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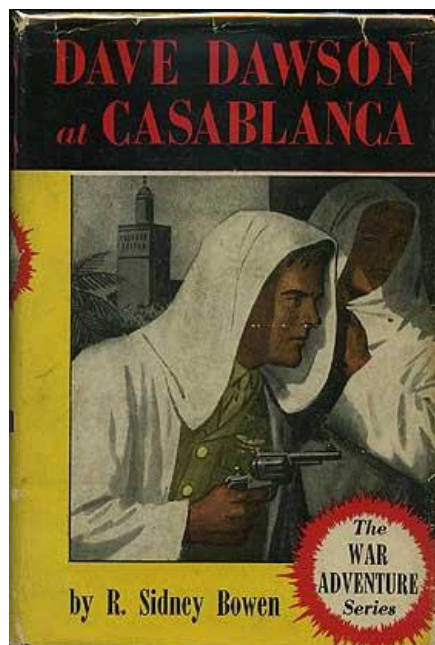
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA ***



DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA

BOOKS BY R. SIDNEY BOWEN

DAVE DAWSON AT DUNKIRK
DAVE DAWSON WITH THE R. A. F.
DAVE DAWSON IN LIBYA
DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL
DAVE DAWSON AT SINGAPORE
DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET
DAVE DAWSON WITH THE AIR CORPS
DAVE DAWSON ON THE RUSSIAN FRONT
DAVE DAWSON FLIGHT LIEUTENANT
DAVE DAWSON WITH THE COMMANDOS
DAVE DAWSON WITH THE FLYING TIGERS
DAVE DAWSON ON GUADALCANAL

DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA

by
R. SIDNEY BOWEN

THE WAR ADVENTURE SERIES

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NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE MAN IN GRAY	13
II	JUST IN CASE	23
III	SILENT LIPS	37
IV	ORDERS FOR EAGLES	46
V	WHISPERING DEATH	58
VI	CHANGED ORDERS	76
VII	BLACKOUT	90
VIII	EAGLES CAN TAKE IT	103
IX	DEATH STRIKES	112
X	INVISIBLE EYES	125
XI	MIDNIGHT RAIDER	138
XII	FIGHTING HEARTS	149
XIII	LURKING WINGS	163
	GOERING'S	

XIV	SNOOPERS	179
XV	DEATH TAKES WINGS	194
XVI	BLAZING DOOM	207
XVII	VULTURES' NEST	224
XVIII	EAGLES COME THROUGH	236

DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA

CHAPTER ONE

[Pg 13]

The Man in Gray

The four-faced clock over the information booth on the Upper Level of the Grand Central Station in New York City showed exactly twenty-five minutes after three. Dave Dawson paused in his restless pacing up and down to look at it for the hundredth time in the last half hour. He glared at it, sighed heavily, and made noises deep in his throat.

"Where is that Freddy Farmer guy, anyway?" he grated to himself. "For half an hour I've been pounding shoe leather here waiting for him. Darned if he isn't worse than a woman, not being at a place on time. But he's probably lost. And if he is, he can stay lost for all I care."

[Pg 14]

With a sharp nod for emphasis, he walked over to the newsstand and bought a bar of candy. The Union News lad back of the counter glanced at the row of decoration ribbons under Dawson's wings, and gave him a smile and the kind of look that said he'd like to hear about some of Dawson's experiences. Dave ignored the look, however, and turned away. He didn't want to talk about the war. In fact, he didn't even want to think about it. Freddy and he were enjoying a much-deserved leave, and they still had four days to go. And until those four days had come and gone, the war could be on another world as far as he was concerned. Right! The heck with it for four more days!

For the hundred-and-first time Dawson looked at the information-booth clock. The hands said twenty-seven minutes of four now, and Dave made noises in his throat once again. He pulled two hockey-game tickets out of his tunic pocket and looked at them.

"For two cents I'd leave him flat and get somebody else to go with me!" he muttered. "I should have drawn the bum a map so he could use it to get over here from Times Square. He—"

[Pg 15]

He let the rest trail off as he saw Freddy Farmer hurrying toward him from the direction of the IRT shuttle train to Times Square. He fixed the English-born air ace with a disgusted eye and watched him approach. Freddy came up to him all smiles and slightly flushed.

"Waiting for somebody, old thing?" he greeted Dave.

"No!" Dawson snapped. "And my mother taught me never to speak to strangers. So scram, before I call a cop."

"Speaking of your New York cops," Freddy Farmer chuckled, "I wouldn't be here now, if it hadn't been for a bobby in the Bronx."

"Bronx?" Dawson exploded. "What the heck were you doing up there? This morning you said you were going to hear Benny Goodman's band over at the Paramount Theatre."

"And so I did," Freddy replied with a nod. "And it was absolutely topping. But—"

"Topping, he says!" Dawson snorted. "You should show your passport when you use words like that. You mean keen, or in the groove, or on the beam, or strictly the nuts. But what about the Bronx? Did Goodman lead a parade?"

"If you'll be so kind as to shut that big mouth of yours, I'll explain!" Freddy snapped. "After the show I had something to eat, and—"

[Pg 16]

"As if I couldn't guess *that*!" Dawson grunted. "And so?"

"And so when I came out of the restaurant it was snowing," the English youth said. "And—"

"Snowing, in *January*?" Dawson mock-gasped and widened his eyes. "Well, what do you know

about that? So you just stood there and watched it snowing in January, of all times, while I cooled my heels here waiting for you!"

"Do you want to listen, or would you rather give that tongue of yours exercise?" Freddy Farmer bit off.

"Okay, okay, but make it good!" Dawson sighed. "I've got two tickets for the Ranger-Chicago Hawks hockey game tonight. Make your story good, or somebody else goes with me!"

"What?" Freddy cried. "You've got—Good grief! Now we've got four!"

"Four what?" Dawson demanded. "Or am I supposed to guess?"

"Four tickets to the hockey game," Freddy Farmer said, and produced two from his own pocket. "I couldn't remember who was to get the tickets. So after I came out of the restaurant, I walked up to Madison Square Garden and got two tickets just to be sure. And—What's the matter, Dave? You suddenly sick, or something?"

[Pg 17]

The last was because Dawson had made a face, groaned, and clapped one hand to his forehead. With the other he reached out and grabbed Freddy's hand that held the hockey-game tickets, and jerked it up until the tickets were about an inch from the end of the English youth's nose.

"Boy, are you something!" he groaned. "Take a look, Bright Eyes! Take a good look! You went to the wrong window. Those tickets are for the Ranger-Boston Bruin game next Wednesday!"

"Oh, good grief, no!" Freddy cried. "I didn't know there was any special window. I just went to one and asked the chap for two good tickets to the next game. And he gave me these. I'll take them back and—"

"No, you won't, sweetheart!" Dawson interrupted, and shook his head. "You'll just be out that dough, and maybe it will teach you to use your head next time. We'll give the tickets to the first two soldiers we meet. But let's get back to the Bronx. Did the ticket fellow send you up there?"

[Pg 18]

"No, it was one of your blasted tube trains!" Freddy Farmer growled. "I asked the chap what tube I should take to get to Grand Central. He didn't understand me until I remembered that you call the *tube* the subway. So—"

"You mean you English guys call the *subway* the tube," Dawson cut in again. "How many times have I got to tell you that when in Rome shoot Roman candles! So you went to the subway, and—? Now what?"

Freddy Farmer didn't reply. He stood staring at something behind Dawson. Dave turned impulsively, but all he saw was a lot of people hurrying toward their respective destinations. He turned back and looked at Freddy.

"Okay, come up for air!" he growled. "What's eating you, anyway?"

"That chap over there by the ticket window," the English-born air ace finally said. "The chap in gray. I've seen him half-a-dozen times today."

"So what?" Dawson grunted. "It's a free country and a small world. What of it?"

"Nothing, except that the first time was in the lobby of the hotel as you and I were leaving," Freddy said. "And the next time he was three seats away from me in the Paramount. And the next time was in the restaurant; then at Madison Square Garden; and up in the Bronx, too."

[Pg 19]

"No kidding?" Dawson echoed, half expecting his pal to pull some kind of a gag.

"No kidding at all," Freddy replied promptly. "I'm certain that the chap has been following me around."

"Could be," Dawson murmured, and casually turned around so that he could get a look at the man in gray. "Frankly, though, you *do* look like a guy with itchy fingers, and we've got a lot of expensive things in this town. He's probably a plain-clothes detective from Police Headquarters."

"Then I'm definitely in a mess now!" Freddy Farmer snapped right back at him. "I'm sure it's a crime in any country to be caught talking to the likes of you! See him, Dave?"

"Yeah," Dawson grunted, turning back. "A nice-looking guy. And he didn't get that overcoat with cigarette coupons. We'll check up in a couple of minutes and see if he continues to trail you. Right now, though, I can hardly wait. What about the Bronx, anyway?"

"I took the wrong tube train, that's all," Freddy said. "And I went right to the end of the line, which was in the Bronx, but not a single station said Grand Central. I got off and asked a bobby how to get there. He was a very fine chap, and straightened me out. But, good grief, I've certainly seen a lot of New York today!"

[Pg 20]

"Well, don't ever take a subway to Brooklyn!" Dawson advised. "You wouldn't be back for a week. What shall we do now? Where'll we go, I mean. Want to take a subway ride?"

"Deliver me!" Freddy Farmer groaned. "Definitely, no! Personally, I'm hungry. Let's go find a nice restaurant and fuel up, what?"

"Okay," Dawson sighed. "I suppose you've got to have a nine-course snack to keep you from

fainting until supper. Okay. But let's go to the dining room in the Biltmore Hotel next door. If your friend in gray follows you there, we'll know he's up to something. Ten to one, though, you've been having a pipe dream."

"Perhaps," Freddy Farmer admitted as he dropped into step with Dawson. "But that's definitely the same chap I've been seeing all day long. I wonder why the blighter *is* following me around? No, no, my little man! Just keep your opinion to yourself. I—I say, wait a minute, Dave!"

[Pg 21]

Freddy Farmer left Dawson's side and went over to two Yank soldiers who were obviously going no place, but just taking in the sights. They saluted him as he came up and stopped in front of them.

"I say, you two on leave, what?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes, sir," they replied together, and gave him a funny look.

"Will you be in town come next Wednesday?" Freddy asked again.

"Yes, sir," they replied in the same breath.

"Good!" Freddy beamed, and held out the hockey tickets. "Use these, if you like. And half a minute! Here, buy yourselves some little thing, what? And good luck."

Freddy Farmer added two one-dollar bills to the hockey tickets and walked away. The two soldiers gaped down at the two tickets and the two dollars.

"What's the matter with that guy; is he touched?" one of them mumbled. "And did you hear him, Fuzzy? He didn't even speak English!"

"Who cares?" Fuzzy asked as he came out of his trance. "Two four-buck-forty hockey tickets, and two bucks in cash! Who cares if the guy is touched? He's okay by me!"

[Pg 22]

"Well, well!" Dawson chuckled when Freddy joined him. "Darned if the kid didn't at that! And even let go of two bucks."

"All I had on me," Freddy said with a smile. "So that makes you the one to pay for our meal, see?"

"Oh, yeah?" Dawson jeered. "Well, don't look right now, but standing in your shoes is a guy who's heading for a lot of dish washing in the Biltmore kitchen!"

CHAPTER TWO

[Pg 23]

Just in Case

"Well?" Freddy Farmer demanded as he leaned across the dining table toward Dawson. "Did I have a pipe dream, or not? Did you see who just came in and sat down?"

"Yeah," Dawson grunted, and buttered a roll. "Your pal in gray. I wonder what's the big idea?"

"So do I!" Freddy echoed instantly. "And I've half a mind to go over right now and ask him. The beggar is beginning to give me the creeps. He doesn't look foreign, though."

"Hey, come out of your spin, pal!" Dawson chuckled. "What do you think this is, Gestapo stuff?"

[Pg 24]

Freddy Farmer looked at Dawson and smiled slowly.

"I wouldn't know, old thing," he said. "You see, this isn't England, so I wouldn't know for sure *what* kind of funny business was afoot."

"Ouch!" Dawson yipped softly, and flung up an arm in front of his face. "Right in the eye, that time. You're improving each day with your snappy come-back, my young friend. Keep it up, and you'll be the life of the party some day. Well, I guess that's all the fodder I want right now. How's for a stroll around in the beautiful January snow, huh? But it's probably slush by now, and—Hey! I almost forgot! You think I'm paying for your meal, don't you? Well—"

"Of course not!" Freddy Farmer cut in quickly. "And just to show my heart's in the right place, I'll even pay for both of us."

"I wonder if there's a doctor in the house?" Dawson murmured, and stared hard at the English youth. "Sure you feel all right, Freddy?"

"Never felt better," the other replied. "Wait just a moment, will you, old thing? I'll be right back."

Before Dawson could ask questions, Freddy got up from his chair and walked quickly across the dining room and down the broad flight of carpeted steps to the lobby. Dawson blinked, then took a sip of water, and glanced over at the man in gray. The mysterious stranger was looking toward the lobby, and was in the act of pushing himself up out of his chair. He seemed to change his mind, however. He shot a quick look over Dawson's way, then settled back in his chair and went to work on a piece of pie the waiter had placed in front of him.

[Pg 25]

"That bird sure is plenty interested in Freddy," Dawson muttered to himself, and frowned. "I wonder what the heck's cooking around here, anyway?"

He played with that thought for two or three minutes, but was unable to get any place. And then as he happened to glance toward the dining-room lobby entrance, he saw Freddy Farmer standing there and beckoning to him urgently. Dawson raised questioning eyebrows, took a look toward the man in gray, got up from his chair, and started to leave the table. He had taken but two steps when the waiter appeared at his elbow.

"The check, Captain," the waiter said politely.

"Oh, yeah," Dawson murmured absently, and glanced at the total. He pulled some money from his pocket and gave it to the waiter. "There you are," he murmured again, and hurried over to the lobby entrance to the dining room where Freddy was waiting. [Pg 26]

The English-born air ace greeted him with a grin like a Cheshire cat.

"And let that be a lesson to you, my good fellow," Freddy said with an emphatic nod of his head.

"Says which?" Dawson grunted, and gave him a blank look.

Freddy Farmer patted his stomach and licked his lips.

"A delicious meal, quite!" he breathed. "I hope you gave the waiter a decent tip. But, knowing you, I doubt it."

Dawson started violently, and his jaw dropped.

"Well, you little I-don't-know-what!" he eventually exploded. "Stuck me for the meal, didn't you? I knew darn well you must have had something in mind when you gave your last two bucks to those soldiers. You play the big-hearted big shot to them, and *I* get stuck for your two bucks' worth of food!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Freddy Farmer chuckled. "Just say it's your share in the lease-lend agreement between America and England. I'll pay you back some day, too." [Pg 27]

"Yeah!" Dawson sneered. "When I'm a hundred and six and have lost all my teeth. When I can eat only soup instead of a thick steak like I just bought for you. But you just wait, my little bowlegged pet! I'll—Oh-oh! The man in gray, eh?" Dawson added the last because of the flinty look that had suddenly leaped into Farmer's eyes.

"Quite!" Freddy murmured. "And I'm jolly well sick of this hide-and-peek business. I'm going to find out what the blighter's up to. I detest shadows, excepting my own."

With a grim nod Freddy Farmer stepped past Dawson and walked over toward the man in gray who was just leaving the dining room. Dawson impulsively swung around and followed him. The man in gray acted as though he did not see Freddy, but the English youth stopped in front of him, barring his way.

"Have you been wishing to speak to me, sir?" Freddy asked quietly. "Is that why you've been following me all over town all day?"

The man in gray looked blank for a moment. Then he shrugged and gave Freddy a friendly smile. [Pg 28]

"It *has* been rather obvious, hasn't it, Captain Farmer?" he said as both Freddy and Dawson stared at him, dumbfounded. "But you went to a lot of places where I couldn't help but show myself. I guess you've had enough experience to guess when you're being trailed. The name is Carter, Captain."

As the man in gray introduced himself, he slipped something out of his pocket and held it cupped in his hand so both youths could see it. They took a good look at the gold F.B.I. badge and quickly raised their eyes to the man's face.

"The F.B.I. no less!" Dawson breathed. "What's up? Is Farmer wanted by the F.B.I.—I hope?"

The man chuckled and shook his head.

"No," he said. "Neither of you are, in fact. The two of us just had orders to keep an eye on you both."

"*Two* of us'?" Dave echoed sharply. "You mean—" He let the rest go as the F.B.I. agent nodded.

"That's right, Captain Dawson," he said quietly, and made a faint gesture toward the other side of the lobby. "My partner has been looking after you, while I tried to keep up with Captain Farmer here. If Captain Farmer hadn't returned to the dining room, I'd have taken on the job of sticking with you, and my partner would have tackled Captain Farmer. Frankly, I would have enjoyed the change. But now—" [Pg 29]

The F.B.I. agent grinned and shrugged.

"But now that the cat's out of the bag," he said, "suppose we stop playing cops and robbers and make it a foursome? My partner got tickets right behind your seats for the hockey game tonight. We're also staying at your hotel. Or would you rather be alone? Now don't be afraid that you'll hurt my feelings. I'll understand. After all, a couple of fellows on leave have their rights, you

know."

"Yeah, sure, of course," Dawson mumbled absently, not quite sure if he was in the middle of a dream or not. "Sure, sure it's okay by Freddy and me. But—but look, sir. I mean, what's all the big idea? Why should the F.B.I. want to follow us around? I don't get it."

"To be perfectly frank, neither do I," Agent Carter made the amazing reply. "All I know is that two days ago we were given orders to come up from Washington, register at your hotel, and keep an eye on you two."

"But for what?" Freddy Farmer asked. "You mean you were to guard us from harm, or some such silly rot?" [Pg 30]

"I wouldn't exactly call it silly rot, Captain," the F.B.I. man said gravely. "After all, you two are marked men, in a way. I mean by that, you've been thorns in the side of Axis Intelligence more than once since this Second World War started. Not that personal revenge by enemy agents in this country is to be expected. Yet, on the other hand, there's no sense in regarding it as impossible."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Dawson gulped. "But that's just plain screwy. Why, I can name several dozen famous soldiers in this war that the Axis would love to get a million times more than they'd want to get us. Do you mean that everybody who's got in a few pokes at the Axis has an F.B.I. escort when he goes on leave?"

"Hardly," Agent Carter said with a smile. "Let's say that you two happen to be special cases. Why, you can search me. Lots of times we're given orders, and we have no idea what's behind them. Let's go over and meet my partner. Or is my suggestion of a moment ago out?"

"No," Dawson replied. "I told you it was okay by us. Besides, maybe your partner can tell us things."

"If he can, he won't," Agent Carter said. "You can count on that, I'm afraid. His name is Hickson, and it so happens that he's a rabid Ranger fan. He comes from this town. Let's go over." [Pg 31]

Still not quite sure that he wasn't being made the goat of some crazy gag, Dawson walked with Agent Carter and Freddy Farmer across the lobby to where a thin, almost sickly-looking man of uncertain years was seated in a chair reading a newspaper. He put down his paper and smiled as the trio approached. It was then Dawson had a vague feeling he had seen that thin face somewhere quite recently. Then as Agent Carter made the introductions, it came to Dawson. Agent Hickson had been the man next in line behind him when he had bought tickets for the hockey game. As he shook hands and mumbled some pleasantries, Dave realized he had seen that thin face other places, too, during the day.

"Did I give you as much trouble, Agent Hickson," he asked, "as Farmer seems to have given Agent Carter?"

"No, Captain," the other replied with a twinkle in his eye. "And don't ever go in for crime. You'd be a cinch."

"With those big flat feet, it would be obvious!" Freddy Farmer chuckled, as the red climbed into Dawson's face. [Pg 32]

"Okay, okay!" Dave growled and grinned at the same time. "I'm not like you, with things on your conscience! So naturally I wouldn't even give it a thought that anybody was following me. But look, Agent Hickson, can you add anything to what Agent Carter has told us? Which was absolutely nothing."

"I'm afraid I can't, Captain." Hickson smiled, and shook his head. "Carter and I are just a couple of slaves who do what we're told and ask no questions."

"But you do know *something*, only you won't tell us, what?" Freddy Farmer pressed the issue.

The F.B.I. man shook his head again and made a little cross mark over his heart.

"I honestly don't know a thing," he said, "except that I like this particular job. I'm from New York, you know. And I'm a hockey fan, in case Carter hasn't told you."

"He has," Dawson grinned, and glanced at his wrist watch. "And I sort of go for the game, myself. It's hours, though, before game time. Anybody have any suggestions what to do until then? Listen, Freddy! Eating is strictly out, at least for a couple of hours!" [Pg 33]

"You don't have to shout, old thing; I hear you," the English youth replied. "Yes, I have a suggestion. I've been meaning to see that United Nations display they have at Radio City. What say we go back to the hotel and clean up a bit? These blasted American shoes I bought yesterday are killing me."

Dawson started to shake his head, but instantly checked the movement. A gleam leaped into his eyes.

"Fair enough," he said. "I could do with a clean shirt myself. Come on. We'll take a cab."

During the cab ride across town to the hotel, they talked of this and that and nothing in particular. When the cab pulled up in front of the hotel, Dawson opened the door, let the two

F.B.I. men get out ahead of him, and got out quickly himself, leaving Freddy Farmer the last to alight. Without so much as a look over his shoulder, Dawson linked arms with the two F.B.I. men and hurried them up the steps into the hotel.

"Dave!" he heard Freddy Farmer call out. "Oh, I say, *Dave!*"

The two F.B.I. men wanted to stop, but Dawson practically pushed them through the doors.

"It's okay," he chuckled. "Just his turn to be left holding the bag. He'll be right in. You'll see." [Pg 34]

That was exactly the case. A moment later Freddy came hurrying inside, flush-faced, with a very hard-eyed taxicab driver right at his heels.

"I say, Dave!" the English youth panted. "You know I haven't a bean on me. Let me have—"

"We're all broke!" Dawson said coldly. "You were last out, anyway. Go over to the desk, borrow the fare, and have it put on your bill. I'll see if there's any mail for us. Meet you upstairs in our room."

Freddy Farmer glared and pursed his lips as though he were striving to hold back the blistering words that rose in his throat.

The cab driver looked at him and scowled darkly. "How's about it, General?" he growled. "I can't keep my hack out front all afternoon!"

"Oh yes, quite," Freddy said. "Come along!"

After giving a look that should have raised third-degree burns on the Yank pilot's face, Freddy went over to the lobby desk and spoke to the clerk. Bursting with inner laughter, Dawson watched Freddy's face grow redder and redder as the desk clerk gave him the fishy eye. Then the clerk went into the manager's office. He came right out, though, yanked open a desk drawer, and handed a bill to Freddy. [Pg 35]

"Now I have got to watch *my* step, and how!" Dawson chuckled, and walked over to the mail window.

There was something in the box. It was a telegram addressed to them both. Dave ripped it open and was reading the message just as Freddy Farmer came over. The wire read:

"Take seven P.M. plane for Washington La Guardia Airport. Report my office War Department on arrival.

COLONEL WELSH"

"And so what?" Dave asked, looking at Freddy Farmer.

"So leave it over, I fancy," the English youth murmured with a frown. "I wonder what now?"

"You do the guessing; I'm stumped," Dawson said, glancing up quickly as Agents Carter and Hickson came over.

There was a telegram in Agent Carter's hand. Agent Hickson looked as though he had just lost his last friend.

"So we all take an airplane ride instead, eh?" Agent Carter said, and nodded at the wire in Dawson's hand. [Pg 36]

"You too?" Dave questioned.

"Right," Agent Carter replied. "There are four reservations waiting for us at La Guardia."

"Wouldn't you know!" Agent Hickson groaned and shook his head sadly. "Wouldn't you know I was nuts to think I could mix pleasure with business!"

CHAPTER THREE

 [Pg 37]

Silent Lips

"Well, I guess this is the parting of the ways, Captain," Agent Carter of the F.B.I. said as the taxicab rolled to a stop on front of a War Department Building in Washington. "Hickson and I will keep the cab for the ride over to the Bureau. Sorry we all missed an evening in New York together, but there'll come another day, I hope. Best of luck, you two. It's been nice knowing you."

"Same thing, the other way around, sir," Dawson said as he shook hands and climbed out of the cab. "And thanks for the protection—or whatever it was supposed to be."

Agent Carter laughed and raised a protesting hand. [Pg 38]

"Now let's not go into that again!" he said. "The answer is still that I don't know. Maybe Colonel

Welsh will tell you. We can't, because we simply don't know. What's the matter, Captain Farmer?"

Freddy was just straightening up after sticking his head back in through the cab door opening. He shrugged and grinned.

"Just looking to see if you had your fingers crossed, sir, while you said that," he replied. "But I see you didn't, and so that's that. Well, cheerio, and good hunting, and all that sort of thing. Sorry I didn't speak to you sooner."

"That's the kind of tough break we get in our kind of job," Agent Carter said, and made a flip wave with his hand. "So long, until we meet again."

"And let's hope that'll be soon!" Dawson called out as the cab rolled away.

The two air aces stood on the curb until the taxi turned the corner toward Pennsylvania Avenue and was lost to view. Then they impulsively turned and looked at each other.

"Swell fellows, those two," Dawson said. "Wish we could have had more time together. I've always wanted to ask a real honest-to-goodness F.B.I. man a few questions." [Pg 39]

"Then those two will never know how lucky they are," Freddy Farmer came right back. "But speaking of questions—"

"Check, and double-check!" Dawson echoed, and started across the sidewalk to the main entrance of the War Department Building. "The sooner we ask them, the sooner we *may* get an idea as to what the heck is going on."

The door guard stopped them and requested identification papers. They complied by producing their leave papers and the wire from Colonel Welsh. The guard referred to a book on his table desk, and nodded.

"Third floor, Captain," he said, and gave them each a building pass that had to be turned in when they left. "Room Three Twenty-Nine."

The two youths nodded, returned the guard's salute, and headed for the stairway. The door of Room 329 was just like all the other doors on that floor except that it had "Colonel Welsh, Private" painted on the glass. Dawson rapped his knuckles on the glass, and immediately received the summons to enter. Colonel Welsh, Chief of U. S. Armed Forces Intelligence, was seated behind a huge desk that seemed to take up most of the office. He was practically hidden behind a mass of papers, bound reports, and such, piled up all over the desk top. [Pg 40]

He glanced up, smiled, pushed back his chair, and rose to come around the end of the desk.

"Welcome to Washington again, you two," he said, and shook hands. "A nice flight down?"

"Fine, sir," Dawson replied. "We had a couple of swell air companions, too. You in charge of the F.B.I. now, Colonel?"

"F.B.I.? Me?" Colonel Welsh echoed. "Hardly! Not as long as J. Edgar Hoover continues to run it so perfectly. But what do you mean?"

Dawson stared hard at the senior officer, and then gave a little sigh.

"Oh, so it's like that, eh?" he murmured. "I thought that maybe you might have had something to do with the two F.B.I. agents who trailed Freddy and me all over New York. I suppose you didn't?"

Colonel Welsh didn't reply at once. He motioned them to chairs and then reseated himself at his desk.

"No, not directly," he said in reply to Dawson's question. "But of course I knew all about it. So you spotted them, eh?"

"Freddy did," Dawson replied. "I didn't, because *I* have a clear conscience. We—or Freddy, I mean—called the turn on one of them. He 'fessed up and introduced us to his partner. Naturally, we asked questions, but they didn't, or wouldn't, admit they knew what it was all about." [Pg 41]

"If you'll only explain, sir," Freddy Farmer chimed in, "maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight."

"Of course I'll explain, Farmer," the Colonel said with a smile. "As for sleeping tonight, I wouldn't count on it, if I were you. Those F.B.I. men were following you around simply to see if anybody *else* was following you around, that's all."

"That's *all*?" Dawson echoed. "Who else would be following us around? And why, for cat's sake? Don't tell me, Colonel, that you really believe some Axis agent might try to get in a bit of personal revenge just because Freddy and I have been lucky on a couple of things! Why, that's—"

"No, that wasn't the idea," the Chief of Intelligence interrupted quietly. "Though I have had that fear more than once. Your being lucky a couple of times, as you so wrongly call it, was most disheartening to certain Japs and certain Nazis, who have long memories. But this recent F.B.I. business was a bit different. I'm not going to give you details, because I'm pledged to utmost secrecy. So don't waste breath asking questions. This much, though, I can tell you. A list of [Pg 42]

names, compiled by the War Department, was recently turned over to the F.B.I. Your names were on that list, and you've been watched over by F.B.I. men ever since. The reason, as I said, was to see if anybody was following you."

"You mean, sir—" Dawson frowned and hesitated. "You mean—because if they were, it would indicate that the mysterious list of names wasn't as secret as it was supposed to be? That it, sir?"

"That's it exactly, Dawson," the Colonel said. "Nice work to have figured that out, too. That's right—that list is most secret. It has the President's approval, the Secret Service's approval, as well as the okay of the Army, Navy, and Air Forces. It is most secret, and it was the F.B.I.'s job to make absolutely sure by maintaining a constant check on every man on that list. Now does that satisfy you?"

"No, sir," Dawson said with a grin. Then with a shrug: "But you said something about not wasting breath asking for details. However, I could do with a hint, if that's in order." [Pg 43]

"It isn't," the Colonel told him instantly. "For once it's my job to assign you to a certain mission without the right to tell you a thing about it. You'll learn soon enough, and when you do, you'll realize why I have to keep my lips silent. This I can and will tell you, though. It'll be a most pleasant mission, and you'll both get a tremendous thrill out of it."

"Well, that's something, anyway," Dawson said. "I'm all for it, whatever it is."

"Quite," Freddy Farmer echoed. Then, with an almost sly look at the Colonel, he asked, "A mission in this country, sir?"

"A mission that will take in several countries, Farmer," the Intelligence Chief replied. "And that *is* the very last bit of information I'm going to give you. Now just excuse me a couple of minutes while I tend to some of this stuff. Then we'll get along out to Bolling Field."

"Bolling Field, sir?" Dave cried, and leaned forward.

For all the good it did him, he might just as well have yelled at the man in the moon. Colonel Welsh seemed to forget that either Dawson or Farmer existed as he gave all his attention to the paper work on his desk. [Pg 44]

It was almost ten minutes later when he signed his name to the last of the papers, collected them, and slipped them into one of the desk drawers which he locked with one of many keys he took from his pocket.

"Sorry it took so long, boys," he said, and reached for his service cap. "All done now, though. So let's go."

The colonel led the way outside, locked his office door, and touched Dawson on the arm as the Yank air ace started along the corridor toward the main stairway.

"No, not that way, Dawson," he said, and pointed a finger the other way. "We're still not taking any chances. Follow me, you two."

Dawson and Farmer did just that. They came out into the Washington night by a small rear door on the ground floor of the War Department Building. There was no guard there, and Colonel Welsh used another key from his bunch to unlock the door. From the door they followed him through a shadow-filled alley, down another one that crossed the first at right angles, and finally out onto a narrow, poorly lighted street, where a car was parked in the deep shadows of some overhanging tree branches.

"Jump in, you two," Colonel Welsh said, and opened the door. "I think we can all sit in front. I'll be your pilot this time. But on four rubber tires, instead of wings." [Pg 45]

"What about our building passes, sir?" Freddy Farmer asked. "Won't the guard—"

"I'll take care of that," the colonel said. "You can explain to him, if you want, when you come back."

"Come back from where, sir?" Dawson asked before he could choke off the question.

"From a lot of places, Dawson," Colonel Welsh said with a chuckle. "From a lot of places. Now, hop in, and enjoy the ride."

CHAPTER FOUR

[Pg 46]

Orders for Eagles

The usually active, buzzing Bolling Field was shrouded in darkness and looked almost completely deserted as Colonel Welsh wheeled the car up toward the main gates. When he came within twenty yards of those gates, however, there was instant proof that not everybody was asleep. Two small-sized searchlight beams cut the darkness and focused square on the moving car. Dawson, from past experience, knew that up in the little towers that housed the searchlights

were a couple of machine guns that were also trained dead on the car. In addition, the captain on duty and two armed guards suddenly appeared and closed in on the car in nothing flat. And as if the twin searchlight beams were not enough, the captain snapped on a flashlight and played it straight into Colonel Welsh's face, then into Dawson's, and then into Freddy Farmer's. Just to make sure, the captain turned the light on the colonel's face once more, and then snapped it out.

[Pg 47]

"Your pass, please, sir," he said quietly.

The colonel produced it, and the captain was completely satisfied. He stepped back, saluted, and gave an order. As the heavy gates swung open, Colonel Welsh slipped the car into gear and rolled on through. Looking back, Dawson noted that the guns of the guards, and the searchlight beams, too, followed the car well inside the field. The idea seemed silly to him for a moment. Then he realized that it would be quite easy for somebody who wasn't wanted to hook a ride on the rear bumper, and thus get inside where he didn't belong.

"Yes, sir!" he murmured as he turned front again. "This is one place that would stop even Superman cold."

"I hope that's true, and I believe it is," Colonel Welsh stated.

Dawson turned his head and glanced sharply at the Intelligence Chief. An undernote in the officer's voice had a queer ring. Before he could ask questions, however, Colonel Welsh turned the car in through the wide-open doors of one of the hangars, braked it to a stop just inside, and switched off the engine. A single rafter-light threw a pale glow about the interior, and in one sweeping glance Dave saw that the hangar was empty of planes except for a single Army-Air-Forces, Wright Cyclone-powered, Vultee V-12C, attack bomber. A couple of mechanics and a technical sergeant were standing by the wing. They came over to the car at once, and gave the colonel a snappy salute.

[Pg 48]

"All set and ready, as you ordered, sir," the technical sergeant said.

Colonel Welsh climbed out of the car, and nodded.

"Very good, Sergeant," he said. "Roll her out and start her up, will you? We're going to use Captain Billings' office for a few minutes. If anybody happens to wander in, no matter who, you have my authority to send him right along on his way."

"Right, sir," the technical sergeant answered, and grinned as though he could name two or three high rankers he would just love to toss out on their ears, now that he had the permission to do so.

[Pg 49]

However, he didn't mention that little item. Instead, he snapped orders to the two mechanics, and all three of them began rolling the attack bomber out onto the hangar apron. Meanwhile Colonel Welsh led Dawson and Farmer into Captain Billings' office in a rear corner of the hangar. He snapped on the light, closed the door, waved them to a couple of chairs, and sat down at a desk. He drew six envelopes from an inside pocket of his tunic. Each envelope was heavily sealed with wax, and each was made of a peculiar-looking paper. At first glance it struck Dawson that it was oil paper, or shark's skin. At any rate, he had a sudden thought that each envelope was absolutely waterproof.

The colonel placed them in a pile on the desk in front of him, and then rested a hand on top of the pile, almost as though he expected a non-existent wind or an invisible force to snatch them away.

"You two are headed for Natal, Brazil," he began, speaking quietly. "With stops on the way at Miami, Puerto Rico, San Fernando in British Trinidad, Paramaribo in Dutch Guiana, Belem in Brazil, and Natal. You will land on the government airport at each of those points. Officially, you are making a survey flight for the Army Air Transport Command. At Miami and Puerto Rico you will contact the American commanding officer, and deliver to him *in the presence of no one else* the envelope that bears his name. On the authority of a letter which I shall give you to take along, you are to instruct him to guard his envelope with his life, and *not* to open it until the sixteenth of this month. At San Fernando, Paramaribo, Belem, and Natal, of course you will contact the officer in command of the American staff, and not the commanding officer of the airport."

[Pg 50]

The colonel paused for a moment as though permitting time for his instructions to sink in. Then he tapped the pile of heavily sealed, waterproof envelopes with his fingers.

"These contain information on perhaps the most important secret of this war!" he continued, speaking in a grave tone. "The Axis would gladly give up half a dozen divisions of troops for the possession of any one of these envelopes. And that doesn't even begin to describe how important they are. I am the only man in the world who knows of the flight you two are to begin in a few minutes. At least, I pray to God that I'm the only one. However, in view of the fact that absolutely nothing is *sure* in this war, I must give you this order: Under no circumstances, not even under the threat of the most horrible kind of death, is either of you to permit a single one of these letters to get into the hands of anybody but the American officer whose name is typed on the front of each envelope. Do I make myself clear?"

[Pg 51]

"Yes, sir," Dawson said with a nod.

"Definitely, sir," Freddy Farmer echoed.

"And I'm sure you do," the colonel said. "I can't help, though, but stress that point. *Don't let any of these envelopes out of your sight until each has been delivered to the proper person. Make*

doubly sure that each of those proper persons understands what he is to do. Naturally, you'll be asked questions by those officers as to what the envelopes contain. That is one reason why I'm not even telling you, so that you can truthfully reply that you do not know. Just remember, this is the most secret mission you have ever undertaken. Guard these envelopes with your lives and see that they are delivered to the proper parties. If the commanding officer does not happen to be there when you arrive, do *not* give the envelope to the next in command. Stay there until the commanding officer does arrive. If you have a forced landing, play up the fact you are on a survey flight. If your plane is damaged, a wire sent to me in Washington will get an immediate reply ordering the commandant of the airfield nearest the scene of your crash to turn over a plane to you. If one of you happens to be injured in the crash, the other will carry on alone as soon as possible, without creating suspicion that the flight is not for survey purposes."

[Pg 52]

The colonel suddenly stopped talking and drew from his pocket two small vials containing a brownish liquid. He placed them beside the pile of envelopes, and looked at the two air aces again.

"If both of you are hurt badly," he said, "or if—and I pray God it will not happen—you should fall into the hands of enemy agents, or force-land on the water and be approached by a lurking U-boat, you are to take the caps from these vials and pour the contents over the envelopes. The powerful acid they contain will completely destroy the envelopes and their contents in a matter of seconds. In short, it is your sacred trust to destroy these envelopes before you die—or are captured. Now, to make sure, repeat to me the instructions I've just given you."

[Pg 53]

Dawson spoke for the pair and repeated almost word for word everything the colonel had told them.

"Well, that's all I've got to say," the Intelligence Chief said with a nod. "Here, Dawson. Three of these and a vial are for you. And the other three and a vial are for you, Farmer. Naturally, my prayers go with you for a safe and very uneventful flight. If it helps any, I personally chose you two for this flight, because—well, you've come through for me several times in the past, and I know you will again. One thing, though. If any of the envelopes fall into Axis hands, I might just as well put a bullet through my brain, because I wouldn't want to go on living. Have either of you any questions?"

"Yes, sir, I have one," Freddy Farmer spoke up.

"Then let's have it," Colonel Welsh said with a nod.

The English-born air ace hesitated a moment, and a slight flush crept up into his sun-and-wind-bronzed face.

"These chaps to whom we deliver the envelopes, sir," he said with a frown. "What if they—Well, what I'm trying to say, sir, is supposing *they* don't follow the orders we give them? What if they should lose their envelopes or—well, you know."

[Pg 54]

"They won't, Farmer," Colonel Welsh said with a grim shake of his head. "Each of the six officers that you will contact is not only an officer in our Armed Forces, but a carefully selected member of Intelligence as well. In short, each is one of my own men. And after you show them this letter of authority, you need not worry that they won't follow orders right to the letter."

As he spoke, the colonel drew a seventh, but unsealed, envelope from his pocket and handed it to Freddy Farmer. Then he turned his head and looked at Dawson's frown.

"Yes, Dawson?" he asked. "You've a question, too?"

"A couple, Colonel," Dave replied. Then with a shrug, "The first may strike you as stupid."

"How can I say, until you ask it?" the Intelligence officer demanded as the Yank air ace didn't go on.

"These officers we're to contact—" Dawson said presently—"is there any way we can make sure that each *is* the one we believe him to be? In other words, we've just got six names, Colonel. I haven't read them yet, but it's possible that neither Freddy nor I know the men from Adam as far as looks are concerned."

[Pg 55]

"A mighty good question, Dawson," Colonel Welsh said with an emphatic nod. "Just shows you've got your eye on the ball right at the start. Contact the officer, show him my letter of authority, and demand his identification. It will be a copper disc with some numbers stamped on it. Every set of numbers will add up to forty-one—the year, incidentally, of Pearl Harbor. If the numbers don't add up to forty-one, then he is not your man."

"And if they *don't* add up to forty-one, sir?" Freddy Farmer asked, and leaned forward.

Colonel Welsh's lips stiffened, and an agate-hard glint came into his eyes. He pointed to the letter of authority Freddy held in his hands.

"Use that to have the man placed under close arrest at once!" he said harshly. "And get in radiophone communication with me as soon as possible. *If* the man tries to evade arrest, tries to escape—shoot him dead on the spot! Yes, that's an unusual order, but this is an unusual mission. Now, the other question, Dawson? What is it?"

"When we reach Natal, sir," Dave said, "what do we do? Fly back and report to you?"

[Pg 56]

"No," the senior officer said with a shake of his head. "I'm allowing three days for you to make this stop-over flight to Brazil. That should get you in Natal by the fourteenth, the fifteenth at the latest. Put up at the Pan-Am Hotel. I will join you there on the fifteenth. I'll have another little mission for you when I get there. Well, any other questions?"

Dawson and Farmer looked at each other. Then they looked at Colonel Welsh, and each shook his head. The senior officer stood up, and as though the gods had waited for that exact instant, the Vultee's Wright-Cyclone outside broke forth with its song of mighty power.

"Then that's that," Colonel Welsh said. "There's some flying gear over there on the wall. Select what you want, and then let's get outside to the plane. I'll stake my life that not a soul has heard what we've been talking about, but four walls always get on my nerves. I like it better out in the open where I can see in all directions, and for some distance, too. But don't pay any attention to me. I'm under a slight strain, and it's trying its darnedest to get me. Stupid, of course. So select your stuff, and let's get out to the plane. God bless you, and all kinds of happy landings until we meet again in Natal, Brazil."

[Pg 57]

If they happened to be listening to the colonel's parting words, the gods of war, and death, and doom, must have had quite a laugh for themselves!

CHAPTER FIVE

[Pg 58]

Whispering Death

Shifting to a slightly more comfortable position in the Vultee's cockpit seat, Dave Dawson absently drummed the fingers of one hand on the side of the cockpit and stared down at the sky-blue Caribbean Sea rolling far beneath his wings. Behind him was Puerto Rico, and a considerable way ahead of him was the British-owned island of Trinidad. Several miles off the Vultee's left wing tip were the Leeward and Windward islands of the West Indies jutting up out of the blue water. High above him was a cloudless sky with a shimmering ball of gold in the center.

All in all, it was a scene that would have made poets rave, and the hardest of hearts melt. However, if the truth must be known, it left Dawson cold. Not because he did not possess an eye for Nature's beauty; it was rather because, though he was looking at it, he wasn't actually seeing it. His mind was too filled with other and more personal thoughts.

[Pg 59]

The previous night he and Freddy Farmer had taken off from Bolling Field and had flown directly to the Army Air Forces base at Miami. There, after making sure, they had delivered the first of the sealed envelopes. Later they had flown on to the base at San Juan, on Puerto Rico, and delivered the second envelope. Now they were winging their way farther south to the Air Transport Command base at San Fernando on Trinidad.

"After Trinidad, Paramaribo, and Belem, and Natal," Dawson said, and scowled down at the beautiful Caribbean. "That's just the point, too. A couple of air-mail pilots, that's all we are!"

"What's that, Dave?" he heard Freddy Farmer's voice in the inter-com phones. "What are you mumbling about?"

"Mumbling?" Dawson snorted. "I was shouting with joy! I'm so excited that I can hardly keep from jumping overboard. And now that I think of it, maybe that *would* be a good idea!"

[Pg 60]

"Then go right ahead, old thing," the English youth in the rear pit chuckled. "Nothing I want more than for you to have your own way, you know."

"Don't look right now, but you can go fly a kite to the moon, pal!" Dawson growled. "I suppose you're enjoying this here-to-there hop in the sky?"

"Well, I *have* seen better piloting," Freddy came right back. "But, considering one thing and all, I'm not too fed up—yet. On the other hand, it is a bit boring. I mean—"

"You mean what?" Dave asked as Freddy let the rest hang in mid-air.

"Don't know just how to put it in words," young Farmer replied. "But—well, after that little talk with the colonel last night, I was quite steamed up, as you would say. Very mysterious, and exciting, and possibly dangerous, if you get what I mean."

"I do," Dawson grunted. "But all it is to me now is mysterious. You can have my share of the excitement and danger, if any. I'm just full of beans, though, I guess. After some of the close shaves you and I have had, routine stuff just gets me down, but quickly! But there have been two bright spots in this thing so far, thank goodness."

[Pg 61]

"Bright spots?" Freddy Farmer echoed. "Then I must have been looking the other way at the time. What do you mean?"

"At Miami and San Juan," Dawson replied. "The way those two commanding officers tried to pump us as to what the sealed envelopes contained. It was nice to look very wise and not tell them a darn thing. It was fun to see somebody else floundering around in the dark. Misery loves

company. Say! Know what I hope, Freddy?"

"I wouldn't even dare guess!" the English-born air ace replied. "What do you hope?"

"That the lad we contact at San Fernando has a copper disc with numbers that add up to forty-five!" Dawson told him.

"What?" young Farmer gasped. "Forty-five? But, Dave, the number is—"

"Sure, forty-one!" Dawson cut in. "But don't you catch on, pal? If the number is forty-five, it means that the lad is a phoney. And that means that maybe we'll get some excitement out of this aerial messenger boy job."

"Rot, and very much so!" Freddy snapped angrily. "Come off it, Dave! This is very serious business, and you are absolutely balmy to even hope that things will go wrong. Just remember what Colonel Welsh said, Dave. If one of these sealed envelopes should fall into Axis hands, he'd rather put a bullet in his brain than go on living. Stop being a blasted fool, old thing! It's not a bit like you at all!"

[Pg 62]

"Okay, okay, papa!" Dawson chuckled. "Consider that you have up-ended me and given me the shingle where it counts most. Just the same, I hate to think of going stark, raving mad in the cockpit of a Wright-powered Vultee."

"Well, if that's all that's bothering you, you can put it out of your mind at once," Freddy snapped, "because you were that way a long, long time ago!"

"Oh, yeah?" Dawson shouted.

"Yeah!" Freddy Farmer replied. "But definitely!"

They left it that way for the next fifteen minutes or so. At the end of that time the Vultee was well out of sight of all land, and Dawson was keeping it on course with instruments. At the end of that time, too, the southern part of the heavens began to mist and fog up and gradually change to a copperish gray. The straight line that marked where the blue of the sky ended and the copperish gray began told Dawson that a line squall was moving across the Caribbean. But five minutes later the little twinge of uneasiness that had come to him melted away, because the copperish gray moved westward and not up northward toward the Vultee. However, because of the silly mood that had gripped him since leaving Puerto Rico, he had to voice a crazy thought.

[Pg 63]

"Wouldn't you know, not even a storm to give us something extra to do!"

"Eh, Dave?" he heard Freddy Farmer say. Then a second later, he felt Farmer's hand tapping him on the shoulder, and heard his pal's excited voice crackling in his inter-com phones. "Bear ten degrees eastward, Dave! There's something down there on the water. Can't see it clearly yet. Looks like a bit of rag being waved about by somebody."

Dawson changed the Vultee's course, and at the same time twisted around in the seat and glanced back at Freddy. Then he turned front and peered ahead and down in the direction of the English youth's pointed finger. He squinted his eyes slightly and even shielded them against the golden sun with his free hand. But for all he could see, he might just as well have kept both eyes shut. There was just blue Caribbean, turned golden here and there by shafts of sunlight dancing off the surfaces of the rolling swells.

[Pg 64]

"I know you can see through a brick wall, Freddy," he said, "but if you can see anything down there, then I'll eat it!"

"It will be quite a meal!" Freddy Farmer cried. "Because it happens to be a life raft! And there are chaps on it. Yes, four chaps! And one is waving his shirt, or something. Blast those dirty U-boat blighters!"

"Never mind the U-boats!" Dawson growled. "Just stick to the raft. Where the heck is it? I think you're seeing things. I—Hold it, everybody; hold it! I see it now, Freddy! I wasn't looking far enough out. Yeah! That's a raft sure enough. Boy! I bet this sun is doing plenty to those birds!"

As Dawson spoke, he watched the small raft riding the rolling swells of the blue Caribbean, as helpless as a leaf. As he stared at the four figures in the raft, his anger boiled and the blood throbbled in his temples. Dirty U-boat blighters, and how, as Freddy had said. Of all the fighting forces to come out of Nazi Germany, the U-boat commanders and crews were the worst. Human life, and particularly the lives of women and children, meant even less to them than it did to the Gestapo. Steel sharks of the sea, they were called. To call them that was an insult to a real man-eating shark. There just wasn't any name to call those who manned Nazi U-boats, because there is no name in any language that adequately describes them.

[Pg 65]

Yes, the dirty U-boat blighters! Down there on the bobbing raft were four who were no doubt victims of a terrible life-and-ship-destroying explosion that had probably come in the dark of night. As those and other bitter thoughts raced through Dawson's mind, he impulsively eased back the Wright-Cyclone's throttle and slanted the nose of the Vultee downward.

"How I wish this was a flying boat, and we could pick up those poor beggars!" he heard Freddy Farmer groan.

"You and me both!" Dave agreed. "We have a radio, thank goodness. So we can get help sent out

before those fellows have to spend another night at sea. I wonder how long they've been floating around?"

"Quite some time, I fancy," Freddy Farmer said. "The chap waving his shirt seems to be the only one with any life in him. The three huddled down in the raft might as well be dead. Sights like that one make me thank my lucky stars I'm in the air end of this blasted war." [Pg 66]

"You can say that again for me!" Dawson echoed. "At least in the air you get it clean and fast. Mostly, anyway. Check and double-check! The boys that really deserve the medals and the praise in this scrap are the merchant marine fellows. They have nothing to fight back with except a peashooter at the stern, and maybe one on the bow. They're perfect floating targets twenty-four hours a day. If their engines break down, heaven help them! Yes, my hat is off to those fellows, and I don't mean maybe. I—Hey, Freddy! See that? He's trying to send us a message with his shirt, isn't he? He seems to be waving it down to the right more than down to the left."

"That's right!" Freddy Farmer cried. "That's the old International Morse code done with a flag. To the right is a dot, and to the left is a dash. And straight down in front means the end of a word. Now, where's my blasted pencil, and I'll put it down. There he put it down in front three times! That means the end of the message. If he'll only repeat it, I think I can get it." [Pg 67]

The man standing on the tiny raft seemed to wait a moment or two, as though he were striving to rally his waning strength for another effort. Then he started waving his shirt again. It was a short message, and both boys got it without bothering to jot down each letter. The message signaled was:

FLY OVER LOW PLEASE, IMPORTANT

"What do you make of that, Freddy?" Dawson asked, and dipped the Vultee's nose even more. "Does he think we're a rescue plane that's come to drop food and water, poor devil?"

"I don't know," the English youth replied. "Possibly. Or maybe there's something on the raft he wants us to see. The only thing to do is to go down and find out. I say! I've just remembered! I have some chocolate, Dave. I'll tie it up in my handkerchief and try to drop it right onto the raft, if you get us down low enough. But, for heaven's sake, don't hit the raft, or the water!"

"Aw gee!" Dawson grated at him. "And that's just what I was planning to do, too! You spoil all my fun, you dope! Act your age, will you?" [Pg 68]

"Just don't take us down too low," Freddy Farmer reminded him evenly.

Dawson opened his mouth to make a fitting retort. Instead he shrugged, let Freddy's remark slide, and concentrated on getting the Vultee down as low as he possibly could. When he had reached an altitude of some ten or fifteen feet, he throttled the Wright Cyclone until it was just a shade on the good side of stalling. He guided it toward the tiny life raft. The shirt-waver had ceased his signaling and was crouching down on the raft as though he were afraid Dawson was going to bounce the Vultee's belly off the top of his hatless head.

"So you're also silly enough to think I'll come too close?" Dawson growled, as he experienced a moment of annoyance. "Well, relax, fellow! Just relax, and let's have a look at the meaning of that message. Okay, Freddy! Get set to drop that chocolate!"

As he spoke, he impulsively started to jerk his head around. Some inner warning cut short his effort, and it was that inner warning that unquestionably saved his life, and Freddy Farmer's life, too. In other words, just as he was about to turn his head for a look at Young Farmer, all four men on the raft sprang to crouching positions. Each gripped a sub-machine gun in his hands and blazed away at the coasting Vultee! [Pg 69]

True, Dawson's sudden inner warning had helped, but it was his instinctive reaction to sudden danger that actually saved his life and Freddy's. In less time than it takes to bat an eyelash, he had smashed the throttle wide open with one hand and was hauling the Vultee around in a wing tip water-kissing turn with the other. Had he started to climb at that same time, the Grim Reaper still might have claimed them both, because the four crouching figures on the raft had automatically pointed their machine guns skyward.

As it happened, though, Dawson held the Vultee in a tight turn until its tail was toward the raft. Then he quickly flattened out, shot forward for a split second, and banked the Vultee over on its left wing tip. He banked it to the right wing tip and hauled the craft up in a twisting power zoom toward the sun-filled heavens. Only when he was well out of range and had leveled off did he let the clamped air out of his lungs and shake the cold beads of sweat from his forehead.

"Suffering rattlesnakes, Freddy!" he choked out. "Was that a nightmare, or did it happen? Those bums let fly at us, Freddy! All four of them!" [Pg 70]

There was no answer from young Farmer, and in the length of time it took Dawson to twist around in the seat, he seemed to die a thousand deaths. His fears were unfounded, however. Freddy Farmer was very much alive. No bullet had snuffed out his life, though the left side of his glass hatch was covered with a million tiny cracks. Amazement and utter bewilderment were all that was wrong with the British-born air ace. He sat rigid in his seat, staring at Dawson as though he had never seen him before in his life. His face was white under his sun-and-wind bronze, and his mouth hung open as though he had intended to yell, but had been shocked into

forgetting all about it.

"Hey, Freddy, snap out of it!" Dawson shouted, and rocked the Vultee violently.

The English youth stared blankly for a second longer. Suddenly he blinked, and his whole body shook like a leaf. The breath came from between his lips in a whistle that Dawson could almost hear above the roar of the Vultee's Cyclone.

"The blighters! The low-down dirty beggars! They shot at us; They—they—" Young Farmer choked on his words, and his eyes opened still wider in amazement. [Pg 71]

It took a half second or so for Dawson to realize that Freddy was looking at something forward and downward. Automatically, he twisted around front and looked down. He let out a bellow of surprise. Down on the Caribbean was a Nazi U-boat breaking surface not over fifty yards from the floating life raft. Unable to move a muscle, he stared as the conning-tower hatch opened and a couple of men spilled out onto the wet deck and hurried toward the bow. The undersea killer veered over toward the floating raft.

What he saw made Dave fighting mad. He shook with anger, and a red film seemed to slide over his eyes.

"So?" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. "So it's like that, huh?"

It was just like that. No sooner had the words left Dawson's lips than the U-boat's bow gun belched flame, and the sky a hundred yards or so off the Vultee's right wing tip seemed to explode in a roar of sound and a great puff of oily black smoke. An instant later, another bit of sky seemed to explode. This time the puff of oily black smoke was high above the Vultee. This was because Dawson had turned the nose of the plane downward and was thundering straight at the U-boat at almost rocket speed. [Pg 72]

"So you want to play, do you?" He shouted the crazy words. "Well, so do we! And how! Here, catch, you tramps!"

The Vultee's wing guns punctuated his words with a chattering blast of sound that made the aircraft tremble violently. Straight lines of silver tracers cut down at the two men crouched behind the guard of the U-boat's bow gun. They would have done better had they dived overboard and down under the U-boat's keel. The bullets from the Vultee's wing guns found them and smashed them to the steel deck. Tapping rudder a bit, Dawson veered the plane's nose a shade to the right and blazed away at the open conning tower hatch. A man crawling up out of it was flung head over heels clear of the U-boat's side and down into the water as though by some invisible giant.

By then the Vultee's prop was about ready to chew into the conning tower itself, and Dawson had to haul the nose up and go curving around and away. That maneuver permitted Freddy Farmer to go into action with his rear guns. As Dave jerked his head around for a split second, he saw the four men on the raft trying to scramble up to the U-boat's wet deck, only to go toppling over backwards like tenpins and disappear beneath the surface of the water. [Pg 73]

"There, you rotten beggars, you'll not do that again!" the English youth's voice rang loud in Dawson's inter-com phones. "Not by half, you won't!"

"The sub's crash diving, Freddy!" Dawson yelled as he saw the hatch close and the nose of the U-boat slip down under water. "Oh, gosh! If we only had a depth charge or two! Oh, how I hate to let that snake get away!"

As the wishful words spilled off his lips, he was in the act of doing what little he could. That was wheeling around and down for another run over the crash-diving U-boat, and letting fly with all his guns at the top half of the submerging craft. He might possibly hit some part that would check the dive and force the U-boat back to the surface. That was a slim, slim hope, and it died completely as the entire craft slid out of sight, leaving behind an empty life raft and seven bodies.

With a groan Dave cut his fire, and hauled the Vultee up out of its dive and onto even keel. He stared down at the floating bodies, gulped, shuddered slightly, and drew a hand across his goggles, as though that would wipe away the scene below and make everything as it had been before. It didn't, of course, but when he took another look downward he found it hard to believe that Death had been whispering so close. Then he snapped out of his trance. [Pg 74]

"Get the nearest patrol base on the radio, Freddy, and report that U-boat's position!" he spoke into his inter-com mike. "There's just a chance that it may have to surface soon, and somebody else can nail it."

"Right-o!" Freddy Farmer called back. "But, gosh, I would love to be that somebody else! Or—or has this just been a crazy dream, Dave? It doesn't make sense! Those were blasted Nazis on the life raft. Like—like a confounded decoy, or something. I—"

"*Decoy?*" Dave Dawson gasped, and sat up straight in the pit. "Holy smoke! Do you suppose so? Sure, you must be right. Look, Freddy! Report that U-boat's last position. Then we'll get out of here, but fast! Something is kind of screwy, and I don't like it, but plenty I don't."

As Dawson nosed the Vultee around and onto its course for San Fernando on British-owned Trinidad, he impulsively lifted his free hand to his chest and pressed it against the two sealed [Pg 75]

CHAPTER SIX

[Pg 76]

Changed Orders

The U. S. Army Air Transport Command at San Fernando comprised the entire south side of the Trinidad air base. Dawson spotted the American flag atop the Administration Building from the air. After his recent experience, a great sense of relief and joy flooded through him at the sight of Old Glory waving proudly in the breeze. And not only that, but the sight of Old Glory meant also that this crazy aerial messenger-boy mission was one-half completed. Three more stops and they would be at Natal. There they would meet Colonel Welsh and, please, please, God, find out what in thunder this secret sealed-envelope business was all about.

[Pg 77]

"And if he doesn't tell me," Dawson muttered as he let down the Vultee's wheels and nosed the craft earthward, "it's going to be the end of a beautiful friendship as far as I'm concerned. Right! He's got to give us a tiny inkling, at least or—or—Well, I sure hope he does, anyway."

"So do I, old chap!" he heard Freddy Farmer echo his hope. "I also want to see his face when we tell him what we have to tell. You haven't any new ideas, have you, Dave?"

"Dawson shook his head. During the remainder of the flight to this next stop, both had taken the U-boat experience apart and had carefully examined it piece by piece. It was all to no avail, in regard to reaching any definite conclusion. True, the logical conclusion was that the life raft had served as a decoy to bring them down so low that its occupants could shoot them into the water. When that had failed, the lurking U-boat had surfaced to try its luck with its bow anti-aircraft gun. If that was the correct conclusion, it made everything even more screwy. Colonel Welsh was the only man living who knew why they were making this crazy flight. He had told them so. How could a Nazi U-boat at sea learn the secret they shared with Colonel Welsh? And—

[Pg 78]

"Gosh!" Dawson gasped. "But no! Heck, no! That would be even screwier!"

"What, Dave?" Freddy asked. "You do have a new idea?"

"Not exactly," Dawson replied. "Just a chilling thought. Do you suppose those birds on that raft were *really* torpedo survivors, and in their crazed state took us for a Nazi plane and—"

"What utter rot, Dave!" Freddy Farmer interrupted. "Don't be silly, old thing! Of course not! Would four torpedo survivors bother to take four sub-machine guns onto a life raft with them? Certainly not! Come out of it, Dave! They were Nazis, sure enough. They were from that U-boat, too, and set adrift to have a go at us."

"But how—" Dawson began and cut himself off short. "Oh, skip it! If I let myself think any more about the crazy business, I'll forget what I'm doing and crack us up."

"Then for goodness' sakes don't think of it!" Freddy Farmer cried in alarm. "I fancy I've had excitement enough for the rest of this day! So forget things and keep your eye on that field down there."

Dawson did just that, and a couple of minutes later he set the Vultee down light as a feather and taxied it over toward the Administration Building. He braked to a stop eventually, unsnapped his safety and parachute harness, and climbed stiff-legged down onto the ground. Freddy Farmer joined him, and they were just starting to get some of the flight stiffness out of their legs when a major came out of the Administration Building and walked over to them.

[Pg 79]

"Captains Dawson and Farmer?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, sir." Dave replied with a salute. "I'm Dawson. And you are Major Parker, Yank commandant here, sir?"

"That's right," the senior officer replied. "Welcome to Trinidad. Word came through that you were making a survey flight along our South American bases. I think you'll find we're not doing so badly here at San Fernando. Here, this came through about half an hour ago. It's addressed to you both. Needless to say, we didn't try to decode it. I don't believe we have that code in the base book, anyway."

The major held out a small yellow envelope. Dawson took it, ripped it open, and withdrew a single sheet of paper. His heart did a loop in his chest when he saw that the coded message was signed, "Tiger." That was the signature Colonel Welsh used whenever he contacted the boys in secret. The major had been quite correct, too. The code used by Colonel Welsh was not to be found in the regular base code book, because it was a special one that the colonel had made up himself. This code was not known by more than half a dozen men, two of them being Dawson and Farmer. The value of such a code was that it was so made up that a decoding book, or decoding wheel, was not needed. Once you knew the code, you could read messages from the memory of what the various letters and numbers and symbols meant.

[Pg 80]

Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer looked at it together, while Major Parker politely stared off

across the base field. The true meaning of the message became instantly apparent to them. Translated in their minds, it read:

"Halt flight San Fernando. Arriving by air midnight. Serious emergency developed. Maintain constant alert. Destroy evidence if necessary. Important!"

WELSH"

Dawson read the coded message three times, absently pulled off his helmet and goggles, ran his fingers through his hair, and glanced sidewise at Freddy Farmer. [Pg 81]

"And that is strictly that," he said. "But I wonder what?"

"I don't know," the English-born air ace replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "Frankly, though, I don't think I'm annoyed by this message. Fact is, I'm just a bit glad. Much rather see him tonight, instead of waiting until we get to Natal."

Dawson grinned faintly, and nodded.

"Yeah, I get what you mean," he murmured. "Maybe there's a connection between this and what happened a while ago, eh?"

"If not, I'll be very much surprised," Freddy Farmer said slowly. "And yet I may be a bit balmy to say that. How could there possibly be any connection?"

Dawson shrugged, but made no reply. He stuffed the coded message into his pocket, and turned to where Major Parker was inspecting the Vultee.

"Thanks for giving us the message, sir," he said. Then he added with a grin, "It sort of looks as though we've been fired, you might say. Our superior officer is joining us here at midnight. Would it be all right for us to eat in the Officers' Club and sort of kill time until he gets here?" [Pg 82]

"Certainly, Dawson," the major replied at once. "The place is yours. Help yourself to anything you like. So your survey flight is called off, eh?"

"Well, temporarily, anyway," Dave replied. "But don't ask me why, because I wouldn't know, Major."

"Okay, I won't," the other smiled. "I'll ask you this, instead. What kind of trouble did you run into on the way down here?"

"Trouble, Major?" Dawson echoed, and stared at him hard.

"These holes," the senior officer replied, and pointed to a cluster of four bullet holes six inches in from the Vultee's left wing tip. "Somebody been sticking a pencil through the wing skin, eh?"

"No; Nazi slugs," Dawson told him. "We—we came across a surfacing U-boat about eighty miles out. It crash dived right after it sighted us, but it threw up a few slugs in the meantime. We got a couple of its crew, though. We radioed Puerto Rico patrol base and gave them the U-boat's position. Have you heard any report that she was caught and nailed?"

"None," the major said, and then pointed across the field. "We wouldn't get that sort of thing, anyway. This is a British-owned base, you know. That we're here is a sort of lend-lease in reverse, you might say. And radio stuff such as your call would be picked up by them over there. Too bad, though, you didn't have a couple of depth charges aboard." [Pg 83]

"You're telling me, sir?" Dawson echoed with a grim laugh. "I'd have given my right eye for just one! I don't think I hate anything so much as I hate the U-boats."

"You're not alone in that pet hate," the major added. "The U-boat is the one thing we've got to lick, and lick fast, if we hope to win this war. Of course, we *are* flying a lot of stuff across these days. But it still takes ships to get oil, and gas, and the heavy stuff over where it's needed. Hold everything! Where are my manners? You two could do with a wash-up and something to eat right now, couldn't you?"

"Oh, quite, sir," Freddy Farmer said eagerly.

And for once Dawson had to agree with the perpetually hungry English youth that a little food wouldn't be a bad idea at all. And so, after a quick check of the Vultee to make sure that no stray bullets had damaged anything seriously, they walked over to the Officers' Club with Major Parker. The commanding officer introduced them to a couple of Air Transport Command pilots and then took them into the mess, where a good meal was waiting for them. Major Parker had a cup of coffee while they ate, and conversation was at a dead end for a bit. [Pg 84]

Finally, Dawson refused a second cup of coffee and sighed in contentment.

"I guess I was rather starved, sir," he said to the major with a guilty laugh. "Must be that Caribbean air."

"Or the excitement," the major remarked quietly. "A little excitement always makes me hungry enough to eat a horse. You and Farmer are a couple of lucky fellows, you know."

"How do you mean, sir?" Dawson questioned, and gave him a searching look.

The other smiled faintly and appeared to be very interested in something he could see out of the mess window. Then suddenly he turned his head and fixed his calm blue eyes on them both.

"Tiger hasn't given *me* anything to do for a couple of months," he said, "except this job here and orders to keep my eyes and ears open for sabotage, and all that sort of stuff. I think a little real action would just about save my life." [Pg 85]

Dawson tried hard to control the start that the unexpected words gave him, but he didn't succeed very well.

"*Tiger*, Major?" he echoed, as a little note of caution sounded deep within him.

Major Parker smiled, and a little bit of red seeped up into his leathery face.

"I couldn't help but see the signature, Dawson," he said. "But you have my word of honor that I didn't read it. Because I saw that it was addressed to you two. Colonel Welsh taught me that secret code of his just before he sent me down to this place. I haven't been lucky enough, yet, to have had the chance to use it."

Since their messenger-boy mission had been washed out, at least until Colonel Welsh's arrival at midnight, there was no reason to check Major Parker's connection with Intelligence, but Dave somehow couldn't pass it by.

"I see, sir," he said quietly. "Well, Farmer and I were taught something, too, before we left. We were taught to take an interest in copper discs. Are you interested in copper discs, sir?"

"Slightly," the other said with a chuckle. "At least I'm interested in one copper disc. It has numbers on it." [Pg 86]

"Numbers?" Dawson murmured, and tried to look a little surprised.

Major Parker smiled, and slipped a hand into his pocket.

"That's right," he said as he withdrew his hand. "Numbers. The numbers on the copper disc I'm interested in add up to forty-*three*. Would you like to see it?"

A cold chill shot through Dawson's chest, and a strange dryness came into his throat. Forty-*three*? But if Major Parker really was Colonel Welsh's agent down here at San Fernando, the numbers on his copper disc should add up to forty-*one*.

"Why, yes, yes," he finally got out with an effort. "I'd like to see it very much."

"Then have a look, by all means, Dawson," the major said, and with a slight movement of his hand he tossed a brightly polished copper disc down on the table top.

Dawson picked it up with fingers that were trying desperately hard to stop trembling. He could hear Freddy Farmer's heavy breathing, as the English youth leaned over to take a look. Dave had picked up the disc with the smooth side showing, so he had to turn it over. On the other side stamped into the metal were the numbers 9 1 2 7 8 6 8. He stared at them, and suddenly the truth came to him. The numbers did not add up to forty-*three*. They added up to forty-*one*, just as they should have. [Pg 87]

The major's soft chuckle made Dawson jerk up his head.

"Sorry I couldn't resist the temptation, Dawson," the officer said. "You just added them up, didn't you? And reached the Pearl Harbor figure, eh?"

"Yes," Dawson said, and handed back the copper disc with a grin. "But you sure had my heart fluttering for a moment there."

"Frankly, I was just about to reach for my service automatic," Freddy Farmer added.

"Well, forgive me my rather flat little joke, and let's skip it, eh?" Major Parker said with a little wave of his hand. "I noticed that Tiger stuff gave you a little start, so I thought I'd kid a bit. Maybe that's what this darn sun down here does to a fellow. To be serious though—and out of order, I guess—anything in Tiger's message that I should know?"

"Just what we told you," Dave replied pleasantly. "Our survey job is held up until Colonel Welsh arrives. Which will be midnight tonight." [Pg 88]

Major Parker looked disappointed. Then he sighed, and grinned.

"Okay," he said, "we'll let it go at that. If he had wanted me to know anything, he'd have sent me a message, too. Well, as I said, the place is yours. I've got some paper work to do, so I'll have to leave you for a spell. Don't hesitate to make yourselves at home. If there is anything you want, just yell. See you later."

"Yes, sir, and thanks for everything," Dawson said. He and Farmer also rose as the senior officer got to his feet.

"Think nothing of it," the major said with a wave of his hand. "And have fun, if you can find any fun around this place." With a smile and a nod, he went through the mess door.

Freddy looked at Dawson, and Dawson looked right back at him.

"Nice enough chap, isn't he?" the English youth finally broke the silence.

"Yes, he's okay," Dawson agreed. "I guess he is going bats down here with nothing to do. That is, nothing in his own line of work. Say, Freddy?"

"Yes, Dave."

"How about walking down some of this swell meal, huh?" Dave suggested. "I could do with a walk around. And like Colonel Welsh, I'm not so keen about four walls." [Pg 89]

"A top-hole idea," Freddy Farmer said gravely, and brushed a couple of crumbs off the skirt of his tunic. "I know just what you mean, old thing. I've been thinking about it myself. Yes, definitely a top-hole idea. Let's get along, shall we?"

"Yeah, let's," Dawson murmured, and led the way toward the mess door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

[Pg 90]

Blackout

The setting sun was turning the waters of Paria Gulf between Trinidad and Venezuela to blood red as Dawson and Farmer strolled along a footpath that skirted a huge sugar plantation close to the San Fernando field. As neither had ever set foot on Trinidad before, the many and strange sights that met their wandering gaze took up all of their attention, and the thought that was in the back of each youth's mind was not given utterance for quite some time.

Presently, though, Dawson came to a full stop, took a deep breath, and squatted down on the ground.

"Let's rest and watch the sunset," he said. "It looks like it's going to be something. Besides, that's plenty enough walking for these aged bones." [Pg 91]

"I was wondering if you were going to keep it up forever," Freddy Farmer grunted, and sank down beside him. "Good grief! It does get your legs when you're not used to it."

"Think of the poor infantry, and realize how lucky you are," Dawson chuckled. "After all, pal, you and I were flying last night, not sleeping."

"And don't I know it!" the other youth replied. "Can hardly keep my eyes open now. As a matter of fact, when we get back, I'm going to borrow a place from Major Parker to sleep until Colonel Welsh shows up. Blast it, Dave! I don't think I feel very friendly toward the colonel, just now. Heaven knows he's kept us in the dark once or twice in the past, but certainly nothing like this. I'm just about ready to explode with curiosity."

"Me, I'm almost beginning not to give a darn," Dawson said, and lazily stretched his arms over his head. "Too doggone much mystery and not an answer to a single question. Speaking of questions, Freddy—call me nuts, but I've got an awful funny feeling." [Pg 92]

"About what, Dave?" the English youth asked quickly, and gave him a searching look.

"These darned sealed envelopes we're still carrying around," Dave replied. "The four we've still got, counting Major Parker's. In the colonel's message, he ordered us to destroy them if necessary. Well—well, outside of that dizzy U-boat thing, it's been just an airplane flight. Yet—darn it, Freddy—having these envelopes in my pocket is giving me the jim-jams!"

"Yes, I know what you mean," young Farmer admitted, and frowned. "I'm getting rather fed up with carrying them around, too. Silly, of course, but a couple of times I've felt as though somebody were watching every move I made."

Dawson started slightly and took a quick glance in all four directions, but he didn't see anyone, except some people near the San Fernando base over half a mile away. He looked at Freddy and grinned a little sheepishly.

"You have, kid?" he echoed. "Well, me too. I've been having exactly that kind of feeling, too. You know what I think about hunches!"

"Yes," the other replied. "And I also know that sometimes your hunches are worth giving serious consideration."

"Sometimes, he says" Dawson snorted. "Look, pal—Oh, skip it! Now about the four envelopes, Freddy, if you want my opinion on the matter, it's—let's dump the acid on them and be rid of the darn things. Maybe Colonel Welsh won't like it, but what the heck? He said, *if necessary*, and the funny feeling I've got right now, and have had ever since we got his message, makes me think it is necessary! What do you think? Or am I going off half-cocked?" [Pg 93]

Freddy Farmer didn't reply for a moment. He sat staring out over the Gulf of Paria that was now changing from blood red to midnight blue since the sun had gone down behind the headlands of Venezuela. Finally he reached a hand up inside his tunic and nodded abruptly.

"If you're going off half-cocked, then we both are, Dave," he said quietly. "I'm all for getting rid of them. If you alone had the funny feeling, I'd say no. But I've got a queer feeling, too. So—well, here go my two, anyway."

As young Farmer spoke, he took out his two sealed envelopes and dropped them on the ground. Then, moving back a bit, he unscrewed the cap of his little vial and poured the brownish-colored contents over the envelopes. There was a small flash of flame as the stuff came in contact with the envelopes which seemed to melt away into the ground, leaving nothing but a black smudge where they had been.

[Pg 94]

"Boy, does that do the trick!" Dawson breathed, and dropped his two sealed envelopes on the spot where Freddy's two had been. "Drop that vial, Freddy, and kick dirt over it. Just a smell of that stuff would most likely take the soles off your shoes. Okay, here go mine, too."

A few seconds later there was another dark smudge on the ground, and not so much as a shred of any of the sealed envelopes, or their contents. Both Dawson and Freddy dropped their empty vials, kicked dirt over them, and stamped the little mounds flat. Then, as if by mutual agreement, they relaxed and heaved deep sighs of relief.

"Maybe I was wrong," Dawson said thoughtfully. "Maybe Colonel Welsh will hit the roof when we tell him. Just the same, though, I feel a hundred per cent better."

"Quite!" Freddy Farmer murmured, but with emphasis. "I feel as though a terrific weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I swear, Dave, I haven't got a strong enough heart to stand much of this sort of thing. Frankly, this is the first contented breath I've taken since we left Washington."

[Pg 95]

"Yeah, I know," Dawson agreed. "The colonel certainly did pour on the old caution stuff this time. So I guess it was—or still is—something pretty doggone important. But there I go again, wondering what it's all about. I sure wish the colonel would hurry up and get here!"

"Know something, Dave?" Freddy asked after a couple of moments of silence between them.

"*Know* something?" Dave groaned, and rolled over on his stomach. "Maybe you haven't been listening to me, pal. *I* don't know from nothing. Do you?"

"Not exactly," Freddy replied. "Just the old guessing game again. I am guessing, though, that somebody found out about those sealed envelopes. Also, they found out that you and I were acting as the messenger boys. Also, they arranged that balmy life-raft and U-boat business this afternoon. And also, Colonel Welsh is a very worried man, right at the moment."

"All of which means nothing," Dawson added, "and will continue to mean nothing until the colonel gets here, and explains. *If* he does."

"Most naturally!" Freddy said with a slight edge to his voice. "I've been doing some extra thinking about this thing, in case you don't realize it."

[Pg 96]

"Well, go right ahead and think yourself black, blue, and sky-pink in the face, if it makes you happy, little man," Dawson said with a laugh, "but you still won't know from beans until the colonel gets here. And if he—"

"I know, *I know!*" Freddy interrupted with an impatient gesture of his hand. "Save your breath, old thing. However, you might give this a bit of thought, if your brain can stand the strain. We've been flying part of the air transport route to North Africa."

"No kidding?" Dawson said with a mock gasp. "Why, I always thought the air transport route to North Africa was by way of Salt Lake City and Alaska!"

"Very, *very* funny!" Freddy snapped. "If I'm not boring you, Major Parker said he was sent down here to keep an eye out for sabotage. He also said nothing has happened in all the time he's been here. Colonel Welsh admitted that his special agents were acting as C.O. of the points where we've stopped and were going to stop. Why, Dave? *Why* should Intelligence have a sudden interest in this air route to North Africa?"

Dawson started to make another wisecrack, but the deadly serious look on young Farmer's face stopped him. He gave the question a moment or two of thought and then shook his head.

[Pg 97]

"I don't know, Freddy," he replied. "I really don't know. You can search me. If it isn't because of possible sabotage, then what?"

"I guess I've asked myself that question a thousand times," the English-born air ace said slowly. "I can think up but one answer that might make sense. This is it. All these arrangements are being made to make absolutely sure nothing will happen to something very special that is soon to be flown to North Africa."

"Such as?" Dawson prompted.

Freddy seemed to hesitate for a long time. Then he shrugged, and made a little gesture with his hands, palms upward.

"Blessed if I know, or can guess," he said. "However, I feel absolutely sure that all this business is taking place because something highly important is to be flown to North Africa."

"I don't think I agree with you there, Freddy," Dawson stated with a frown. "This is one of the Air Transport Command routes to North Africa, but if something special was to be flown across, the plane carrying it certainly wouldn't land at all these points. Heck, Freddy! Air Transport Command has lots of planes that could make the run down here to Trinidad non-stop, and hop from here to Natal the same way."

[Pg 98]

"Oh, quite," Freddy Farmer agreed, and waved his hand as though brushing aside the undisputed point. "Non-stop all the way to Natal, if you want to make an issue of it. However, the points in between are being given just as much attention. Presumably this is being done *in the event of trouble and a forced landing*; emergency fields, so to speak, all along the route the plane, or planes, will fly."

"Okay, okay, Master Mind!" Dawson laughed, and threw up his hands. "Maybe you've got something there. And if you have, it means that what we've been delivering, and what we just destroyed, are instructions in case your mysterious cavalcade of the air happens to sit down on one of the fields. Okay, that's that, then. Now all you have left to figure out is *why* this mysterious flight?"

Freddy Farmer nodded but made no reply. He sat watching the swiftly approaching shadows of night. Glancing at his face, Dawson saw that the English youth had something very absorbing on his mind. When young Farmer continued to maintain silence, Dawson's curiosity got the best of him.

[Pg 99]

"Okay, out with it," he said. "What's the heavy thought that's weighing down your brain at the moment?"

"A very definitely insane one," Freddy Farmer replied, with a little apologetic smile. "But taking it all and all, I'm blessed if I can think of anything better."

"Thanks," Dawson said sarcastically, and rolled over on his side. "That makes everything clear as mud. What do you want me to do—get up on my hind legs and beg?"

If Freddy Farmer heard the remark, he ignored it. He turned to Dawson and held up one hand with the fingers stiff and extended upward. Then he started counting them off with the forefinger of the other hand.

"*One*: Two F.B.I. chaps followed us all over New York," he said. "*Two*: Colonel Welsh told us that a list of names compiled by the War Department had been turned over to the F.B.I., and that it had the approval of the President, the Secret Service, the Army, Navy, and Air Forces. *Three*: The colonel refused to give us so much as a hint as to what's behind this flight of ours. *Four*: He told us to guard those sealed envelopes with our lives. *Five*: He said that one of his agents was in secret command of every point where we were to stop. *Six*: The route is the Air Transport route to North Africa. *Seven*: The colonel said that the sealed envelopes contained the most important secret of the war so far. And *eight*: He said that he would have another special mission for us when we met in Natal."

[Pg 100]

"And *nine*?" Dawson queried when young Farmer stopped talking and lapsed into brooding silence.

The English youth hesitated, chewed on his lower lip for a moment, and then leaned over toward Dave and whispered, "*Nine*, is that all these arrangements are being made because—because President Roosevelt and the Yank High Command are being flown to North Africa, and perhaps beyond, for a war conference with Prime Minister Churchill, Premier Joseph Stalin, and their High Command Staffs. And there you have what *I* think!"

Dawson whistled softly, sat up straight, and stared hard at his flying mate and dearest friend.

"And *I* think you are strictly nuts, Freddy!" he said. But scarcely had he spoken the words when he frowned and gave a little twist of his head. "Jeepers, I wonder!" he mumbled.

[Pg 101]

"Yes, no doubt I am quite nuts," Freddy agreed, and got up on his feet. "Personally, I can't think up a better guess. It's started my brain swimming, though. So what say we start on back, eh? Don't want to miss evening mess, you know."

"What a guy! *What a guy!*" Dawson groaned, and stood up. "Here in one breath he has perhaps figured out the biggest secret in the war so far, and in the next breath he's sounding off about that stomach of his. Did I mention a moment ago that I think you *are* nuts? If I didn't, then consider it said right now!"

"The difference between us, old thing!" Freddy Farmer explained with an airy wave of his hand as he started back along the path. "The food you eat helps your body. The food I eat helps my body *and* my brain. If you'd only eat more, maybe some of the nourishment would have a chance to get up that high! I say! I didn't half realize that it was this dark."

"Yeah," Dawson agreed as he stumbled over a root. "A good thing that talking box of yours ran out of words, or Major Parker would have to send out a searching party. I—Hey, Freddy! What's the matter?"

[Pg 102]

Dawson shouted the last because young Farmer, some ten or fifteen feet ahead of him in the gloom, had suddenly buckled at the knees and had fallen slowly to the ground. Dave leaped forward toward his prostrate pal and had started to kneel down beside him when suddenly there

was a rustling sound in the sugar cane to his right. He turned his head and caught a fleeting glimpse of bare feet and trousers. Then the Trinidad sky seemed to fall on top of his head with a thunderous roar of sound, and a great shower of red, yellow, orange and purple sparks.

"Hey! What—"

From a million miles away he heard the hoarse whisper of his own voice. Then the hands of an invisible giant seemed to grab hold of him, lift him high, and fling him spinning head over heels out across a world composed of booming sound and flashing light.

CHAPTER EIGHT

[Pg 103]

Eagles Can Take It

A death-like stillness was everywhere. In that total absence of sound, Dawson was aware of a throbbing, pounding pain in his head that made him feel as though somebody were chopping it apart. Silence, darkness, and somebody chopping his head to pieces. These three things Dawson's sluggish brain could grasp, or at least grasp for a moment at a time. All else, though, was just a great big blank. He didn't know where he was, or what had happened. He scarcely remembered who he was.

Suddenly a prickly pain all over his face seemed to speed up the functioning of his brain. That, and the dull realization that he could barely breathe because something was clamped hard against his nose and mouth. Realization, yes; but there was not yet enough strength in his body to do anything about it. For that matter, he felt as if he had no body. He was aware of nothing but the pain in his head. Maybe his body was gone, and only his head was living on. Did such things happen? Was it possible for—

[Pg 104]

"Dave! Dave, old man! Oh—*Dave!*"

Sound? Yes, that was the sound of a voice! But whose voice? Dave couldn't see anything because of the darkness, shattered every now and then by pin-points of glittering light, like falling stars in the night heavens. He—The thought dribbled away as a sense feeling returned to his "absent" body. He suddenly realized that he was being picked up, or rolled over on his back. The prickly pain left his face at once. In the next instant he knew that his eyes were open, because he was conscious of many shadows. The shadows moved, but no objects were clearly outlined.

"Dave! Dave, old thing! Can you hear me?"

An arm was about his shoulders, and a hand was brushing his face. The brushing seemed to remove every trace of the prickly pain. It also seemed to cause the shadows to stop moving and gradually take on shape and outline. He knew he was looking at treetops outlined against a pale grey sky that grew darker and darker as he looked at it. A head came into view. He saw wide, fear-filled eyes and lips that moved but made no sound, save dry sobs. Suddenly, as though a button had been pressed inside his head, his sluggish brain started to speed up, and in a flash complete consciousness returned. Memory too, came flooding back like waters pouring through a broken dam.

[Pg 105]

"Freddy!" he heard himself gasp. "You—you okay, Freddy?"

The arm about his shoulders tightened, and Freddy's choking voice answered, "Thank goodness, Dave! I thought—I could hardly feel your heart beat. You can thank God for your helmet, and I for mine, too. Our heads would have been caved in but for them. No, Dave! Don't try to sit up. You got it worse than I, or maybe my head is harder."

"I'll feel better sitting up, Freddy," Dawson mumbled, and sat up in spite of Farmer's plea for him to lie still.

For the first couple of seconds, though, it didn't help at all. The throbbing pain doubled in intensity, and he thought his head was going to fly off his shoulders. After the first couple of seconds the throbbing pain died down, and he could feel new strength surging through his body. It was then that he took a good look at Freddy Farmer, let out a little startled cry, and impulsively reached out a hand.

[Pg 106]

"Jeepers, Freddy!" he gasped. "You look like you've been through a meat grinder, and—Holy smokes! Look at me, will you? I look even worse. My tunic's in ribbons, and—"

Dawson stopped talking and stared wide-eyed at young Farmer. The English-born air ace returned his look and nodded slowly as he wet his lips with his tongue.

"Quite, Dave," he said in a strained voice. "Some dirty beggar chopped us down and searched us from head to foot for something he *didn't* find."

An icy chill swept through Dawson, and he swallowed hard. It was a second or two before he could speak.

"Those sealed envelopes, I bet!" he whispered. "We got rid of them just in time. But, my gosh,

Freddy! Who—"

Dawson let the thought go unspoken because it seemed so utterly incredible.

"Yes, who?" Freddy Farmer echoed, and gave a little shrug of his shoulders. "Somebody, that's certain. Gosh, he came close to killing us. When I came to and saw you with your ripped tunic pulled up over your head and your face pushed down into the dirt, I thought sure you were a goner. Look, Dave, take off your helmet, if it doesn't hurt too much. I want to see if it's more than just a bump. If your scalp's been cut, I can patch it from this pocket Red Cross kit I carry." [Pg 107]

But Dawson had already explored under his helmet with very gentle fingertips. He had two bumps side by side, not over an inch above a point where two such blows would undoubtedly have paralyzed him for life, if not killed him instantly. As it was, there were just the two bumps and no wet or caked blood.

"Just bumps, Freddy," he said, and forced a chuckle. "A couple of pips, but you know me, Old Iron Head. How about you, though?"

"I'm lucky," Freddy said, and tried to match Dawson's forced gaiety. "Just one lump, but I'm sure the old noggin will ache for months. We'd better bear this in mind, Dave. We can't stand another of these attacks."

"Says which?" Dawson mumbled.

"We couldn't possibly be that lucky twice," the English youth explained. "Blast this whole business, though! I don't like things I don't understand. I definitely don't!" [Pg 108]

Dave Dawson didn't make any comment on that. He got slowly to his feet, steeled himself while a dizziness swept through his head, and then began a methodical search of his uniform pockets. Watching him, Freddy Farmer waited until he had inspected their contents and had put them back.

"Anything missing, Dave?" he asked.

"Nothing, not even my money," Dawson replied with a note of grimness in his voice. "So that proves it. Proves it wasn't a stick-up and plain robbery. That we're both still alive and more or less kicking proves murder wasn't the big idea, either. They were after something that we didn't have any more. And—Sweet tripe, Freddy! That was over a couple of hours ago. Look at the time, will you?"

As Dawson spoke he thrust out his wrist watch. Freddy Farmer didn't glance at the radium-painted dial. He simply nodded.

"I know," he said. "I didn't enjoy our little nap at all. If you really do feel up to it, Dave, what say we get on along back, what? Major Parker may be wondering about us." [Pg 109]

"Yeah," Dawson said, and stopped short. "Major Parker, Freddy?" he said after a long pause. "He knows that code of the colonel's. He delivered that message to us, but swears he read only the signature. And he is the only one, outside of those two Air Transport Command pilots, that we've spoken to here. But heck! I'm just plain nuts. It just couldn't be!"

"And I don't think it is, Dave," Freddy Farmer murmured. "I'd bet my life it wasn't Major Parker. He—Half a minute, Dave! Here comes somebody along the path! I can see two flashlights!"

"Me, too!" Dawson answered quickly. "I can—" He stopped as the silence of night was suddenly broken with a loud hail.

"Hello-o-o-o-o! Dawson and Farmer! Where are you? Hello-o-o-o-o! Dawson and Farmer-r-r-r!"

"That's Parker!" Dawson cried. "Out looking for us. Let's go, Freddy!"

Dawson took a couple of steps, then stopped and cupped his two hands to his mouth.

"Hello-o-o there, Major!" he bellowed. "We're coming!"

As his call died away, he could tell by the movement of the beams of light far back along the path that whoever held the flashlights was coming on the run. He and Freddy walked toward the approaching lights, and after a couple of minutes one of them was playing over him at close quarters. Major Parker's dumbfounded comments were splitting the night air. [Pg 110]

"Good grief, what happened to you two? I waited mess for you, but when you didn't show up I got worried for fear you'd got lost. Somebody said they saw you heading up this path, so we came after you. Good grief! What happened? Are you badly hurt?"

By "we," Major Parker meant himself and one of the field pilots, who was carrying the other flashlight. On impulse Dawson gave the man, whose name was Tracey, a searching look, but he saw only bewildered amazement and sympathy in the sun-and-wind bronzed face.

"We don't exactly know, sir," Dawson answered the major. "We were heading back to the base when suddenly the lights went out. Somebody jumped us from the sugar cane. When we woke up, we were as you see us, but nothing was missing."

"Nothing?" Major Parker asked sharply.

"Not a darn thing, sir!" Dawson replied truthfully. "I don't get it. And I don't like it, either. Thanks, though, for coming after us." [Pg 111]

Major Parker dismissed the last with a wave of his hand, and opened his mouth as though to say something important. He seemed to change his mind as he shot a quick glance at Tracey, because he gave a little shrug and remarked, "Well, standing around here isn't helping anything. I'd better get you two back so you can clean up. We've got some spare uniforms, and it won't be hard to find your fit. Slugged, and not a thing missing, huh? Well, that's a new one on me. Okay, let's get back—if you two really aren't hurt badly?"

"Just a bump or two, sir," Dawson assured him. "Nothing to write home about, at all."

"Quite," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Received worse than this in a crash or two. We're quite all right, sir."

Major Parker paused, scowled, and shot them both a keen, searching look. He said nothing, though; he just shrugged, turned around, and started leading the way back along the path that skirted the sugar cane plantation.

CHAPTER NINE

[Pg 112]

Death Strikes

Brows furrowed in deep thought, Major Parker slowly packed tobacco into his pipe, put the stem between his teeth, and struck a match. As he applied the flame to the bowl, he raised his eyes and watched Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer putting away their second meal as his guests. This time, however, it was not in the Officers' Mess. The trio were in the major's own quarters, and Dawson and Farmer looked none the worse for their recent experience. Uniforms that fitted them perfectly had been found, and it had been a matter of a couple of minutes to transfer their insignia and incidentals from their torn and dirt-smearred uniforms. As a matter of fact, anybody stepping inside the major's quarters at the moment wouldn't have thought anything amiss. That is, unless he noticed the fixed scowl on the major's face. [Pg 113]

The major kept scowling until Dave and Freddy had fully satisfied their craving stomachs. Then he poured coffee for the three of them and offered cream and sugar. That done, he slipped a hand into his tunic pocket, pulled out his copper disc and tossed it on the table.

"What else do I have to do to convince you two?" he asked quietly.

Dawson lowered his coffee cup and looked at the major in mild surprise.

"What's that, sir?" he asked.

Major Parker jabbed his pipe stem at the copper disc.

"That," he said, "is the only identification I can produce until Colonel Welsh arrives at midnight. That isn't far off, of course, but you two ran into some trouble tonight. Bad trouble, I'd say, and—Well, I'm supposed to be in charge down here, which automatically makes me responsible for your safety. I fell down on the job, it seems. In other words, I'd like all the details so that I can start the wheels turning to round up this mysterious trouble-maker." [Pg 114]

Dawson smiled, gave a little twist of his head, and gestured with one hand.

"That's just the trouble, sir," he said pleasantly. "There aren't any details, except the unpleasant ones that we've already told you. We were heading back here when we were suddenly jumped and knocked cold. Whoever did the job tore our uniforms to ribbons searching us."

"And what do you suppose he was searching for?" Major Parker asked shrewdly.

"I don't know, sir," Dawson said quietly, and looked straight at him. "Whatever it was, he didn't find it, because neither of us lost a single thing."

"That's quite right, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up. "I just had a thought, though. Perhaps robbery was the main idea, but something or somebody scared the beggar off."

Major Parker made a face as though he suddenly had a bad taste in his mouth, and sighed sadly.

"Look, Farmer, I'm all of thirty-three!" he said sarcastically, "I've been around a little. Don't give me that kind of an explanation. It's silly. Whoever it was had time to tear your uniforms to shreds, but *no* time to grab your money. That is, if it *was* robbery." [Pg 115]

"Well, it was just a thought, sir," Freddy replied with a weak grin.

"Then let's skip it," the major suggested laughingly. Becoming serious, he said, "Don't think I'm trying to bust in on secret stuff. What isn't my business *isn't* my business. I've been attached to Intelligence long enough to learn that. I ask for details simply because a couple of funny things have happened around here lately. About ten days ago one of the field laborers, hired by the British, was found dead with a bullet in his brain. It turned out to be a Luger bullet. Three days

ago somebody broke into my office and tried to go through my private files. At least, that's the way it looked to me—though my hunch might be all wet. Tell me this, if you can: Did either of you get a look at whoever slugged you?"

"I didn't see a thing, or feel a thing, for that matter," Freddy Farmer said with a shake of his head. "I was just walking along, and the next instant I was out cold."

Dawson started to shake his head, when suddenly he remembered. "I saw his feet and legs up to his knees! As a matter of fact, he was barefooted, but he wore pants. That's all I saw. Just his bare feet and his trouser legs up to his knees."

[Pg 116]

"Barefooted, eh?" Major Parker murmured. "That could well mean one of the natives. There are certainly enough of them around here. Well, that just makes this confounded business much more mysterious. I'll certainly be mighty glad when Colonel Welsh arrives."

"I guess that goes for the three of us, sir," Dawson added with a smile.

"Yes, very much so," Freddy Farmer chimed in.

Then followed a few minutes of silence, while each was engrossed with his own thoughts. Presently Major Parker sighed faintly, knocked the coals from his pipe bowl into an ash tray, and got to his feet.

"I have to make a little nightly inspection tour about the place," he said. "So, if you two will excuse me, I'll get on with the job. Don't go away, though. I won't be long. I'll be back for another cup of coffee with you. They certainly know how to make it down in this part of the world."

"All right, sir, we'll wait," Dawson answered for Farmer and himself. "Unless there's something we can do to help? Doesn't seem quite fair for us to eat your food, take up your time, and not do any—"

[Pg 117]

"Forget it, Dawson," Parker interrupted. "I'm glad to have you here. Well, be seeing you shortly."

With a nod and another wave of his hand, Major Parker went outside and left the two youths looking at each other.

"I like Major Parker plenty," Dawson said after a while. "And it sure makes me feel like a heel."

"What does?" the English-born air ace wanted to know. "The fact that you like him?"

"Cut it out!" Dawson urged. "Of course not. I feel like a heel because I can't come clean and tell him all that we know."

"It isn't very much, if you ask me," Freddy said with a shrug and a gesture.

"I know, but just the same I wish I could tell him what little we do know. I'm sure he knows that we're holding out on him. And like I said, he's such a swell fellow. And not the least bit dumb, what I mean."

"Well, you can't be dumb and work for Colonel Welsh, I fancy," Freddy murmured.

Dawson started to agree with him, but suddenly checked his words and shot a quick glance at Freddy. The English-born air ace was toying with his cup of coffee and didn't see the grin that tugged down the corners of Dawson's mouth.

[Pg 118]

"Well, there is one exception," Dave said. "I could give you his name with one hand tied behind my back."

"And so could I!" Freddy said without so much as glancing up from his cup of coffee. "His name is Dawson! Thought you were being very smart, little man, didn't you, what?"

"Okay, pass the cream!" Dave ordered. "I know when I'm licked. I—Hey! You hear that?"

"Hear what?" young Farmer asked, and looked up quickly.

"I thought I heard a shout and a couple of shots from outside," Dave told him. "You didn't hear anything at all, Freddy?"

"Not a blessed thing, except your confounded voice," Freddy told him.

That was all the English youth did say, because at that instant they both clearly heard wild shouting and the savage yammer of machine-gun fire. For about half a second they sat perfectly still. Then as one they leaped to their feet, whirled, and raced out the door of Major Parker's quarters. Outside, it was dark, and the sudden change blinded them both. But only for a moment, and at the end of that moment they saw two or three moving lights over at the southwest corner of the base, and several figures running across the field toward those moving lights. Impulsively, Dawson reached for his holstered service automatic and broke into a run.

[Pg 119]

"Let's go, kid," he called back over his shoulder.

The last was unnecessary, because young Farmer was in motion, too, and right there at his elbow. Together they ran across the field and reached the small group gathered about three figures holding powerful flashlights. The beams were being played on something on the ground, and as Dawson took a look he gasped and instantly pushed his way forward. On the ground, and

just being helped up by a guard corporal, was Major Parker. The officer, in spite of his leathery tan, looked very pale. And there was a trickle of blood running down from a cut on his forehead just over the left eye.

"Take it easy, sir; I'll get the ambulance," the guard corporal was saying as Dawson reached the injured man. "And we'll get the guy that did it, too."

"Don't bother about that, Corp," a voice said. "I saw him running after the major fired, and me and little Betsy, here, knocked him out. He's over there and not talking to anybody. He'll never talk again, not that bird!" [Pg 120]

Dawson had raised his head at the sound of the voice, and saw a square-jawed American soldier not ten feet away. The soldier was holding a sub-machine gun in the crook of one arm, and patting it affectionately with his hand. He paused in his patting long enough to jerk a thumb to his left. Dawson looked in that direction and started inwardly as he made out the huddled figure of a dead man on the ground. The thing that made him start was the fact that the dead man was barefooted. One glance, and Dawson turned his attention to Major Parker, who was now on his feet, gently pushing aside the guard corporal's efforts to keep holding him.

"It's all right, Corporal, thanks," Major Parker said. "And I don't want any ambulance. Somebody loan me a handkerchief until I can get a real patch for this thing."

"I've a First Aid patch right here, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up quickly. "Here, let me put it on. There! I say, sir, what happened?"

The major tested the First Aid patch with his fingers and grinned a trifle stiff-lipped at Dawson and Farmer. [Pg 121]

"He seems to have gone in for numbers tonight," he said. "I was just coming around the corner of the Non-Coms' mess over there, when I thought I heard a sound behind me. I turned, but it was quite dark at that spot, so I didn't see anything clearly. Just—well, just somebody diving at me. I didn't bother to ask questions. I dropped and went for my gun. That's what saved me a really nasty crack, I guess. It messed up his aim, because he had to reach out farther. But I missed, too, when I shot at him as we both fell to the ground. Singed him, though, because he cried out. The crack he gave me made me see a few stars, so I missed again as he jumped to his feet and started running. Private Marvin, here, arrived on the scene just in time, and Private Marvin is the kind who doesn't miss. Let's go take a look."

The whole group moved over to the dead man on the ground. The flashlight beams were played on him. Somebody leaned down and turned the corpse over on its back. The dead man was dressed in cheap native clothing, and his skin was burned almost as black as the night sky. There was something about the features, particularly the wide forehead, that arrested Dawson's attention. As he leaned closer for a better look, he caught sight of a corner of white showing beneath a tear in the dead man's shirt. On impulse, Dawson reached down and pulled. Out came a white envelope, and Dave's heart leaped up into his throat. He didn't have to look inside the envelope to know what was there. Instantly he recognized it as the letter of authority Colonel Welsh had given Farmer and him to carry. [Pg 122]

"Holy smokes!" he whispered to himself. "So he *did* get something off us. This! I'd forgotten all about this thing."

"What thing?" Major Parker asked sharply, and stepped close.

Dawson hesitated, but when he saw that the major and he were standing a little apart from the others, he removed the letter of authority and smoothed it out so the senior officer could read it. Major Parker did just that.

"But you didn't give me any—" he began, and stopped short as Dawson nudged him quickly.

"I know, sir," Dave said in a low voice. "We decided it best to destroy them, after the message we got from Tiger. We did just that about five minutes before your corpse there jumped us. He didn't find what he wanted, but he did find this letter. No doubt he figured that we'd given them to you, or, at least, that you had been given yours. He went after you, and—" Dawson came to a halt and gave a little angry shake of his head. "I seem to be doing fine, I don't think!" he grated after a moment. "I guess you could almost say, sir, that I gave you that crack on the head. I was responsible for it, anyway." [Pg 123]

"No, that's not true, Dave!" Freddy Farmer spoke in his ear at that moment. "I'm the thoughtless blighter. Don't you remember? I began carrying that letter at Puerto Rico. I confess I had forgotten all about the blasted thing."

Dawson looked hard at his pal and then shrugged.

"Okay, you or me, what does it matter?" he sighed. "The major should be plenty sore at both of us."

"You can skip that, both of you," Major Parker spoke up instantly. "After all, maybe it's a break in a way. The rat is dead, and that makes one less of his breed to bother us. Ten to one he killed that field laborer and searched my office. If so—"

The major let the rest slide, for at that moment all heard the roar of an approaching aircraft. It [Pg 124]

was coming in fast from the north, and as Dawson stared in that direction, he caught sight of the winking green and red running lights. A couple of moments later, the field lights were turned on to light the long runway. Shortly after that an American B-25 slid down to a nice landing, and went trundling over toward the Administration Building. Dawson, glancing at his watch, saw that it was exactly midnight.

CHAPTER TEN

[Pg 125]

Invisible Eyes

No sooner had the North American B-25 bomber braked to a full stop in front of the Administration Building than the fuselage door swung open and Colonel Welsh disembarked. The Intelligence officer's thin face was deeply lined from worry and loss of sleep, but his eyes were sharp and clear as he swept them over the group that had sprung to attention. When his eyes came to Dawson and Farmer, a light of relief seeped into them, and he gave a little nod of his head as a sign of recognition, and perhaps approval.

"Get inside, you two, at once!" the colonel ordered. And then, as his eyes picked out Major Parker, he added, "You, too, Parker. Everybody else, back to your posts!" [Pg 126]

With a million and one speculative thoughts dancing and racing about inside their heads, Dawson and Farmer climbed up into the bomber, with Major Parker at their heels. Once inside, they saw that the bomb compartment had been fitted out as an aerial office. Instinctively they headed that way. By the time they reached that compartment, Major Parker had joined them. The senior officer wigwagged a finger to check any questions that might be asked and waved the three of them to the little seats fitted to either side of the fuselage. He seated himself behind a small table bolted to the bomb compartment flooring and stared into space as the B-25's engines were revved up a little, and the bomber started to trundle forward.

Automatically, Dawson braced himself for a take-off, but the ship did not leave the ground. The pilot trundled the bomber over toward one of the hangars, braked it to a stop, and cut his engines. A moment later, the field's ground crew was busy filling the aircraft's tanks. Still Colonel Welsh sat staring into space without speaking a word. The suspense, and the mystery of it all, were like butterflies in Dawson's chest. Again and again he glanced at the colonel, hoping to catch the senior officer's eyes, believing that if he did so the colonel might give him some kind of a sign that would at least relieve the tension. [Pg 127]

He had no luck, though. The colonel sat like a man of stone while the B-25's fuel tanks were being filled to the brim. When they were filled, the engines were started, and the bomber was trundled out to the take-off end of the runway.

"A take-off sure, this time!" Dawson thought to himself. "I wonder where we're headed? In fact, I'm wondering a whole lot of things right now. Something has certainly happened, because the colonel looks in a bad way. He looks about as bad as I felt a few hours ago."

But there was no take-off. When the bomber was swung around into the wind, the engines were throttled to idling speed. Then and then only did Colonel Welsh come out of his trance. He looked at Dawson and Farmer, and reached out his hand.

"Give me the rest of those envelopes," he said.

Dawson shook his head and spoke quickly as a look of utter horror spread over Colonel Welsh's face. [Pg 128]

"We haven't got them, sir," he said. "Right after receiving your code message, we decided it was best to destroy them, so we did."

Horror vanished from the Intelligence Chief's face and thankful relief took its place.

"Good lads!" he said. "Now give me a detailed report of your flight from Washington."

Dave Dawson glanced impulsively at Freddy Farmer, but the English-born air ace shook his head and made a sign for Dave to do the talking. Dave turned to Colonel Welsh and began to relate everything that had happened from the Washington take-off to the moment of the colonel's arrival. He didn't leave out a thing. However, in the event he might have missed something, he shot a questioning look at Freddy Farmer when he had finished.

"No, I can't think of a thing to add," the English youth said. "You've covered everything, I'm sure."

During all the time Dawson was talking, Colonel Welsh sat leaning forward slightly and listening as though his life depended upon every word. Eventually he straightened up and looked at Major Parker.

"Have you anything to add?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir," the major replied. "Dawson covered my end of it all in complete detail." [Pg 129]

"You had never seen the dead man before, Parker?" the colonel then asked.

"No, sir," Major Parker replied. Then, with a faint gesture, he added, "I may have seen him, sir, in the course of my work, but the natives here all look more or less alike."

Colonel Welsh grunted, scowled down at the little table in front of him, and suddenly shot a sharp look at Dawson.

"Yes?" he asked. "You've got something on your mind, Dawson?"

Dave started slightly, because he did have something on his mind and was debating if he should mention it. He could feel the red seeping up into his face as he looked at Colonel Welsh.

"Just a hunch, sir," he said. "I'm probably all wrong. The dead man is undoubtedly a native, as Major Parker says, but—"

"But what?" Colonel Welsh pressed as Dawson let the rest go unspoken.

"Well, his skin was dark like that of a native's, sir," Dave replied after a quick apologetic look at Major Parker, "but there was something about his features that sort of struck me as queer. The forehead looked a little too wide for a native's, and I was suddenly struck by the hunch that he was—No, I *must* have been wrong!"

[Pg 130]

"Never mind what you must have been!" Colonel Welsh said sharply. "Finish what you were going to say! You had the hunch that he was—"

Dawson hesitated a second and then took the plunge. "That he was a German, sir!"

A moment of tingling silence settled over the made-over bomb compartment. Then Colonel Welsh broke it with an order to Major Parker.

"Come with me and show me this dead man, Parker," he said. "Dawson, you and Farmer wait right here for me."

Three seconds later the colonel and the major had climbed out of the bomber, leaving Dawson and Farmer to twiddle their fingers.

"I am going stark, raving mad!" young Farmer suddenly exploded in a low, vibrant voice. "If I don't find out something soon, I don't know what I'll do!"

"I'll join you in a throat-cutting act, pal!" Dawson said, and sighed heavily. "If this isn't the most mixed-up business we ever got into, then I don't know what! The colonel's been here half an hour, and we don't even know why he came down here in the first place. We can thank the gods for one thing, anyway."

[Pg 131]

"What's that?"

"That Colonel Welsh was relieved and not burnt up when I told him we had destroyed those envelopes," Dawson replied. "Envelopes! Phew! I'll be seeing those darn things in my dreams for the rest of my life. Gosh! One would think they contained the complete plans of Allied High Command for the invasion of the European Continent, or something!"

"Maybe they did," Freddy Farmer said with a shrug and a sigh. "Maybe they did."

With that the pair lapsed into brooding silence. Each was perfectly content to remain silent, because words were just a waste of breath now. They had talked themselves black and blue in the face as to the what and the why of this crazy business. For all their talking, they were right back where they had started in regard to anything concrete and definite. Why talk about it any more? It was far, far better to go quietly nuts waiting for Colonel Welsh to return and throw a little light on the subject.

They sat and waited for a good fifteen minutes, mulling over their own thoughts and listening absently to the even murmur of the idling Wright-Cyclone engines that powered the North American B-25.

[Pg 132]

At the end of that fifteen minutes, however, the colonel returned. To Dawson's relief and pleasure, he saw that a lot of the worry had left the Intelligence officer's face. In fact, there was an almost happy look in his eyes. He came straight into the bomb compartment, seated himself at his little table, and took the inter-com phone mike off the wall hook at his side.

"Take off, Captain," he spoke into it. "Fly north for twenty minutes and then take up the course I gave you. Eh? Right!"

The colonel put the inter-com mike back on the hook, looked at Dawson, and smiled faintly.

"Thank heaven for your hunch," he said. "You were absolutely right. He was a German."

"A spy, sir?" Dave blurted out before he could check himself.

"Naturally," the colonel replied. "Just about the best in the Nazis' gang. Colonel Baron Franz von Steuben is his name. Or was. Frankly, we've been after him for a long time. The world is well rid of his kind. What's the matter, Dawson?"

"Major Parker, sir," Dawson replied, and reddened slightly. "I hope he didn't think that I—"

[Pg 133]

"Not a bit of it!" the colonel interrupted quickly. "The major admires you for your hunch. He'd be the last one in the world who would want you to keep it to yourself. As a matter of fact, he suspected that you might feel embarrassed and asked me to give you his compliments and to say he was sorry he couldn't go along with you."

"To where, sir?" Freddy Farmer fairly shouted. And then he blushed so flamingly that both Dawson and the colonel had to laugh.

"That's all right, Farmer," the Intelligence officer said, still chuckling. "Don't blame you at all. I can see it in both your faces that you're practically ready to blow up with questions. Well, things have happened that I didn't want to happen, so I guess it's time for me to do a little explaining. Do you remember that technical sergeant in the hangar at Bolling Field?"

The two air aces nodded.

"He's dead," Colonel Welsh stated grimly. "He, too, was a Nazi spy. And working right under my very nose, which doesn't make *me* feel very proud. Shortly after your take-off, one of the mechanics who helped to roll out your plane came to me with the information that the technical sergeant had been standing right outside that office while I was giving you your instructions. I can tell you that that was the closest I ever came to having a case of heart failure. I got to work at once checking up on that technical sergeant. I won't bother you with the details, but we caught him cold. Complete with a powerful short-wave sending set, and all the rest of it. That was *after* he had had time to do his dirty work, *if any*. I know, now, what that dirty work was, of course. Your experiences, and Major Parker's, made the picture clear. He simply flashed word to other agents to get you two by hook or by crook. He knew your course, and he knew what you carried, though I'm still positive that he didn't know the contents of those sealed envelopes.

[Pg 134]

"Anyway, word was flashed along the network of Nazi spies on this side of the Atlantic and to that U-boat lurking in the Caribbean. Heavens! That was a daring stunt those devils tried."

"I'm still shaking at how close it came to being successful!" Dawson spoke up in a strained voice as the colonel paused.

"Amen, and let's not think of that any more," the Intelligence officer added almost fervently. "As soon as I learned the truth, I flashed you a message to halt the flight and wait for me. I was too late at Puerto Rico. I also took off in this plane at once to get down here and contact you. I stopped at Puerto Rico, and Miami, too, and collected the two sealed envelopes you had already delivered. Then I came on here and found out that you two had used your heads. Just in time, too, thank goodness. That you beat Colonel Baron Franz von Steuben to the punch is something you can congratulate yourselves on for the rest of your lives. If I had even dreamed that devil was down here, I would have had nineteen different kinds of cat fits. But all's well that ends well. And, although we've got to change our plans, we're still a couple of jumps up on the Nazis."

[Pg 135]

Colonel Welsh paused for breath and to take out his handkerchief and wipe imaginary beads of sweat from his forehead. Both Dawson and Farmer sat on the edges of their seats waiting for him to continue, but after a moment or two of silence Dawson couldn't stand it any longer.

"Can't you tell us a little about all this, Colonel? Just a little that might help us—well, in case we got into another jam? Or are we on our way back to Washington now? Is the job finished as far as Freddy and I are concerned?"

"No, we are not heading back to Washington," Colonel Welsh answered quietly. "As for you and Farmer, the job is just beginning. Well, you've earned the right to know. Since I was going to explain at Natal anyway, I might as well explain now. You recall all that F.B.I. business in New York? Remember my telling you of that list of names turned over to the F.B.I. for checking?"

[Pg 136]

"Could we forget, sir?" Dawson chuckled. "Freddy and I have been going nuts trying to add two and two. We got a zero every time, and I don't mean a Jap Zero, either."

"Well, all that was simply a check and double-check, you might say," Colonel Welsh said as his face became grave. "Every name on that approved list was to be connected in some way with—"

The colonel paused and ran his tongue across his lower lip.

"Every man on that list," he began again, "is to have something to do with a proposed trip by President Roosevelt to a war conference with Prime Minister Winston Churchill at Casablanca in Morocco, North Africa!"

A moment of silence hung over the trio as the colonel finished speaking. Then Dawson gave a little laugh and looked at Freddy Farmer. "Pick up the marbles, Master Mind!" he said. "Pick them all up. You win!"

[Pg 137]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

[Pg 138]

Midnight Raider

"What?" Colonel Welsh exploded as he looked from Dawson to Farmer, and back again. "What's

this?"

"Farmer, sir," Dave explained. "We made about six million guesses apiece as to what this was all about. One of his was that the President was going to North Africa, or beyond, for a conference with Prime Minister Churchill and Stalin."

"Nobody heard you make that guess, did they?" the colonel asked, tight-lipped, as he fixed his eyes on young Farmer.

"No, sir!" the English youth replied. "Nobody."

[Pg 139]

"He's right, sir," Dawson spoke up quickly. "I remember when he made that guess he spoke so low I could hardly hear him, and I was lying right next to him. In case you're wondering, Colonel, it wasn't until we were on our way back to the base that Colonel Baron von Steuben slugged us. So it's certain he didn't hear Freddy."

"Yes, of course you're right," the colonel said, and smiled at Farmer. "So don't feel bad. It just gave me a start that you had hit the nail on the head. You were partly wrong, though. Joseph Stalin will not be among those present this time."

"And those envelopes, sir?" Dawson asked when the colonel fell silent and stared out the compartment window at the darkness of night sweeping by. "They are still very hush-hush stuff, as far as we're concerned? Could I ask if they contained information about the President's trip?"

The senior officer turned from the window and looked straight at him.

"You can, and I'll tell you," he said. "Each envelope contained the route the President's plane is to fly, the exact time schedule, and the codes to be used in case the aircraft runs into trouble, or danger, and all that sort of thing. In short, as I told you in Washington, the Nazis would give almost anything to get hold of one of those sealed envelopes. With that information in their possession, they could have delivered a terrible blow to the United Nations. Think of it! The death of the President and members of the American High Command! It would be like setting our war effort back to the day of Pearl Harbor!"

[Pg 140]

The horrible thought made Dawson shiver in spite of himself, and he thanked God that Freddy and he had destroyed their letters before von Steuben had smashed them both to the ground. The President's death would have been loss enough, but to have added the loss of the great leaders of our military, naval, and air forces would have been world shaking indeed.

"And now, sir?" Dawson asked after several moments of silence. "Now another plan is to be carried out?"

Colonel Welsh didn't answer for a moment. He stared down at his two hands folded on the edge of the little table, and the expression on his thin face seemed to show a reluctance to answer that question. Presently, though, he lifted his head and looked straight at the two youthful air aces.

[Pg 141]

"We are now headed for Casablanca," he began quietly. "With the extra tanks of fuel we have aboard, we can make it easily. If we reach Casablanca without any trouble, I will be as sure as a man can be that the enemy has not learned anything of the President's plan to fly there himself. If we don't—"

The Chief of all U. S. Intelligence let the rest trail off into thin air and made a little gesture with one hand. Dawson frowned and looked at him earnestly.

"I don't think I get what you mean, sir," he said slowly.

"And neither do I, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up.

For a moment the colonel held his lips pressed together in a thin, grim line, and a hard light glittered in his eyes.

"In a thing like this," he said presently, "you can't afford to take *any* chances. You've got to be dead sure; as dead sure of everything as it is humanly possible to be, from start to finish. I had utmost confidence in your making the complete flight to Natal. And the way you two did handle yourselves, when the odds were actually all against you, proves that the confidence I had in you was justified. But in everything there is ever present the little item of fate. A tiny little something that is beyond man's power to see in advance, or even to counteract when it happens. For example, that technical sergeant at Bolling Field. I would have staked my life on that man. But, as things turned out, I was completely mistaken. And so with you two, or with each of my agents at the stops you were to make. Because of something you couldn't guard against, or prevent before death came to you, the contents of one of those sealed envelopes might have fallen into enemy hands. What I mean is, one of the envelopes might have been opened, the contents read, and then the envelopes resealed."

[Pg 142]

"But, Colonel," Dawson protested, "one of us would—"

"I know, I know," the colonel said, stopping him with a gesture of his hand. "But look at it this way. Suppose von Steuben had knocked you both out while you still had the envelopes? Suppose he had opened one, read its contents, and resealed it so that you'd never have guessed? What then? When you came to and found you still had the envelopes, you'd never dream that they had been touched."

"But I'd be plenty suspicious, sir!" Dawson interrupted. "I'd—"

[Pg 143]

"Would you?" the colonel's quiet but firm voice stopped him again. "But von Steuben was no fool! What if he stole your money and Farmer's money, too? What then?"

"I see what you mean, sir," Dawson said, and grinned sheepishly. "We would have thought we'd been victims of some holdup."

"Exactly," the colonel agreed. "A crazy little twist of fate over which you had no control whatever. Yet the damage would have been done. So I had to do what I could to find out if there had been any crazy twist of fate. In other words, each of those sealed envelopes contained the information, in code of course, that the *next* bombing plane to pass through would carry the President, and members of his party."

Dawson blinked, and suddenly the truth hit him between the eyes.

"What, sir?" he gasped. "You—you mean this B-25 is *supposed* to be carrying the President?"

"I mean just that!" the colonel confirmed grimly. "If enemy agents have learned what was in those envelopes, they will believe that this bomber is carrying the President as a passenger. The President has already left Washington in secret, and it wouldn't take much checking by enemy agents to find out that he isn't at the White House. Naturally they'd believe he was aboard this plane."

[Pg 144]

"Anything funny happen on your flight down, sir?" Freddy Farmer asked, as the senior officer paused for breath.

"Nothing that I noticed," Colonel Welsh replied with a shake of his head. "But just because things don't happen doesn't mean that they *won't*, in time. So, as I said, we won't know for sure until we arrive at Casablanca."

"And maybe not even then," Dawson mumbled to himself.

Colonel Welsh gave the Yank air ace a sharp look, and then nodded his head.

"That's right," he agreed. "And maybe not even then. Just another reason why an Intelligence man gets gray hair so early in life. You never can tell about a job until it's all finished and you're working on another. Then it's the same thing all over again."

The trio lapsed into silence, but not for long, because the question that had been plaguing Dawson just had to come out.

"Supposing we make it to Casablanca okay," he said, "and you feel sure that the enemy hasn't learned a thing about the President's trip, what then? The sealed orders Farmer and I were to have delivered at the rest of the stops are destroyed, and you say you collected the envelopes we left at Miami and Puerto Rico. How will they know about the President's plane when it does come through?"

[Pg 145]

"A good question, but I've got the answer, Dawson." The colonel smiled and pointed to a briefcase on his little table. "In there are duplicates of the orders, *without* the part about the next bomber through being the President's plane. If we reach Casablanca safely, we'll turn around and head south for Liberia, cross the South Atlantic to Natal, and deliver one of those sealed envelopes to each of the stops as we fly north to Washington. I've allowed sufficient time for us to do that, in case that's the way it works out."

"Well," Dawson remarked, and shifted to a more comfortable position on his chair, "there's nothing like a two-way hop across—"

But he never finished his sentence, because at that moment the pilot of the B-25 came back into the made-over bomb compartment and spoke to Colonel Welsh.

"A surface ship just ahead, sir, sending up distress flares," he reported. "Probably a merchantman with a torpedo in her plates. We're about three hundred and fifty out, due east of Barbados. Do you want me to radio the ship's position? You gave orders, you know, to maintain radio silence."

[Pg 146]

"Sending up distress flares?" Colonel Welsh queried with a frown. "What good does she think flares will do? The captain of any other ship near by would be a fool to come close to her. The U-boat might still be lurking around."

"I know, sir," the pilot said. "Maybe she hears us and wants us to send out her position because her radio shack is gone. Maybe she thinks we're a flying boat on patrol."

For some unknown reason a sudden eerie chill rippled across the back of Dawson's neck. He looked at Colonel Welsh and tried to convince himself that this was none of his business, but that eerie chill forced him to blurt out, "And it could be something *else*, sir! I mean, if we send out the ship's position, our radio will reveal *our own* position."

The pilot of the bomber glared quickly at Dawson, and the corners of his mouth stiffened. "It isn't fun to be torpedoed at night," he said quietly. "I lost a brother that way."

Dawson flushed slightly, but he didn't drop his eyes before the other's stare. Before he could say anything, though, Colonel Welsh addressed the pilot.

[Pg 147]

"Circle her and continue to maintain radio silence, Captain," he said. "Just before you pass her to port, drop a flare so that we can get a good look at her. If she seems in trouble, then maybe we'll do something for her. Meantime, though, I want all members of the crew to go to battle stations."

The bomber pilot's eyes widened in surprise, but he had sense enough not to ask any questions. He nodded, glanced at Dawson, turned and went forward to his compartment. Dawson waited until he was out of earshot, and then gave Colonel Welsh an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, speaking out of turn like that, sir," he said. "I guess the captain must think I'm a little cracked."

"Let him think so," the colonel remarked quietly. "All he knows is that he's flying me to Casablanca for a meeting with my agents, and that it's up to him and his crew to get me there. If he'd been through what you have, he'd be the first to agree with you. Maybe the flare will tell us something. If it is a torpedoed ship, I think I will take a chance and have her position radioed. Poor dev—"

[Pg 148]

That was as far as the colonel got. The savage yammer of aerial machine-gun fire interrupted him. An instant later they all heard a yell of pain from the pilot's compartment. Even before the echo had died away, the North American B-25 heeled over on one wing and started to slide off and down with both engines wide open.

"The pilot's hit!" Dawson yelled, and lurched to his feet. "Pilot hit and his co-pilot, too, I guess. By what? How the heck—"

Dawson didn't finish, either. At that instant the night outside was lighted with a brilliance like that of high noon. A terrific roar seemed to slam into the B-25 from all sides and spin her around until she was as helpless as a dried leaf in a gale.

CHAPTER TWELVE

[Pg 149]

Fighting Hearts

The crazy motion of the bomber knocked Dawson off balance and sent him lurching heavily against the flare rack as he reached the navigator's nook just aft of the pilot's compartment. The air whistled out of his lungs, and balls of colored fire danced before his eyes. Fortunately, though, his outflung hands caught hold of something, and he was able to prevent himself from pitching headlong on his face.

The B-25 was still flooded by brilliant light, and above the screaming roar of the over-revving Wright-Cyclones, Dawson could hear the chatter of aerial machine guns. He gave no thought to the thing that was happening. He had but one idea in his head, and that was to fight his way forward to the pilot's compartment. As he dived past the navigator's nook, a hand grabbed him by the arm, and he heard voices, but he could not understand the words above the din of other noises. With a savage wrench of his arm he freed himself, and piled forward into the pilot's compartment.

[Pg 150]

One glance gave him a complete picture, and his racing heart seemed to stand still. The glass of the pilot's compartment was shattered to bits. The pilot was slumped over against the Dep wheel, and the weight of his limp body was pushing the control forward so that the bomber remained in its mad dive. Beside the limp pilot was the co-pilot, flopped over against the side of the compartment and looking for all the world like a man dead tired who had simply leaned over to brace himself and catch a couple of minutes of sleep. That is, he looked like such a man except for the crimson blood that gushed from a gaping wound in his neck just below the left ear.

After one look at the hideous sight Dawson flew into action. Bracing himself behind the pilot's seat, he grabbed the limp figure by the shoulders and pulled him back on the seat. Holding him upright with one hand, he reached around and opened the catch of the pilot's safety harness. That done, he braced himself again and eased the man to the floor boards. The pilot's eyes fluttered open, and his lips sprayed drops of blood as he tried to speak. Dawson didn't have time to listen. He leaped into the pilot's seat, grabbed the control wheel with one hand, hauled back on it steadily, and eased off the throttles with his other hand.

[Pg 151]

Little by little the crazy downward plunge of the B-25 eased off. The plane began to climb back into the sky. There was still brilliant white light all about. It had a silverish tint to it, and Dawson had the impression that he was flying straight through a phosphorescent ocean. In an abstract way he realized the white light was caused by flares that had been dropped from high above the bomber and were bringing it out in clear relief for a mysterious aerial night raider.

"Where is it, and what?" Dawson gasped as he squinted his eyes in the brilliant glare. "It's just one ship. I can tell it from the guns. But what—"

He cut the rest off short and heeled the B-25 way over on its wing and brought it around and up in a climbing turn with the engines wide open. He did so because he had caught a glimpse of a shadow boring in and up at him from the left. Just a shadow, but he knew instinctively that it was another plane. At the top of its climb, he whipped the bomber over and around in the opposite

[Pg 152]

direction. The bomber was neither a P-40 nor a Lockheed Lightning, and his heart seemed to stand still in his throat as he waited for the big craft to come around. With each passing second, he expected to hear the savage yammer of guns blazing away at him.

As a matter of fact, a moment later he did hear guns, but they came from the B-25, not from the other plane. They came from the port side, and impulsively he jerked his head around in that direction. As he did so, he saw a sight that brought a wild cry of joy from his lips. Silhouetted against the brilliant background of light was a Nazi-marked Arada AR-95 twin-pontoon seaplane. He could see the silverish disc described by the spinning propeller, but the aircraft seemed to be standing still. Rather, it seemed to be held motionless in the air by twin streams of tracer smoke that reached out to it from the B-25.

It was motionless for only a moment, and then suddenly a sheet of flame spewed out from under its engine cowling. Fire mushroomed out in all directions, and in the wink of an eye, the Arada completely disappeared, and there was just a great cloud of fire hanging in the flare-lighted heavens. To Dawson the cloud seemed to hang not for seconds, but for minutes. And then, as though an invisible cable had been cut, the cloud of fire dropped straight downward. [Pg 153]

"Sweet shooting! Pretty!" Dawson heard his own voice yell. "And I've got a hunch that it was good old Freddy who nailed her! If it—"

He stopped short, as he happened to glance ahead and to the left. By now the flares were burning out, and were down close to the water. Because of that he was able to see the seven-or eight-thousand-ton tramp steamer that was leaving a broad, churning wake as it made off at top speed toward the darkness to the north. The surface vessel flew no flag, and there was little to distinguish her from any of the thousands of tramp steamers.

She was no mystery to Dawson, however. One look at her racing away from the light of the fading flares was all he needed to know the truth. That ship was one of the few Nazi sea raiders left, and the Arada seaplane had come from her decks. By looking carefully he could see a cradle on the forward deck, and a huge hoisting crane that must have lifted the seaplane over the side. [Pg 154]

"The dirty dogs!" Dawson grated as he glared down at the fleeing vessel. "If only we had some bombs or depth charges aboard, what a finish we could put to that sea murderer! We'd—"

"Dawson! Thank God!"

The words seemed to explode in his ears. He jerked his head around and saw the strained features of Colonel Welsh. The Intelligence Officer's eyes were wide with both anger and amazement. His lips moved silently for a couple of seconds before he spoke again. "That was close! It would have been too close, but for you, Dawson! What's that down—"

"A Nazi raider that was carrying the seaplane," Dawson cut him off. "We can't do anything about her now, though. Even our radio is smashed, so we can't send out her position. But the pilot and co-pilot, Colonel! Get help and get them aft. The pilot is still alive, I think, but this chap—"

Dawson stopped as he turned and looked at the co-pilot in the seat next to his. Cold rage filled his heart, and his bitter hatred of all things Nazi flared up again. Too many times had his youthful eyes looked upon death not to recognize it now. Nothing in the world could help the co-pilot. He had passed on to join his buddies in the airmen's Valhalla. [Pg 155]

"Better get to work on the pilot behind me!" Dawson said with a sharpness he didn't realize was in his voice. "There must be a medical kit aboard this bomber. I'll stick here and keep us going. Or do you want to turn back?"

"No, keep going!" the colonel replied. "It wouldn't do to turn back now. Here, Corporal! Give me a hand with your pilot. Where's the medical kit?"

The last words were directed to one of the aircraft's crew who had come forward into the compartment. Dawson paid no attention to him, for at that moment the port engine started to kick up a bit, and he had to give all his attention to getting it to run smoothly again. By then the glow of the flares had faded out, and the B-25 was thundering on through the darkness of the night. Dawson switched on the small-instrument light so that he could keep a careful check on engine performance and hold the aircraft to her course across the Atlantic. Only once did he take his attention from his flying, and that was when the dead co-pilot was lifted from his seat and taken aft. Once again red rage burned within Dave, as it always did when one of his countrymen was killed. He gripped the control wheel hard to prevent his hands from shaking. [Pg 156]

Presently somebody slid into the co-pilot's seat and touched him on the arm. It was Freddy Farmer.

"Well done, old thing!" the English youth said in a voice that shook with feeling. "Fancy we've all got you to thank for saving our hides. Personally, I was too scared to move for hours, and—"

"Nuts!" Dawson interrupted with gruff affection. "Anybody can haul a plane out of a dive. If it hadn't been for your sweet shooting, that rat might have nailed us!"

"Good grief, how did you know?" Freddy gasped. "You couldn't see me from here!"

"I didn't have to look back," Dawson chuckled. "I simply saw the kind of shooting it was and knew at once you were behind the guns. How's the pilot making out, or don't you know?"

"Not too bad, for which he can thank his lucky stars," the English youth replied. "He'll pull through all right, but I guess the chap will be out of the war for some time. What kind of blasted business was it, anyway, Dave? That beggar was waiting for us right up on top, with his confounded flares. We were—well, as you would say, a sitting duck."

[Pg 157]

"Yeah, and we were darn near a dead pigeon, too!" Dawson said grimly. "But how, and why? Don't ask me, pal! I just haven't got the brains it would take to figure out this crazy mess. To me it looks like one of those little items of fate the colonel was talking about. Unless—"

"Unless what, Dave?" Freddy Farmer pressed as Dawson fell silent.

"Unless there's no connection at all," the Yank air ace finally remarked.

"I'm afraid that doesn't make much sense to me," young Farmer said. "What do you mean, no connection?"

"Well, figure it this way," Dawson replied. "Say that the President's forthcoming trip to Casablanca is as much of a perfect secret as ever. That—"

"But that's silly!" Freddy Farmer cut in. "The fact that this plane was mysteriously attacked means that some blasted Nazi agent found out what was in one of those sealed envelopes. I mean, that the next bomber through would have the President aboard."

[Pg 158]

"Are you all through sounding off?" Dave snapped. "Or don't you want to hear the rest of what I have to say?"

"Sorry, and all that!" the English youth snapped right back at him. "I'll be still. What were you going to say, Dave?"

"Figure the President's trip business *out*," Dawson went on speaking again. "Okay. So for what other reason should we be attacked by a mysterious plane from a mysterious raider in the middle of the Atlantic? I can think of only one, and this is it. Take it or leave it. The Nazi U-boats aren't doing so hot for Hitler these days. We're sinking his steel sharks left and right, and he's going to run out of them before long. Okay. Where is a lot of our stuff going these days? To North Africa. And a lot of it is being *flown* over. Okay. The Nazis don't stand a chance of going after our transports with their planes, like they can on the supply route to England. So what do they do? They send a sea raider out, fitted with a scout seaplane. The sea raider's detector picks out one of our planes crossing at night, and the seaplane goes up to high altitude and waits. Maybe those distress signals are part of the gag to get our plane to go down for a look. Anyway, the seaplane pilot drops his flares. They light up the target for him and also blind those aboard the transport plane long enough for the Nazi rat to do his stuff with his guns. And there you are. Take it or leave it!"

[Pg 159]

"Just the point, Dawson," Colonel Welsh suddenly broke in. "I don't know *whether* to take it or leave it. I certainly don't!"

"Oh, you there, sir?" Dawson gulped as he turned his head around. "I was just—well—"

"I know, and I'm glad I heard what you said," the colonel interrupted him. "I was certain that they were laying for us because they believed the President to be aboard. Yet I swear I don't see how they could possibly have found out. I'd stake my life that only we three know the contents of those sealed envelopes."

"If I may say so, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up, "I have a feeling that Dawson has come very close to the truth, if he hasn't hit it exactly. Frankly, sir, it was just too perfect for the Nazis to have planned it this way. There—there just wasn't enough time, I'd say."

"What do you mean by that last?" the colonel asked him.

"I mean that if we had been attacked by a land-based plane, we could take it that the Nazis had got wind of the truth and had come after us," the English youth started to explain. "But that aircraft was from a surface ship—a surface ship that was *directly* in our path. Tell me this, sir, if you will. On the way down, what did you plan to do when you reached Trinidad?"

[Pg 160]

"Eh?" the senior officer grunted. "Why, see you two, of course, and find out what had happened, if anything. After I had heard what you had to say, I'd decide what to do next. Why?"

"Well, there you are, sir!" young Farmer cried. "That proves that Dawson's idea must be right. Don't you see? Even *you* weren't sure as to where this aircraft would go next. You didn't even give the pilot his course instructions until the very start of the take-off. So how could the Nazis possibly have found out and radioed that surface vessel to sail to a point *directly in our path* in the time it took us to fly out here from Trinidad? It's—it's silly, if you'll forgive me, sir."

The colonel said nothing for a moment. Then he gave a long-drawn-out sigh.

"Yes, I guess you're right, both of you," he said. "The secret of the President's trip must still be as safe as ever. Yes, it must be that way. We just happened to bump into something that any plane flying this route would have bumped into."

[Pg 161]

"I sure hated to see that sea raider get away!" Dawson grumbled. "Talk about lucky shots! That first blast got the radio set cold, unless the radio man can fix it up, sir? I saw the shambles it was as I dived by the navigator's nook."

"No, no such luck," Colonel Welsh replied. "I asked him quite a while back, and he said it was hopeless. The navigator, of course, has a record of the exact position at the time, so we can report it when we reach Casablanca."

"How's the pilot, sir?" Dawson asked. "Were there any other casualties besides that poor co-pilot?"

"The pilot will pull through," Colonel Welsh replied. "The only casualty was the co-pilot. Well, I'll go aft now to see if I can do anything for the pilot. You two can get us through all right, eh? I mean—"

"If the engines keep ticking over, we'll make it, sir," Dawson said quietly. "The tanks were spared, praise be! So I think it will be all good flying from here in."

"Then I'll leave you to it," the colonel said. "And—and God bless both of you!"

[Pg 162]

Neither Dawson nor Farmer had a chance to say anything, because the Intelligence officer quickly turned and went aft.

"Well, you convinced even me with that swell sales talk of yours, Freddy," Dawson eventually broke the silence between them. "I guess maybe I did hit on the right idea, at that."

"I think you did," the English youth echoed. Then with a chuckle he added, "But I suppose I'll never hear the end of it from now on!"

"Now ain't that gratitude for you?" Dawson groaned, and shook his head sadly. "So help me, why I keep getting that food-craving hide of yours out of tight spots, I'll never understand. I must be nuts, I guess!"

"And for once," Freddy Farmer laughed, "I won't argue with you!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

[Pg 163]

Lurking Wings

For the hundredth time Dawson dug knuckles into his tired eyes, stifled the yawn that struggled to get up out of his throat, and took a quick glance at Freddy Farmer seated in the co-pilot's seat. And for the hundredth time he wondered how the English-born air ace could go through so much and still look as fresh as a daisy.

"Boy, oh boy!" he finally blurted out. "How do you do it, anyway, Freddy?"

The English youth glanced his way with arched eyebrows.

"How do I do what?" he wanted to know.

"Look so doggone full of pep," Dawson told him. "Here I feel like the last rose of summer after a steam roller has run over it, and you look like a million bucks, or more. How come? Are you taking some very secret vitamin pills that I don't know anything about, huh?"

[Pg 164]

"Certainly not!" young Farmer replied at once. "I haven't got *that* old, yet. But would you like to know the truth?"

"Well, if you insist on telling me, I suppose I've got to listen," Dawson grunted. "So shoot."

"Well, don't let my looks fool you," Farmer replied. "I may look fresh, but I definitely am not that way inside. Fact is, I'm not quite sure whether I am awake or asleep. And if you insist on knowing everything, I'd be jolly glad if we would sight land."

Dawson started slightly and shot him a keen look.

"Meaning?" he asked.

Young Farmer made a faint motion of his hand toward the milky sort of world through which the B-25 was flying. The sun had been up for a long time, now, but haze blurred the sun's rays and turned both sea and sky into a drifting milky-tinted mass that made instrument flying absolutely necessary.

"Meaning that I'm wondering if my navigation has gone haywire," Freddy said. "We should have made landfall half an hour ago, Dave. But there is nothing but blasted water down there. How's our fuel?"

[Pg 165]

"Okay, we've got plenty in the tanks," Dawson said. "If your navigation is all cockeyed, then I'll eat this ship. Of course, you are a funny sort of gink in lots of ways, my little man. But when it comes to navigating, I'll take you every time. So relax, pal. What's a half hour on an ocean hop? We probably bumped into a head wind, that's all."

"Thanks, old thing," Farmer smiled at him. "And I certainly hope that you're right. However, this whole blasted business has been so balmy right from the start that I'm willing to expect almost

anything. And, in fact, I do."

Dawson ignored that remark. Freddy had certainly hit the nail on the head. Of all the jobs they had tackled, this one was certainly the most mixed up and involved. It seemed so for the very simple reason that not one thing had gone along as planned. At every turn something had popped up to toss a monkey wrench into the works and necessitate a complete revision of plans. Realization of that caused little fingers of ice to pluck at Dawson's heart. The object of all this business was a safe journey by air to Casablanca for the President and the American High Command. With everything going haywire from the start, what other blows of Fate might be struck once the President was on his way?

[Pg 166]

"But I'm just tired, and letting myself get off the beam!" Dawson mumbled. "The colonel's secret is still his secret. And—and that raider business was just one of those things. Darn it! Nazi agents just couldn't have found out anything!"

"Just what I've been trying to convince myself of for hours," he heard Freddy Farmer say. "But I'm still finding it a bit of a difficult job. As you say, though, we're both so blasted tired. I feel as though I've been in this aircraft all my life."

"Yeah, me, too!" Dawson agreed. "I—"

He stopped speaking, straightened up in the seat, and peered into the milky-colored sky off to the left and a little bit ahead. He stared until his eyes ached and smarted.

"What's the matter, Dave?" Freddy asked presently. "Are we making landfall?"

"No," Dawson replied slowly, with a little shake of his head. "I guess I'm just seeing things. I could swear that I saw a group of planes show off there for a split second or so."

[Pg 167]

"Planes?" young Farmer echoed excitedly. "What type? Maybe it's an escort come out to meet us, and—But no, that couldn't be. Nobody knows we're coming. Did you recognize them, Dave?"

"That's just the point," Dawson complained as he continued to stare into the milky mass that was the sky. "I'm not dead sure, but I think—Well, if you want to know, they looked like Junkers Ju-88's to me. Yeah, the big long-range babies the Nazis used against England and shipping in the Atlantic. But maybe I was just seeing things."

"You must have been, Dave!" Freddy said sharply. "It's my guess the Nazis haven't any long-range bombers to spare against shipping in this part of the Atlantic. We have far, far too much aerial cover for our boats. Besides—"

The English-born air ace didn't continue. He stared off to the left. Dave sensed the sudden movement and impulsively turned his head to look in that direction, too. As a result, they both saw the milky sky split apart for a brief moment and reveal six Nazi Junkers Ju-88's winging along on a course almost parallel with theirs. The haze and the milky overcast parted just long enough for them to see the six-plane formation, and then it promptly closed down and hid all from view. But they had seen the ships and before Dawson took another breath he piloted the B-25 down and away on a detour course toward the north.

[Pg 168]

"You were right, Dave!" Freddy Farmer spoke first. "Absolutely right! Those were Junkers, or I've never seen one in my life. And I've seen plenty of them!"

"Junkers, right enough," Dawson repeated with a nod of his head. "And that bunch was the *second* group! In short, there must be a whale of a big Yank convoy that they are hunting for, or else—"

Dawson stopped and shrugged, but Freddy Farmer wouldn't let it remain that way.

"Or else what?" he demanded.

"Or else they are hunting for *all* planes headed for Casablanca," Dawson replied slowly. "Go aft and get the colonel, will you, Freddy? I think he should be told what's going on."

"Definitely!" young Farmer replied, and quickly slipped out of the co-pilot's seat.

During the next couple of minutes Dawson virtually "explored" every square inch of the milky air all about the B-25 but he didn't sight any planes. Then Freddy returned with Colonel Welsh, and Dawson reported what they had seen.

[Pg 169]

"They seem to be all around our course, sir," Dawson added. "Do you want us to plow right on through, or continue to detour around this area and come into Casablanca from the north? We've the fuel left to do it, if that's what you want."

The colonel didn't reply at once. It was very plain from the expression on his thin face that the news of sighting Nazi aircraft disturbed him greatly.

"It can't be a convoy they're after," he finally said, "because there isn't one this far south. And they can't be looking for any plane, such as this one, because—"

The Chief of U. S. Intelligence paused a second, shook his head, and ordered, "Get on course for Casablanca, Dawson, and plow right on through! With our radio gone, we're helpless to find out what's what—if anybody happens to know. The sooner we get to Casablanca, the better. So bang on through, but avoid action if it's possible."

[Pg 170]

"Very good, sir," Dawson replied, and pulled the B-25 back onto her original course. "By the way, sir, how's the pilot?"

"Getting better by the minute," the colonel replied. "Lost a lot of blood, but we'll take care of that as soon as we get to Casablanca. Push on through, and I'll order the crew to remain at battle stations. This is the darnedest mess I ever bumped into!"

"If I've ever met up with anything more tantalizing, then I sure don't remember it," Dawson remarked by way of agreement. "Okay, sir! Casablanca it is, and on the run!"

Colonel Welsh murmured something that Dawson didn't catch and, giving the Yank air ace a pat on the shoulder, he swung about and returned to his battle station aft. For the next twenty-two minutes Dawson and Farmer didn't speak as the twin-engined North American B-25 prop-clawed its way forward through the milky-hued heavens. Neither of them spoke because anything they might have said would only have served to increase their fears. Both feared they were lost, and not even headed toward Casablanca. They feared that at any second a whole flock of those mysterious Junkers might suddenly appear in the air before them and open up with all guns. They feared that once more their plans were about to be knocked into a cocked hat. [Pg 171]

"Jeeper, jeepers!" Dawson finally muttered. "I couldn't have a worse case of jim-jams than I've got right now, even if I was actually piloting the President's plane. I—"

"Dave!" Freddy Farmer broke in excitedly. "I'll be blessed! Look!"

The English youth's exclamation was quite unnecessary because Dawson was already staring wide-eyed at one of the many so-called miracles of weather. In other words, the milky air stopped abruptly, as though cut off by a knife. One instant the B-25 was plowing on through the stuff, and the next it was roaring out into clear air filled with brilliant sunshine. Dead ahead was the coast of French Morocco, and the Port of Casablanca glistening white in the sun!

"So this guy Farmer is a punk navigator, huh?" Dawson shouted joyously. "Like heck he is, what I mean!"

"Luck, blasted luck, I swear it!" Freddy breathed, but there was a happy smile on his face just the same. "Man! I never was so glad in all my life to see a place as I am to see that spot ahead. Luck, absolutely nothing but luck!" [Pg 172]

"Okay, have it your way," Dawson laughed. "But just keep right on having this kind of luck. That's all I've got to say. Boy, oh boy! Dry land ahead, and something to eat, and a place to lay down my weary head. Oh-oh! Here come some of the boys to give us a look-see. See them, Freddy?"

"Of course," the English youth replied with a nod, and fixed his gaze on the flight of Lockheed P-38 Lightnings that were sweeping gracefully up off North African soil and streaking out to sea toward the B-25.

In less time than it takes to tell about it, those high-speed fighter aircraft were right on top of the B-25 and skipping and sliding all about it as their pilots investigated. It took them but a couple of moments to satisfy themselves. Then they throttled and dropped into escort position. That is, all except one pilot. He slid out in front to lead the way to the American-built air base on the north side of the city. A few minutes later Dawson throttled his engines, and slid the B-25 down to a feather-bed landing. At a signal from the Operations Tower, he trundled the bomber in toward the small Administration Building. There he killed his engines completely, took a deep breath, and relaxed in the seat. A glance at the instrument clock showed that he had been in the air for a little over twelve hours, but the way his numbed body felt, it was as though he had been in the air for over twelve hundred hours. [Pg 173]

"So this is Casablanca," he murmured, and absently unsnapped his safety harness. "Well, I sure want to give it a look, but not right now. No, sir! For the next thirty-six hours, and maybe longer, all I want is a nice soft bed!"

"Make that two, if you please!" Freddy Farmer added, and put a hand to his mouth to cover the yawn he could no longer hold back. "Just a—Oh-oh! Here comes a high-ranker in very much of a hurry. Now what, I wonder?"

Dawson looked toward the Administration Building and saw a trim major general of the Air Force running toward the B-25. By the time he reached it, Colonel Welsh was out of the plane. The two officers exchanged hasty salutes, and the major general started to take Colonel Welsh by the arm and lead him away. The colonel held back, however, nodded at the bomber and said something. The major general nodded in reply and made a waving motion with one hand. Then the pair turned and hurried over to the Administration Building and disappeared inside. [Pg 174]

"Well, how do you like that?" Dawson gasped. "What about that wounded pilot aft?"

"That's why the colonel stopped," Freddy Farmer replied, and poked a finger to the right. "Here comes the ambulance now. Let's get back and see if we can lend them a hand. After all, this is his aircraft."

"Right; let's go," Dawson agreed, and pushed his stiff body out of the seat. "The least we can do is wish him all kinds of luck."

They made their way back to the compartment where the wounded pilot was resting on blankets

laid out on the floorboards. There was some color in his face, now, and his neck and the upper part of his chest was swathed in bandages. Gathered about him were the members of his crew, each trying to keep from looking at the blanket-covered body of the co-pilot that lay on the far side of the compartment.

Dawson crouched beside the wounded pilot and grinned cheerfully.

"Lucky guy, Captain," he said. "A nice hospital, pretty nurses, and swell food for you. How's for changing places, huh?"

"I'll let you know after I've tried it for once," the other said, and matched the grin. "And, Dawson —" [Pg 175]

"Yes, fellow," Dave prompted.

"I'm a dope, Dawson," the pilot said. "I want to apologize for that crack I made about losing a brother in a night torpedoing. It sure turned out different. I didn't know the score, you see, so I thought you were just—Well, I mean—"

"Skip it, fellow, skip it," Dawson smiled, and gently pressed the other's arm. "I didn't know the score myself, so I was just whistling in the dark. But forget it, Skipper! You had a perfect right to think as you did. Now here's the ambulance, so I'll stop talking. Good luck, fellow. And if we can work it, we'll come say howdy to you in the hospital. Good luck, anyway!"

"Yes, a million in luck, old thing!" Freddy Farmer added as he stood smiling down at the man.

"I've already had the million in luck, thanks to you two," the pilot said, as the ambulance medico came climbing into the B-25. "Be sure and come see me, if you can. I want to thank you for bringing the ship through. I'm kind of fond of her, you see, and—Well, you know how it is, eh?"

Both Dawson and Farmer nodded gravely. Being pilots, they knew exactly how a fellow felt about his aircraft. Made of metal, and plastics, and wood, and fabric, to be sure. But to its pilot, it was something human and full of understanding. Something that couldn't be put into words, because there are no words in any language that can adequately describe the feeling a pilot holds in his heart for his plane. Dawson and Farmer simply nodded gravely, and gave a hand in lifting the wounded man out of the bomber and putting him in the ambulance. [Pg 176]

"A nice guy," Dave murmured as the ambulance pulled away. "I sure am going to visit him if I get the chance."

"Yes, and me too, if!" Freddy Farmer murmured.

The remark caused Dawson to turn his head and glance sharply at his pal.

"And just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Young Farmer shrugged and nodded toward the Administration Building. "That chap headed our way," he said. "I've a bit of a hunch that something is up."

"Huh?" Dawson gasped. "What—"

He let the rest go as a field orderly came up on the run and saluted smartly. "Colonel Welsh's compliments, Captains Dawson and Farmer," the orderly said. "He asks that you report to him in the commanding general's office in an hour." [Pg 177]

"An *hour*?" Dawson choked out, and then caught himself. "Very good, Sergeant," he said hastily. "We'll be there."

The orderly saluted and retreated toward the Administration Building. Dawson groaned softly.

"One hour, and off we go again! How much sleep can a fellow catch in an hour, I'd like to know?"

"About sixty minutes' worth," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Frankly, I prefer to spend that time eating. Let's go hunt up the Officers' Mess."

Dawson started to speak, thought better of it, and dropped into step with Freddy. One hour, huh? And then what? But he was much too tired and hungry to bother guessing up some answers. What would happen, would happen. And, after all, what was one more hour in this mysterious business?

What was one more hour? The gods of war on high could have told him. They could have told him it was just one more hour in which the Grim Reaper could steal closer and make ready to strike a blow that would stun the entire civilized world! [Pg 178]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Goering's Snoopers

"Anything else I can get you, sir?"

Dawson glanced up at the mess orderly standing by the table, shook his head, and smiled.

"No thanks, Corporal," he said. "I've had all I can hold. How about you, Freddy?"

"I'm finished, too," the English youth said with a contented sigh. "That hit the spot, Corporal. My compliments."

"Thank you, sir," the mess orderly said, and beamed his pleasure.

"Tell me, where is everybody, Corporal?" Dawson asked, and waved a hand at the empty mess room. "Out on patrol?"

"Oh, no, sir," the orderly explained. "This is only a stop-over base for pilots and equipment headed for the front. We don't fly any patrols from here, sir, though a few of the pilots have been taking a whack at Goering's Snoopers, whenever they get close enough." [Pg 180]

"*Goering's Snoopers?*" Dawson echoed with a puzzled look. "Do you mean Nazi bombing raids on this place?"

"No, sir," the other replied promptly. "And that's the funny part of it, too. Not one of them has come within gun range of this place. Fact is, only once since they started their funny business three days ago, have we seen them. Then they were so high, they were no more than dots. I heard one of the pilots say, though, that they were long-range Junkers. Goering's Snoopers, we call them, because they seem to hang around all the time, but do nothing. I wish we did have a regular squadron of fighter planes here, though. Those Junkers get on my nerves. A darn funny business, if you ask me, sir."

Neither Dawson nor Farmer made any comment for a moment. They simply exchanged glances, and each knew what the other was thinking. Thinking of the mysterious flock of Junkers Ju-88's they had seen a hundred miles or so off the coast. [Pg 181]

"Phantom ships, eh, Corporal?" Dawson finally spoke. "Any of the pilots who went up after them lucky enough to nail one?"

"Yes, I think so, sir," the orderly replied with a nod. "Day before yesterday they say a P-38 pilot got one of them. It was way inland near Marrakech. I heard the pilot had just enough gas to get back. It's pretty bad country in these parts for forced landing, you know, sir."

"But doesn't the C.O. know where the bombers are based?" Freddy Farmer spoke up. "They're not coming here all the way from Tunisia, are they?"

"I couldn't say, sir," the orderly replied with a shrug. "All I know is what I hear around the base. There aren't many of us here. The base isn't in full swing yet. But it won't be long, and then maybe we'll have a fighter squadron here, in case them Nazis try to really start something. Funny about them Snoopers starting to show up three days ago. It doesn't make sense. But what does in this screwy war?"

Neither Dawson nor Farmer had an answer for that one, so they just shrugged, and pushed back their chairs.

"Well, thanks for the fine meal, Corporal," Dawson said, and tossed a bill on the table. "Here, have a time for yourself when you get a pass to town." [Pg 182]

"I sure will, and thanks, Captain!" the orderly gulped when he saw the amount of Dawson's tip. "Thanks a lot, sir. And I hope I'll be here next time you pass through."

"So do I, Corporal," Dawson smiled as he headed for the door. "And good luck."

"The same to you, sir!" the other called after him. "The same to you both!"

Outside the mess, Dawson glanced at his wrist watch and saw that it was just about time to report to Colonel Welsh in the field commandant's office.

"Let's go, Freddy," he said. "What do you think of Goering's Snoopers? I guess we spotted some of them, huh?"

"No doubt," the English youth replied, and frowned. "And a very queer business, if you ask me. Do you suppose, Dave—"

"I wouldn't know," Dawson said as Farmer paused and frowned all the harder. "But you may be right. I mean that the Nazis have got wind of something, and Goering's Snoopers are sort of keeping an eye on things. If so, that's not so good. Do you get what I mean?"

"I do, and I agree with you completely," Freddy replied at once. "But how in the world—Oh, blast it! I'm tired of trying to figure out riddles!" [Pg 183]

They left it at that and walked in silence to the Administration Building. A sentry met them just inside the door, learned their names, and led them at once to the office of Major General Hawker, commanding officer of the recently established U. S. Air Forces Base. The two youths were admitted at once, and as Dawson looked at Colonel Welsh seated to one side of the huge desk, his heart gave a nervous leap and tried to slide up into his throat. The Intelligence Chief's face looked like that of a ghost. Rather, it looked like the face of a man worried sick; worried so sick he was seeing ghosts. However, with a tremendous effort Colonel Welsh gravely presented the

two air aces to Major General Hawker who welcomed them with a smile and a few well chosen words. His face, too, showed the nervous strain under which he was suffering. Dawson, glancing from one to the other, felt the old familiar eerie tingle at the back of his neck. The old eerie tingling that had never in the past failed to serve as a warning of danger and death in the immediate future.

"Be seated, gentlemen, please," the major general was saying, and gesturing a hand toward a couple of chairs. "I—Well, Colonel, I believe you'd better begin the talking, anyway. These two officers have been working with you since the start of things. So go right ahead, sir."

[Pg 184]

Colonel Welsh nodded his thanks to the general and stared at Dawson and Farmer with eyes haggard from worry and fear.

"Bad news for us," he said bluntly. "The thing we tried to prevent has come to pass in spite of our efforts. Where the leak is, I don't know. Maybe I'll never find out. But that is not important, now. What is important is the fact that the Nazis have learned of the war conference to be held in Casablanca. In short, the Nazis know that President Roosevelt is coming to Casablanca!"

"You're sure, sir?" Dawson blurted out as the colonel paused for breath.

"As sure as it's necessary to be," the Intelligence officer replied, tight-lipped. Leaning forward, he tapped a map spread out on the top of the desk. "Take a look at this and tell me what it means to you."

Both Dawson and Farmer left their chairs to study the map. It was a large-sized navigation map that included the eastern shores of the two American continents and the western shores of the European and African continents. The map was creased in many places, and there were many smears of grease on its surface to indicate it had been used considerably. What caught and instantly held Dawson's attention, and Farmer's also, were the many penciled markings and notes on the map. At first glance, they didn't mean much, but on second glance, their full meaning was revealed. It was very startling, to say the least.

[Pg 185]

Dawson jerked up his head and stared in half-stunned amazement at Colonel Welsh.

"This is an air navigator's chart, sir!" he exclaimed. "With a dozen different courses plotted out from the States, from South America, and from England, to here. *To Casablanca!*"

"That's right," the Colonel said soberly. "Every course plotted on that chart *ends* at Casablanca! If you look closer, you will see where the Nazi owner of that chart has penciled in the area off the coast of Morocco that he patrolled."

"Nazi owner, sir?" Freddy Farmer choked out. "You mean—"

The English-born air ace stumbled over his words, and before he could start over again, Colonel Welsh answered him.

[Pg 186]

"That's right, Farmer. That chart was taken from the body of a dead Nazi pilot, whose bomber was shot down in the Atlas Mountains about two hundred miles from here."

"One of Goering's Snoopers, eh?" Dawson murmured absently.

Major General Hawker stiffened and glanced at him sharply.

"What's that, Dawson?" the senior officer asked. "Where'd you hear about Goering's Snoopers?"

"The Officers' Mess orderly was telling us, sir," Dawson explained. "He said there has been a group of Nazi bombers hanging around this base for the last three days, but not too close. He said that your pilots had nicknamed them Goering's Snoopers."

"Oh, I see," the major general said with a nod. "That's right, they certainly are Snoopers. But they'll be a whole lot *more* than that—if they get their chance!"

The senior office emphasized the last by rapping a clenched fist on the desk.

"Then you know what they're up to, sir?" Dawson asked quickly. "I suppose the colonel told you that we sighted them off shore? Is their base near here, sir?"

[Pg 187]

Dawson would have asked more questions, but the major general raised a hand for silence and looked at Colonel Welsh.

"Do you want me to do the talking, Colonel?" he asked. "Or would you rather?"

"No, go right ahead, sir," Colonel Welsh replied with a shake of his head. "After all, you've been right here where it's all been going on. Go right ahead, sir."

Major General Hawker grunted and stared down at the desk top for a moment, as though taking time out to choose his words. Presently he looked up at Dawson and Farmer. Both youths were a little startled by the glitter of seething anger in his eyes.

"The North African campaign has progressed so rapidly and so successfully," he began, "that we're way ahead of ourselves, you might say. I mean that we've been so busy doing the big things that we've had to let much detail work slide. For example, this base wasn't to be ready for another month yet, but it is in operation right now. It has been for the last three or four weeks.

[Pg 188]

However, it is simply a port through which equipment and personnel pass on the way to the battle fronts. The working staff is very small, and we have no squadron, or even a flight of planes and pilots of our own. I mean, based here for our protection. That, of course, is because every plane and pilot is needed at the front. Those of us who are behind the front must shift as best we can, until there comes a lull in the main battle, and we've the time to start tucking in the ends."

The major general paused for breath.

"So far, I've only given you a picture of conditions here," he continued presently. "Well, about ten days ago I was secretly informed through Colonel's Welsh's office that the President and Mr. Churchill were going to hold a war conference here at Casablanca. Naturally, I kept that secret. However, the Nazis must have got hold of that news somehow, either here or in Washington. We'll probably never know which. Three days ago those Junkers long-range bombers started putting in an appearance. At first, I thought they were after convoys, but pilots who sighted them off shore reported that they either kept at a safe distance, or raced away to hide in the clouds before our planes could reach them. In short, they did everything in their power to avoid air battle. In addition, they went the limit to prevent any of our planes from *following them back to their base*."

[Pg 189]

"Just what do you mean by that, sir?" Dawson asked with a puzzled frown.

The major general reached out a hand and tapped a finger on the navigator's chart on the desk.

"That plane and its crew were deliberately sacrificed so that the others could get away," he said. "It happened yesterday morning. A Lockheed Lightning pilot happened to be in the air, and he sighted the Snoopers off shore. He requested permission by radio to give chase and engage them. That permission was granted. The Snoopers had a good start on him, however, and there were a lot of clouds, so the Lockheed pilot was unable to catch up until the chase had gone a good two hundred miles inland. When he started to close in, the pilot reported later, one of the bombers dropped out of formation, turned back, and gave battle. It put up a good fight, and by the time the Lockheed pilot had downed it, the others had disappeared completely. Just before turning back to fight, the German pilot dumped his full load of bombs, and they exploded in the wilderness below. That didn't help him any. Well, the bomber crashed, and *no one bailed out!* That struck the Lockheed pilot as being queer and as there was some smooth ground close by, he landed to take a look at his victim. He said it was not a pretty sight. *But* there were only three aboard, whereas a Junkers Ju-88 usually has a crew of at least six. Not one of those three had made any attempt to leave the plane as it fell earthward. Do you know why?"

[Pg 190]

The senior officer paused and seemed to wait.

"No, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up impulsively. "Why, sir?"

"Because there were *no* parachute packs aboard the plane!" the other replied at once. "In fact, the plane was stripped bare of everything that was not absolutely essential to flying and fighting. There were no identification papers on any of the crew, though the Lockheed pilot could tell from decoration ribbons that all were veteran airmen. There was nothing except this navigation chart. The Lockheed pilot said that one of the men was holding it as though he had been about to destroy it, but was stopped by the crash. By that I mean, in one hand he clutched the chart and in the other a cigarette lighter. Anyway, the Lockheed pilot brought the map back to me, and as soon as I took one look at it I knew the reason for the constant patrolling of those Nazi bombers. I know exactly what they are."

[Pg 191]

"It sounds like a suicide outfit to me," Dawson murmured as the major general paused. "They must be waiting for the President and his party to arrive. Then they'll let go with the whole works, to say nothing of their own lives."

"There's no doubt about it!" Major General Hawker agreed grimly. "I'm as convinced of that as though they had come and told me so. If they know *when* the President and Mr. Churchill will arrive, I don't know. Perhaps they will receive that signal from somebody right here in Casablanca. The way they have let convoys alone and have avoided air battle, at the deliberate sacrifice of one of their own, is proof positive that they are waiting for the one big opportunity. And even though the President's life, and Mr. Churchill's life, were spared, the loss of other lives would be almost as disastrous to the Allied cause. In short, so long as that German suicide squadron remains in existence, a terrible danger hangs over the entire civilized world. No matter how many planes we have protecting the President and his party, some of those bombers would be bound to get through."

[Pg 192]

"But their base, sir, wherever it is?" Dawson spoke up as the other paused. "If you could only find it, and—"

"Exactly the point!" the major general interrupted. "If we could only *find it!* The only thing I've got here that could out-fly the Junkers Ju-88 is a Lightning. But the main difficulty is that I have no pilots I can order out on such a mission. I mean, should they find the base and radio its position, they wouldn't have fuel enough left to return. They'd force land in the mountain wilderness and eventually die of starvation or the heat. We've *got* to destroy those planes—and *within the next thirty-six hours!*"

"Thirty-six hours, sir?" Dawson echoed, as his heart started to pound against his ribs.

The major general looked at him gravely, and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Just ten minutes before your plane landed I received code word from Washington that the President and his party are *already on the way to Casablanca!*"

"Good gosh!" Dawson gasped before he could check himself. "Only thirty-six hours and then Goering's snooping suicides can do their stuff? Or try to do it? But—"

Dawson suddenly checked himself and looked at Freddy Farmer. For a long moment their eyes met, and then they nodded impulsively. Dawson turned to Major General Hawker. [Pg 193]

"With your permission, sir," he said quietly, "Farmer and I would like to locate that base and radio its position so that our bombers could go over and wipe it out."

As Dawson finished speaking, silence settled over the room. Colonel Welsh broke it as he addressed his words to Major General Hawker.

"Just what I told you, sir," he said. "And by God, they'll find it, too—Bless them both!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

[Pg 194]

Death Takes Wing

For the tenth time, Dave Dawson checked his position and made absolutely sure that he was where he was supposed to be. For the tenth time, countless fears shot through his brain to taunt and jeer at him. He wasn't at the agreed rendezvous point. His navigation was all cockeyed. He was a hundred miles north of the point. He was a hundred miles south of it. He was—

"Cut it out, fellow!" he ordered himself. "This is a fine time for you to go haywire! You're simply here ahead of time. Your watch tells you that. Freddy was held up a bit, that's all. Maybe he ran into a bit of weather, or something. Maybe—"

[Pg 195]

Or something? But what? That was the question! Freddy Farmer could fly through the toughest weather made. He was that kind of pilot. It was crazy to think that weather would hold up Freddy. But where was he? Why wasn't he here?

These tantalizing questions pounded in Dawson's brain like the booming of big guns. He clenched his teeth and gripped the controls of the Lockheed Lightning so tightly that the knuckles of his hands showed white through the skin. That this was perhaps the last flight he might ever make didn't bother him much. What did was the fear that Freddy and he might fail in the successful completion of this vitally important mission. And that fear was doubled when he realized that the odds were all against them. Yesterday when they had volunteered for the job Major General Hawker had told them in no uncertain terms that their chances of finding the secret Nazi bomber base were about one in a thousand, and their chances of coming back alive were about one in a million.

Yes, the odds were all against them, but that didn't matter. They'd had the odds against them before and had won out. So right after leaving Major General Hawker's office they had selected two Lockheed Lightnings on the field and flight tested them thoroughly. By then darkness had settled, so they had gone to one of the field hutments and tumbled into bed with their clothes on, so that there would be no waste of time in case they had to make a night take-off in a hurry.

[Pg 196]

Good fortune was theirs, however. They each had twelve solid hours of sleep before word came that Nazi bombers were sighted off the coast. Five minutes later they were both in the air, but instead of flying out to sea, they carried out a prearranged flight plan. Dawson had flown northward to circle around to the east and then southward to a point over the middle of the Atlas Mountains. And Farmer had flown south with the idea of circling eastward, and then up north to rendezvous with Dawson. One of them would be sure to cross the path of the Nazis winging back to their secret base. The instant one of them spotted the Nazis he would code call the other over his radio and give his position and course. The other would head that way at once, join up, and together they would trail the Nazis to their base, and then code call Casablanca where a hastily assembled squadron of American bombers was waiting.

[Pg 197]

Yes, a very carefully thought out plan of action, except for one flaw. And that one flaw was making itself known right now as Dawson coasted the Lockheed about in the North African sky over the prearranged rendezvous point. In short, he had not seen the Nazi bombers, and he had not heard so much as a whisper over the radio, though he had called Freddy Farmer several times for a check. No bombers! Radio silence since Casablanca! So—

"So," Dave said to himself as he tried to still the fearful pounding of his heart, "So something has happened to Freddy! He's bumped into trouble, and his radio went haywire on him. Or he's lost and has missed the Nazis completely. Or—or he's dead!"

Dawson hardly realized that he had spoken the words until they were out. Their echo in his ears caused his mouth and throat to go dry, and fingers of ice to curl about his heart. He shook his head savagely and pounded one clenched fist on his knee.

"Stop it!" he ranted at himself. "Don't even let yourself think of it, you dope! Freddy will show up,

or call you. He's just got to. He's—"

He cut the rest off short and stiffened in his seat as he caught sight of a plane ripping through the air toward him. As he opened his mouth to let out a shout of joy at meeting up again with Freddy Farmer, his breath stuck in his throat.

[Pg 198]

"But that can't be Freddy!" he mumbled as he squinted his eyes at the oncoming plane. "That plane is coming from the east, and Freddy would be coming up from the south. And—Hey! My gosh! That—that plane is *German!* It's a Messerschmitt 109, a Nazi fighter plane, and heading right my way!"

He cut off the last with a vigorous shake of his head, as though to clear his vision. However, when he took another look, the plane was still a Nazi Messerschmitt 109, and it was still racing straight toward him from out of the east. A moment later, though, just as Dawson instinctively slid the guard off the electric trigger button of his guns, the on-streaking Messerschmitt swerved southward, and its nose went slanting up in a climb.

"What the heck?" Dawson cried, as a faint sensation of disappointment rippled through him. "Is he getting cold feet so soon? Or didn't he see me?"

A couple of moments later, his last thought seemed to be proven true. The Messerschmitt pilot leveled off after he had climbed a couple of thousand feet, and Dawson could tell by the decrease in the plane's speed that the pilot has eased back to cruising throttle. No more than a couple of miles separated the two aircraft now, and though the Messerschmitt was perhaps three thousand feet higher than the Lockheed, Dawson knew that he could close in on the Nazi in no time, if he wished to.

[Pg 199]

That was just the point. Where a few moments ago he had been ready and eager for battle, he was now filled with a sense of caution. For one thing, what was a Nazi ME 109 doing over the Atlas Mountains? Was it close to its base—the same base used by the mysterious Junkers bombers—or was the pilot lost and wandering about in the North African heavens hundreds and hundreds of miles from where he should be? And for another thing, why hadn't the Nazi spotted him? Was the pilot dead, and was the aircraft simply flying itself until it ran out of gas?

"Or is this a smart trick, and I'm too dumb to catch on?" Dawson muttered the next thought aloud, and stared at the other plane that was now circling slowly about in the air. "Is he waiting for me to come piling in, because he has some special surprise package waiting, or what?"

[Pg 200]

As he mulled over the question in an effort to guess at an answer that might be close to the truth, the Yank air ace searched the surrounding skies. However, if he expected to see any other planes in the heavens, he was doomed to disappointment. As far as he could see in every direction there was nothing but sun-tinted blue North African sky and a few mountains of clouds piled up here and there.

"Maybe *I'm* nuts!" he groaned, and gave a little shake of his head. "Maybe I'm just seeing things. Or maybe I'm asleep and dreaming, but don't realize it. Well, one German less is one German less, I always say. So here goes for that bird tooting around up there. He'll—Well, for cat's sake! Now what?"

The last was because the Messerschmitt pilot had suddenly ceased his coasting around and had swung onto a course due south at an increased speed. And though Dawson gaped and stared in amazement, he let no "sky grass" grow under his feet. He instantly swung south and opened up his two Allison engines, but continued to maintain his altitude of some three thousand feet below the other plane.

For a full five minutes, the Nazi rocketed south with Dawson some two miles behind him and holding steadily to the pace. At the end of that five minutes, though, the Messerschmitt reached the edges of one of the towering mountains of clouds in the sky. Impulsively, Dave opened his throttles so that he would not lose the Messerschmitt in the clouds. The action was unnecessary for the German pilot swerved to the east just before he came to the clouds. Once again his abrupt change of speed showed that he had eased back to throttle cruising.

[Pg 201]

Anger took the place of amazement in Dawson, and he was on the point of slamming up to give battle to the Messerschmitt, when suddenly twelve Junkers 88 long-range bombers came sliding out from under the mountain of cloud, looking for all the world as though they were rolling their wheels across the peaks of the Atlas Mountains.

So suddenly and so weirdly did they appear that for a second or so Dawson was unable to realize what they were. When truth came to him, he sat up stiff and straight in the seat and let out a yell of excited relief.

"Goering's Snoopers!" Dave cried. "There they are, the bums, as sure as shooting! And on their way back to their base. No doubt of it, and, so help me, that Messerschmitt must be some kind of a lone escort come out to meet them and lead them home. Sure! There he goes sliding down, now. But—but where is Freddy? Where is good old Freddy? He made his flight south, so he must have crossed their path. He—!"

[Pg 202]

He cut his own words off abruptly as a squealing noise sounded in his earphones. It rose and fell, and rose and fell again. Although he worked furiously over the tuning knobs of his panel set, he could get nothing but the squeal's. That is, nothing but squeals for the next minute or two. Then,

suddenly, the squealing sound stopped, and a single spoken word came through as clear as a bell.

"Noswad!"

That single word made Dave's heart pound furiously, because it was his own last name spelled backwards; because it was the signal call Freddy Farmer was to use when getting in radio contact with him. No sooner had he heard the code call spoken once, than the squealing sound filled his ears again. Whether it was Freddy's set or his that had gone haywire, he could not tell at the moment. He simply put his lips to his own mike and shouted Freddy's code call at the top of his voice.

[Pg 203]

"Remraf! Remraf!" he shouted. "Can you hear me, Remraf? Over!"

The only reply that he received was the continued squeal in his earphones. Once again he called Freddy, but the result was the same. Impulsively, he checked his own set as best he could, but found nothing wrong with it. As a matter of fact, to make definitely sure that his own set was in perfect working order, he sent out a signal call to Casablanca Base and instantly received a reply that came in loud and clear.

"So that settles that," he grunted. "Freddy's set has gone haywire. He probably picked up those Snoopers long ago and hasn't been able to contact me up to now. He's around. I can't see him, but he must be around somewhere doing his job of trailing those Snoopers back to their base. With his eagle eyes, I'll bet a million bucks *he* can see *me!*"

His heart overflowing with joy at the knowledge that Freddy Farmer was alive and still flying, Dawson left his set tuned as fine as possible and gave all of his attention to the Messerschmitt-led air cavalcade of Junkers 88's that was sliding through the air over the mountain peaks. They were all well below Dawson's altitude now, and all he had to do was to throttle to their speed and hug the sides of the cloud banks. True, there was a small chance that he might be sighted, silhouetted against the clouds as he was, but that was the chance he had to take. If he was sighted, he knew that it would be the Messerschmitt 109 that would turn back to drive him off, and so he kept his gaze on that plane and paid little or no attention to the bombers.

[Pg 204]

Eastward and then southward the Nazi planes flew, and then at the end of some thirty-five minutes, they changed their course to the east again, and then northward. Most of the Atlas Range was out of sight now. Ahead lay barren country that looked as though nothing, not even a blade of grass, had ever lived there. Farther ahead was the border line between Morocco and French Algeria, but of course there was nothing to mark it. Nothing, for as far as the eye could see there was only wasteland. These barren lands of the western rim of the Sahara Desert seemed to shimmer and tremble in the blistering heat of the sun. Even the banks of clouds were gone now. They had been left over the Atlas Mountains, and the sun blazing down made Dawson's throttles feel like red hot pokers, despite the fact that he was some twelve thousand feet in the air.

[Pg 205]

As a matter of fact, the constant glare of the sun, and the intense concentration on the Nazi formation ahead and below him strained his eyes to the utmost, and he began to see crazy objects and shapes that were no longer there when he took a second look.

It was because of this that he paid little or no attention to a gray-green blur that appeared on the barren earth just ahead of the Nazi planes. That is, he gave it scant attention until he suddenly realized that the Nazi pilots had cut their throttles, and in follow-the-leader style were circling around and down toward that gray-green blurr. Shoving up his goggles, he dug knuckles into his smarting eyes, then impulsively leaned forward as though that bit of movement would afford him a better look.

But whether or not it did, he certainly saw more than he had the first time. The gray-green blur was a small group of shrub-covered hills that rose right up out of the desert. That it was some kind of an oasis was evident by the patches of pale green here and there.

One thing was definite, however. To Dawson it was the only thing that mattered. That gray-green patch on the seemingly limitless expanse of shimmering and quivering Sahara was the secret base of Goering's Snoopers! He had found it! There it was! The first two of the bombers were already on the ground on the eastern fringe of the gray-green patch. They looked like beetles as they moved along over the ground.

[Pg 206]

A wild, fierce joy surged up in Dawson as he stared down at the place, but when he happened to glance at his fuel gauges, a tiny icy shiver went through him, and his joy was tempered by cold, hard reality. He had fuel for about another half hour in the air. Fuel enough to take him a fraction of the distance back to his Casablanca base. What he had expected had happened, but only now did the full significance of it descend upon him.

"But we found it!" he shouted wildly as he put his lips to his flap mike and reached out to tune his set to the Casablanca Base wave length. "And that's what matters most. Now to tell Casablanca and—"

At that moment Dawson's ears were filled with the savage yammer of aerial machine guns and air cannon, above and behind him!

Blazing Doom

One, two, three seconds slipped by before Dawson could move a single muscle. It was as though invisible hands of steel held him powerless. Only his eyes and brain seemed able to function in that short space of time. His eyes saw the top left section of his glass hatch melt away as if by magic. His brain told him the shambles that was suddenly made of his instrument board and radio panel would never in all this world permit him to contact his Casablanca base. The golden moment had come—and gone.

Keeping alive was his prime concern now. The Grim Reaper was savagely striving to cut life short for one Yank air ace! [Pg 208]

In three seconds Dave Dawson became a flying madman. Instinct, and instinct alone, caused him to whirl the Lockheed up, over, and down in a half roll. Hardly had he started the maneuver, than he kicked the ship over on wing and came around back and straight up toward the sun-filled sky. Not until he had reached the peak of his power zoom did he take so much as a second for a look around. But now he did race his eyes about the sky, and rage boiled up within him as he saw three German Messerschmitt 109's pulling out of furious power dives, and prop clawing around and up in an effort to "box" him in a perfect cross fire.

"Not today!" he thundered wildly, and dropped the nose of his Lockheed. "You had one swell chance, because I was too dumb a sap to think of keeping eyes in the back of my head. That's the only chance you'll get. You didn't make good, and now it's my turn. Hey! You there on the right! How do you like *this* for a tasty dish?"

As he shouted the words, he touched right rudder a bit and slammed down almost at the vertical, straight for one of the power-zooming Messerschmitts. The German pilot must have thought that ramming was the one idea Dawson had in mind, because the Nazi plane suddenly fell over on its side and started to circle away to avoid a mid-air crash. But ramming was not Dawson's idea. No, not while he had slugs for his aerial machine guns and shells for his air cannon. However, he waited until the last second before he gave the Nazi aircraft everything the Lockheed had. The almost instantaneous result indicated that it was much, much more than enough. One minute the Messerschmitt was curving away, and the next it just wasn't there any more. That is to say, it was just a shower of flaming and smoking embers falling away to the sun-scorched Sahara far below. [Pg 209]

"One!" Dawson bellowed, and cut his fire.

Yes, one! And that left two others in the sky. However, those two were crafty veterans of the *Luftwaffe*, and they had not been wasting time. Nor had their actions been with the idea of getting away from the wild, mad flying Yank eagle. On the contrary, they had simply maneuvered to await their time. And that time came as Dawson cut his fire and started to wheel up out of his thunderous power dive.

As he started up, those two let fly at him. Maybe both hit the mark, or maybe one of them missed completely. But what did it matter? The mark was hit, and the "mark" was Dawson's plane. The air all about him seemed suddenly alive with tracer smoke, and the Lockheed Lightning acted as though it was about to fly right out from under Dave. He was hurled back against the headrest with a force that filled his head with winking stars. Then the Lockheed whipped up over on its back, dropped its nose and headed straight down like a meteor gone berserk. Thunder roared in his ears, and before his eyes exploded and flashed all the color combinations in the world. In his nose was the acrid stench of smoke. [Pg 210]

"Your turn, this time, pal!" he heard his own voice shout, as he went hurtling downward. "No! No, it isn't, darn it! *You're* not hit. *You're* okay! Hit the silk, you dope! Bail out! Hit the silk! If you—"

He choked off the rest, or rather fear choked off his words, as he suddenly heard the renewed bursts of savage aerial machine-gun fire. His ship shot to ribbons, and falling to earth in flames, yet those two Nazi vultures were still pumping death at him.

"But why not?" he reasoned. "They're Nazis, aren't they? What else would you expect these killing rats to do?" [Pg 211]

Even as the thought slipped across his brain, a new one crowded close on its heels. Rather, it was a realization. The realization that there was not one bit of pain in his body as he struggled to free himself from the burning Lockheed. And also that no ribbons of tracer smoke were cutting past him. So what were the Nazis shooting at? At each other, or—

Before he could finish the question he had managed to fight his way up out of the pit, and dived headlong into sun-filled thin air. But it was not his own movements that stopped his unfinished thought. On the contrary, it was the sight of a wingless Messerschmitt 109 hurtling down to its doom about three hundred yards from where his own body seemed to hang in mid air.

"Hey!" he gasped. "Did I get another one? Did I get two, and I'm just finding out? But how the—"

And he didn't finish that question either. He didn't, because at that exact instant the gods of war, as though angered by the fact that he still lived, tried one last time to finish him off. At any rate, at that exact moment a piece of his riddled Lockheed Lightning flew off. Straight and true as a [Pg 212]

ball pitcher's perfect strike it cut across the air space toward him. He actually saw it coming out of the corner of his eye, and he tried to duck as his body slowly tumbled end over end downward. But he didn't succeed in ducking, or he didn't duck in time. Something hit him a smashing blow on the side of his head, and the entire North African sky blew up in a thunderous roar of sound!

When consciousness returned to Dawson his first hazy impression was that he was floating about in the middle of a great sea of black ink. But no, not everything was that black. At regular intervals a faint yellowish orange glow appeared before his eyes. But before he could get a good look at it the glow faded away out of sight. Instinctively he tried to get his brain to function; to get it to figure out what everything was all about. However, for a long time he somehow just couldn't force his brain to make that effort. He simply lived in a world of hazy snatches of thought, and inky darkness lighted now and then by a yellowish orange glow.

Eventually, as though secret curtains had been pulled away inside his head, memory came slipping back, and he began to discover and realize things. The first realization was that he was hanging suspended in mid-air and slowly swaying this way and that. The second realization was that the darkness was the darkness of night. The third realization was that there was a dull throbbing on the left side of his head. And the fourth, and perhaps the most important realization of all, was that he was dangling at the ends of the shroud lines of his parachute, which was hopelessly fouled in the crooked and gnarled branches of a scrub tree. By throwing his head way back he could look upward and see his fouled 'chute and the tree branches silhouetted against the billions of stars that twinkled at him from high overhead. And when he looked down he saw that rocky ground was not over three feet from the soles of his flying boots.

[Pg 213]

That realization filled him with great joy, but it also made him gulp, and caused beads of cold sweat to break out on his forehead. Never as long as he lived would he be able to remember that he actually had pulled the rip-cord ring of his parachute whether or not that flying bit of Lockheed wreckage caught him on the side of the head. But he must have done that little thing, and by the grace of God and Lady Luck he had not been allowed to strike ground while still unconscious. To have done so, to have hit ground without being prepared for the landing shock would unquestionably have resulted in a couple of broken ankles, if not legs. Particularly because of the rocky soil under him. However, one chance in a billion had come to pass, and his journey earthward had been checked in the nick of time by the crooked and gnarled branches of the scrub tree.

[Pg 214]

"Or maybe it's just a dream!" he whispered hoarsely as he fumbled at the snaps of his parachute harness. "Maybe it's just a cockeyed dream, and I'm going to wake up stone dead!"

The words he spoke, however, were just a means of letting off pent up steam. He got the 'chute harness snaps undone, grabbed the straps with both hands and slowly lowered himself until his feet touched solid earth. However, his body had experienced so much swaying motion that his sense of balance was all upset. And no sooner did his feet touch, and had he let go of the harness straps, than he fell stumbling down onto his hands and knees, and his brain started to spin furiously.

For the next few moments he was content to sit on the solid earth and wait for his brain to stop spinning and for fresh strength to flow back into his body. Then finally he slowly arose and peered about in the darkness. Just where he had come to earth he hadn't the faintest idea, but it seemed a good guess that he must be somewhere in the region of that weird group of shrub-covered hills that marked the spot where he had seen those Junkers 88's go down to land. That guess caused countless little fears to start pecking at his brain. How close to that secret base was he? How come he had been left hanging unconscious on his parachute shroud lines for the rest of the day? Where was Freddy Farmer? Had Freddy really been trailing those bombers, too? Had he reported the location to Casablanca base? Or was his radio truly dead, and did Casablanca base still not know the truth? What time was it, anyway? Had he been unconscious for just a few hours? Or had it been for a day and a night, and had Goering's Snoopers already roared out from their hidden base to do their devilish dirty work?

[Pg 215]

Those and countless other soul-tantalizing questions whipped and spun through his head as he searched about him in the gloom. Suddenly he spotted the yellowish-orange glow once again. He judged it to be perhaps a mile away, but he was unable to see the base of the glow because of a rise in the ground. After one good look, though, he knew that it was flame. Rather, a column of flame-tinted smoke that rose upward into the night sky. Having seen that same sort of sight at night in other parts of the world, he was pretty sure that the yellowish-orange glow was from the burning wreckage of a plane.

[Pg 216]

"Mine, or that Nazi I nailed?" he asked himself the question aloud. "Or—Hey! I remember, now! *Two* Nazis went down, and I know darn well that I only got one of them. I—"

He stopped short, caught his breath and held it as though not daring to let himself speak.

"Freddy?" the whisper finally came out from between his stiff lips. "Was it Freddy who piled down and nailed that second Nazi? But—But what then? Where did he go? What did he do? I know he didn't have fuel to get back to Casablanca, but if *only* his radio worked, and he was able to tell them the story! Please, dear God, let Freddy have made good where I—I failed."

For a long minute he stood there motionless as though waiting for the answer to his question to come drifting down through the night air. Suddenly his hand flew to his holstered service gun, and he whirled around and down in a crouch. Behind him, he had heard the crackling snap of dry

twigs, followed by the rattle of loose stones hitting together, and the faint thud of something falling to the ground. [Pg 217]

With his finger crooked about the trigger, and his heart trying to slam-bang its way out through his ribs, he waited for more sound. And when it came to him, he didn't know whether to shout with insane joy, or to break into crazy laughter. He didn't know which to do because the sound he heard was a human voice; a hoarse whispering voice that was filled with seething anger. A voice that said:

"Blast, and eternally blast this confounded darkness!"

For five full seconds Dawson was utterly unable to unhinge his frozen tongue. The one-in-a-billion miracle left him completely speechless. It seemed to knock everything out of his head and make all so unreal and fantastic as to be absolutely impossible as an actuality.

"Freddy! Freddy Farmer!" the words finally forced their way past his lips. "Freddy! Can you hear me? Over here, Freddy! Over here!"

As his voice died away to an echo, a tingling moment of silence settled over everything. Then once again he heard Freddy Farmer's voice, like a ghost voice from out out of the past.

"Dave, Dave! Keep talking, old chap! I'll follow the sound of your voice. Dave, old thing, are you all right? Don't move, Dave! Just keep talking! I'll follow the sound of your voice!" [Pg 218]

"I'm okay, Freddy!" Dawson replied as hot tears of inexpressible joy stung his eyes. "And, pal, this is the biggest moment of all, past, present, and future. I'm over this way, kid. I can hear you now. Over here, Freddy! Gosh, oh gosh! Am I glad to—"

He never finished the sentence because at that moment a darker shadow than the night suddenly materialized at his side, and in the next instant the two air aces were hugging and thumping each other and mumbling a lot of things that neither of them heard, much less paid attention to. Finally, though, they ceased the greeting act and calmed down.

"Man, Dave!" Freddy Farmer panted. "I thought I'd never reach you. A thousand times I swore I was lost and heading in the wrong direction. Phew! What absolutely unbelievable luck! I'll never forget this as long as I live. Not ever, I swear it!"

"You and me both, Freddy!" Dave echoed the statement. "But look! You were trailing those bombers? And it was you who nailed that Messerschmitt right after I started down in a heap, and —But wait! Tell me this, first. Your radio was okay, wasn't it? And you notified Casablanca base, didn't you?" [Pg 219]

The air came out between young Farmer's lips in a whistling gasp, and he grabbed hold of Dawson's arm.

"Dave!" he choked out. "Dave! You mean *you* didn't let them know?"

Dawson was unable to answer for a moment. His whole body seemed to turn into a solid chunk of ice so that he could hardly breathe. It required a tremendous effort to get the words off his lips.

"No, Freddy," he said. "Just as I started to tune in Casablanca, that Messerschmitt bunch gave me the works and shot my set into splinters. Then—then your radio was out? I tried to raise you several times, but couldn't."

"The blasted thing went haywire after I'd been in the air only fifteen minutes," the English youth replied. "I had half a mind to turn back to Casablanca, but I didn't dare for fear the Junkers might be down my way. They were. I sighted them coming in over Magador. They were hugging the clouds. I gave them a few miles and then tagged along. I tried to raise you, but I didn't get any answer, so I just carried on. About an hour later I spotted you trailing a Messerschmitt. I tried to rise you again, but still no answer. Then when we got close to here I saw those three Messerschmitts drop down on you. I was above the lot of you, so I saw everything. Man! I thought I'd die when you did nothing, and just let them come down!" [Pg 220]

"Dumb ape that I am," Dawson said bitterly, "I was so interested in watching the Junkers that I didn't think to keep an eye on my tail. I heard your call once, Freddy, though I couldn't spot you. You did get one of them, huh?"

"I got both, with a bit of luck," young Farmer said quietly. "But not before one of the blighters had put a bullet through my port engine's oil line. All I could do was force land. I saw your parachute open, and saw your silk foul in a tree near here. I tried to land as close as I could, but messed things up something terribly. A blasted awful landing. I was lucky not to have broken my confounded neck. I think I was knocked out for a spell. Fact is, I'm sure of it, because it was late afternoon when I collected my senses. I could see this bit of a hill where we are now, so I started out for here. Good grief, what country! The Alps are easier to cross than this bit of ground. When it got dark, it was just three times as bad. But—Well, thank the Lord I finally reached you!" [Pg 221]

Dawson said nothing. He simply groped for Freddy Farmer's hand, found it, and pressed it hard.

"That was rotten luck for you, and just plain dumbness on my part," he finally got out in a groan. "Those are the two reasons for our failure. Gosh! If I had a knife, I think I'd be tempted to cut my throat. When I think how close we came to preventing those bombers from raiding Casablanca, I —"

"But they haven't taken off yet, Dave!" Freddy cried excitedly. "It's still not too late, if that's what you're thinking!"

Young Farmer's words seemed to make Dawson's heart swell up and explode in his chest.

"What?" he gasped. "Haven't left yet? But it's well over the time limit, Freddy! According to schedule, the President's party should have arrived at Casablanca early this evening, and—"

"Maybe it did, but the bombers haven't taken off!" young Farmer interrupted. "While making my way here, I saw their hidden field from some high ground. That was about an hour ago. They had a few oil pot flares burning, and I could see the planes. All props were dead. They haven't left yet, Dave. My guess is that the President's party has been delayed a bit, and *they* know it! And, Dave! There are more than just Junkers there, too. At least half a dozen Messerschmitt single-seaters, not counting the ones we got, and a two-seater Messerschmitt 110."

[Pg 222]

"No kidding?" Dawson breathed, and swallowed hard. "Then that checks with the thought I had. I mean, those bombers have a fighter escort to protect their secret base in case a stray plane or two found it—like what happened to us. But I think the big idea of their being here is to sail out to give the bombers a better chance to get through when the big moment comes. They must be 'Number Two Suicide Squad' because they'd never get back here on the gas they carry!"

"Absolutely!" Freddy Farmer replied at once. "No doubt of it. When the bombers were sure of their target, they'd radio the Messerschmitts to come on the jump and lend a hand. Dave, old thing, we're not all washed up yet! Don't you understand?"

"And how! I understand!" the Yank air ace said grimly, and got up onto his feet. "Do you know the way to that secret field from here, Freddy?"

[Pg 223]

"Yes," the other replied. "But it's about two hours of blasted hard going. We've got to be very careful. I think the blighters have patrols out hunting for us. I heard a few Jerry voices while I was making my way here. By the way, that glow over there is your aircraft still burning. Never knew a plane to burn so long."

"So that's what it is, huh?" Dawson remarked absently. Then, reaching out, he gripped Freddy Farmer's hand. "Let's go, pal," he said quietly. "Don't ask me if I have any plans, because I haven't a one, yet. But let's get to that field and decide when we get there. One thing is in our favor, anyway. We're both still alive and kicking. If you ask me, that's plenty for a starter!"

"Quite!" Freddy Farmer echoed, tight-lipped. "We're both still alive, so we're jolly well not licked yet!"

"Check, and triple check!" Dawson grunted. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

[Pg 224]

Vultures' Nest

Dawn was a faint gray line marking the point where the North African sky met the North African Continent in the east. Just a faint gray line heralding the coming of a new day, though the world was still shrouded in the darkness of night. A new day. A new day of war. A new day—of victory, or utter failure?

The question was like a pin-point white hot flame burning in Dave Dawson's brain as he and Freddy Farmer hugged the hard-packed ground behind a clump of withered desert brush. Just seventy yards beyond the desert brush was a long level strip of desert, flanked on both sides by scrub-covered hills. Hills? They were little more than mounds of rock and sand. As though Nature throughout the ages had thrust them up from the bowels of the earth and covered them with scrub growth for a crazy prank. They looked just about as natural in the middle of the Sahara as a part of the Sahara would have looked in the middle of New York City. Nevertheless, there they were. Another bit of the mysterious Sahara's phenomena for man to study and wonder about. A desert oasis completely surrounded by hills! Yet there it was for mortal eyes to view.

[Pg 225]

However, the strange freak of Nature's handiwork held no interest whatsoever for Dave Dawson or Freddy Farmer. What interested them completely were the man-made things on that strip of desert valley. The fifteen Junkers Ju-88's, the six Messerschmitt 109's and the single two-seater Messerschmitt 110, that were pulled way back under perfect camouflage covering on either side of the desert strip—the planes, and the groups of shadowy figures that were walking about among them.

For fifteen minutes the two youths had hugged the ground behind the scrub bush and peered out at the weird yet deadly-looking scene in silence. For one thing there was nothing to say. However, the main reason for silence was that each was close to the point of complete exhaustion and collapse. Not two, but three hours ago they had started toward the spot where they now were. Those three hours had been the most torturing and grueling of their entire lives. Three hours used to cover a distance of but a little over a mile! Simple enough to think about, but how far different the actual execution of that night-shrouded journey. Cuts and bruises on their bodies

[Pg 226]

were countless. Their uniforms were in shreds and tatters, and there was an utter weariness within them such as few men have ever experienced. A hundred times all that kept them going over the rock-studded ground, with thorn-bush barriers every other foot of the way, were their fighting hearts and savage determination to win through in spite of all odds.

And they *had* won through, but were now forced to stretch out on the ground and fight another battle—the battle for new strength and new energy that would carry them forward to the most terrific struggle of all. Yes, carry them forward to the struggle—and the successful completion of an almost impossible task.

"Freddy, I'm wondering," Dawson suddenly whispered, and touched the English youth's prone body with his hand. [Pg 227]

"Yes, Dave?" came back the equally faint whisper. "Wondering about what?"

"If—" Dave began, and paused. "I mean, maybe we're all wet about this business. There's not an engine out there ticking over, and it's darn close to dawn. You'd think they'd be warming them up now, if they expected to go out at a moment's notice. In other words, I'm wondering *if* Major General Hawker was right. If this bunch *really does* have any connection with the President's trip to Casablanca?"

"I'm sure it must have, Dave," Freddy Farmer replied after a few seconds of silence. "Everything absolutely adds up to that. In my mind, there's no doubt about it. As for warming up the engines, the blighters are up and about. No doubt they'll start them up any minute now. May be waiting for a bit more light, you know. The point is, what are we—"

The English-born air ace never finished that question. He didn't because at that moment a figure garbed in the uniform of the Nazi *Luftwaffe* rushed out of a little camouflaged hut on the left side of the desert strip and shouted orders at the top of his voice. He spoke in German, of course, but both Dawson and Farmer knew the language, and so—and so absolute confirmation of the truth was given them. [Pg 228]

"All pilots and crews report to *Herr Kommandant* at once!" the voice bellowed in a note of wild, frenzied excitement. "*Der Tag* has come! The signal has just been received from Casablanca. Your targets are approaching there now. The American *Schweinehunds*, and the English ones, too. *Der Tag* has come! *Heil* Hitler!"

A brief moment of silence settled over everything. And then a silence-shattering roar came from many throats.

"*Heil* Hitler!"

Bombs were exploding in Dave Dawson's brain, and his heart was pumping madly in his chest as he pushed up onto his hands and knees.

"Freddy!" he got out in a choking gasp. "This is it! You hear what that bird said? They've received word from some rat in Casablanca, just as Major General Hawker thought they would. Freddy! It's up to us now, or else! Those confounded bombers just *can't* take off! And that's got to be *that!*"

"Absolutely!" the English youth echoed in a hoarse whisper. "And just look at the blighters! Like blasted ants crawling all over those planes, and—Dave! Do you see—" [Pg 229]

"Right!" Dawson cut in, and gripped his arm. "That Messerschmitt 110. They're not touching it yet. Must be the *Kommandant's* plane. Probably going to tag along and watch the slaughter, but keep out of the way."

"Yes, yes!" Freddy said excitedly. "But we—"

"My idea all along, pal!" Dawson breathed fiercely. "That's not the rat *Kommandant's* baby, that's *ours*, Freddy! If we can only get it off before they get us, we can pin the rest of those crates on the ground like nobody's business. But, Freddy!"

"Yes, Dave, yes?" the English youth asked impatiently. "What now?"

"Just a thought," Dawson said in a quiet, steady voice that surprised himself. "We'll get that baby off, and we'll raise merry heck with these birds, even if it's the last thing we do. That's the idea! Maybe it *will* be the last. I have a funny feeling that we've had more than our share of luck already. So—Well, if you'd rather we tried to swipe a single-seater Messerschmitt apiece, so that —"

"Rot!" young Farmer snapped angrily. "So that one of us might get away? Meaning me? Not a bit of it, Dave! We started the balmy business together, and by the Lord Harry we'll *finish* it together, one way or the other. So stop your silly talk, and let's get on with things. You have your gun, of course?" [Pg 230]

"Right in my hand, kid," Dawson assured him. "And you're a pretty nice guy, Freddy, if I haven't ever mentioned it before. Okay, together it is. Keep low, and run like the dickens. If somebody gets in our way—well, it will be just too bad for him. They're going half nuts out there, now, so maybe we'll get the breaks and not be seen. Set, Freddy?"

"Set, old thing," the English youth replied, and pressed Dawson's arm. "Luck to us both!"

"We don't count," Dawson said, and pressed young Farmer's arm in return. "Luck to the Casablanca war conference, please God! Right! Here we go!"

Dawson pressed Freddy Farmer's arm once more, then wheeled around, bent way over almost double, circled the scrub bush, and went streaking out onto the desert strip at top speed toward the Messerschmitt 110 parked a good eighty yards away. Farmer bolted right after him.

Perhaps it was Dawson's spinning imagination, or perhaps it was an actual fact, but it seemed that no sooner was he out from behind the scrub bush than the amount of light thrown forward by the swiftly approaching day was tripled in intensity. He had the sensation that he and Farmer stood out as clear and as huge as a couple of runaway horses, and that every German eye was fixed upon them. In fact, had a hundred machine guns suddenly opened up on them, he would not have been the least bit surprised. With every racing stride he took, with every split second that skipped by, he expected just that.

[Pg 231]

However, there were no screams of alarm, and there were no blasts of yammering machine-gun fire as the two youths covered forty yards in their headlong dash and reached the first of the parked bombers. At that point, Dawson swerved sharply to the left in order to avoid all notice if possible. Then he swerved back to the right again without checking his speed for a single instant. They had to pass four more bombers with mechanics and pilots swarming all over before they reached the Messerschmitt 110. They accomplished it in a matter of split seconds, but to Dawson's high-pitched nerves and whirling brain, it seemed a thousand years. It seemed as though he was only crawling over the ground, and in slow motion at that.

[Pg 232]

But the crazy thoughts he had were far from the truth. He was traveling so fast that he virtually ran into the side of the Messerschmitt and was bounced back, to bump up against Freddy Farmer's plunging body. They caught hold of each other in an effort to maintain their balance. They succeeded, but no sooner had they regained their balance and were turning to scramble up into the plane than two uniformed Nazis came running around the tail of the aircraft.

The two Nazis saw Dawson and Farmer. Their jaws dropped, and they skidded to a halt and reached for their holstered Lugers. But they might just as well have tried to jump over the stars and drop straight down on the two air aces. Dawson's gun barked once, so did Freddy Farmer's, and there were two less Germans in the world.

Before either of the dead Germans had hit the ground the two air aces had whirled and had thrown themselves into the Messerschmitt's cockpit. Though nothing had been decided between them, Dawson impulsively leaped into the pilot's pit, and Freddy Farmer piled into the gunner's pit aft. It was one of those unspoken agreements, and as Dawson landed in the seat, his hands shot out for the engine switches, throttles, and starter buttons. Two seconds later, the grinding of the starter gears sounded like the loudest noise in all the world, and Dave's heart pounded in wild fear that their two shots were bringing a horde of other Nazis on the run. However, he didn't waste time looking about. He hunched forward in the pit and concentrated every bit of his attention and all his prayers on getting the two Daimler-Benz engines started.

[Pg 233]

One second, one minute, one hour, or maybe a thousand years dragged by before the two engines "caught" and roared in a mighty earth-shaking duet of power. Dawson's heart leaped with wild joy, and for five precious seconds he forced himself to let the engines run to warm up a little before the take-off. At the end of five seconds, he eased off the throttles, kicked off the wheel brakes, and let the Messerschmitt trundle forward out of line with the other aircraft. No sooner was he in the open and swerving left toward the long way of the field, than the chattering yammer of a machine gun rose above the general roar, and he heard the deathly whine of bullets passing overhead. He also heard a wild yell from Freddy Farmer's lips, but he didn't dare twist around in the seat and look back. He didn't because he was pointing the long way of the desert strip now, and was ready to ram his throttles wide open. In front of him was a milling mass of Germans. He was that a furious attempt was being made by a Messerschmitt 109 pilot to trundle his single-seater out of line and onto the desert strip to block the way!

[Pg 234]

Stark terror gripped Dave's heart as he saw the nose of that single-seater moving out toward the line of his take-off. He had impulsively rammmed both of his throttles wide open, and his aircraft was leaping forward like a shell leaving the mouth of a cannon. Whether or not he would pass that moving 109 in time was something that was in the lap of the gods.

Touch and go, and it was instinct more than sane thought that gave him a new lease on life. As the Messerschmitt 110 rocketed forward toward the milling mass of Nazis and the Messerschmitt 109 rolled out into his path beyond, Dawson jabbed the electric trigger button of the ME's guns and punched the air-cannon firing knob. Instantly the plane bucked and jumped madly as the guns yammered and pounded, and it was all Dawson could do to hold it on its straight take-off line.

[Pg 235]

"Gangway, bums, or take it!" he roared at the top of his voice. "Leap for your lives, or else!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

[Pg 236]

Eagles Come Through

Words, crazy, insane words poured from Dave Dawson's lips as he held the Messerschmitt 110 as steady as a rock and guided it forward at full throttle. Perhaps his actions were as crazy and insane as his words. For every German his guns sent spinning to the ground, two more seemed to come bounding out of nowhere with blazing sub-machine guns in their hands. The Messerschmitt 109 that was being rolled out to block his path loomed up larger and larger with every split second until it seemed to fill the entire desert valley almost directly in front of his prop.

Yes, perhaps crazy, perhaps insane, and perhaps totally and hopelessly mad. Dawson didn't have time to wonder about that, or to give it a single thought. The only thought he held in his swirling brain was that he had to get the Messerschmitt off and into clear air. If he didn't, all was doomed. And the point was that getting the aircraft into the air was but the beginning of things!

[Pg 237]

"Up, up with you! Come on! Get off, *get off!*"

Shouting the commands at the plane, he hauled back on the controls, held his breath, and shut his eyes, as though that would help a little. An eternity of suspense dragged by. At the speed he was traveling now, there wasn't a hope in the world that Freddy or he would survive a crash with that other German plane. It was now, or never. All, or nothing but instant death. With the fate of the entire civilized world hanging in the balance, was it life, or was it—

A mighty upward surge of the Messerschmitt caused Dawson's heart to swell with joy. He opened his eyes and instinctively ducked because his left wing and the nose of the Messerschmitt 109 seemed to be touching one another. But not quite, thank God, and the 110 went prop-clawing up close to the vertical. Prop-clawing upward as the withering fire of enraged vultures below spewed up after it.

[Pg 238]

"Made it, made it!" Dawson choked out, and instantly kicked the Messerschmitt over on wingtip and pulled it around in a screaming turn. "Freddy, we—"

He cut short his words as sudden memory of Freddy Farmer's wild yell came back to mind. It seemed as though he lived and died a hundred deaths in the time it took to turn his head and glance back at the rear cockpit. What he saw sent a flood of joy into his pounding heart. Freddy Farmer was still alive and kicking. And very much so, too. He had his rear guns swung around and down and was blazing away at the ground. One of his bursts of bullets had already nailed one of the Junkers 88's, and livid red flame was shooting upward from the giant aircraft.

"First blood for you, Freddy!" Dawson screamed into the thunder of his twin Daimler-Benz engines. "First blood for you, and how! Let's go, kid! They think they've got a date at Casablanca. The heck they have, I'll say! Here, you, a kiss from Casablanca!"

As Dawson roared out the last, he dropped the nose of the Messerschmitt like a rock and went piling down toward the row of parked planes. He saw two Messerschmitt 109's taking off, but they were past his line of fire, so he couldn't do anything about them. Nor could he do anything about the ocean of ground fire that swept up toward him. Maybe their 110 would be "drowned" in that ocean of machine-gun and rifle fire, but not before Freddy and he had made that secret desert airdrome a shambles of burning aircraft that would block off all other attempts to take off.

[Pg 239]

With every cubic inch of air seemingly filled with death-whining bullets from the ground guns, Dave rocketed the 110 recklessly downward and let go with all his guns and air cannon. One, two, three huge Junkers 88's seemed to crab sideways and then break out into flame before he was forced to pull up out of his mad dive, or go roaring in to his doom. His heart was smashing against his ribs, and his face was bathed in hot sweat as he pitted every ounce of his strength against the downward momentum of the Messerschmitt. Then, with but half a second to spare, he got the nose up and went engine-howling for the dawn gray sky.

"Dave! They are—"

Whatever Freddy Farmer had to say was drowned out in a tremendous thunder of sound. Sound that billowed up from the ground directly under the power zooming plane. Sound that seemed to envelop the Messerschmitt, to grab it with many hands and fling it cartwheeling end over end out across the North African dawn. All the fireworks in the world popped and crackled in Dawson's head. A thousand steel fists hit against his body from every conceivable angle. The nose of the Messerschmitt and the instrument panel started spinning until all he could see was a whirling blurr. The air that he sucked into his lungs was as liquid fire, and it seemed to dry up every drop of blood in his body. In a crazy, abstract sort of way he knew that some of the Junkers bombs had let go before he had been able to zoom out of range, and concussion had caught the Messerschmitt to make it as helpless as a dried leaf in a cyclone.

[Pg 240]

"Dave! Man your guns! Two planes got off! There they come down. From in front—*from in front!*"

Freddy Farmer's screaming voice seemed to tear away the blurred veil that covered Dawson's eyes. His vision cleared, and he looked up to see the two Messerschmitt 109's streaking down at him from in front. Freddy Farmer's guns were already blazing away, but the angle was bad, and the tracers were smoking well above the diving planes.

[Pg 241]

Even as Dawson looked up and spotted the two planes, he was pulling up the nose and fumbling for the electric trigger button on his control stick. He found it, only to have his fingers slide off. When he looked down, he saw that his hand was red and glistening from his own blood. The sight stunned him for a second because he felt no pain. That is, no acute pain. From head to foot his entire body felt numb and weak, but there was no sense of pain whatsoever. He was even more

astonished when he saw that the front of his ripped and torn tunic was stained with blood, too.

One glance, however, was all he could take—one glance to see, realize the truth, and be dumbfounded. Then he snapped his eyes upward, tapped right rudder just a little to bring one of the diving planes into his sights—and fired!

The result? He saw what happened with his two eyes, but he did not know whether his bullets and air cannon shells, or Nazi panic, caused it. It seemed that he had hardly jabbed the electric trigger button when the plane in his sights swerved violently off to the right. Maybe his burst hit it and kicked it that way, or perhaps the unthinking Nazi pilot swerved purposely to throw Dawson off his aim. But whether no or yes, the 109 swerved violently to its right, and went side-slashing into the other diving 109. One second there were two planes hurtling downward, and the next they had locked wings, crumpled about each other like wet paper, and then completely disappeared in an exploding ball of flame and oily black smoke.

[Pg 242]

"Good gosh, no!" Dawson gasped, and hurled the no over and around to avoid the flaming inferno as it went plunging past. "Did I get him, or did the guy go haywire? Hey, Freddy! Did you see that?"

Silence greeted his question, and terror was his again as he twisted around in the seat. What he saw brought no yell of joy to his lips. On the contrary, it brought a sob of alarm, because Freddy Farmer was slumped over like a sack of wet meal against the side of the cockpit. One upstretched hand still clung to the trigger guard of the rear guns, but the English youth's face was deathly pale, save where it was spattered with drops of blood. His eyes were closed.

"Freddy!" Dawson shrieked. "Freddy! Speak to me, pal! Oh, dear God, *no!* Please, oh, please! Freddy! Freddy, boy!"

[Pg 243]

Dawson's voice faltered, and the only sounds he made were dry sobs that struggled up out of his throat. He turned front, and hot, stinging tears fell from his eyes. On the ground was a sight that should have brought shouts of joy to his lips and filled him with wild, surging happiness. The secret desert-oasis field was now completely covered by clouds of dirty black smoke that were slashed every few seconds by the bright red and orange flames of newly exploding bombs. Each time a flash of flame slashed its way up through the clouds of dirty smoke, bits of plane wreckage came hurtling up after it.

Yes, Goering's Snoopers were doomed. They would never fly to Casablanca, or to any other place, for that matter. But that wonderful, thrilling realization left Dawson untouched. Somehow, he was beyond all feeling. His brain was numbed, his heart was dead, and there was hardly the strength in him to go on living. His tattered tunic was now drenched with blood. Drops of blood fell from his fingers curled about the Messerschmitt's controls. A gray curtain seemed to hover before his eyes, and it took every ounce of effort that he possessed to peer through it and make out the instrument panel.

[Pg 244]

"Can't be done, can't be done!" He heard his own mumbled voice as though from miles and miles away. "We plastered them for keeps. But—but they got old Freddy. And maybe they got me, too. Oh, dear God, I'm so tired, so darn tired. I—I can't fly this thing back to Casablanca. I just—I just want to quit now, and go to sleep. What does it matter, anyway? Freddy's gone. And without old Freddy, I—"

His mumbling voice trailed off, and there was nothing but the continued thunder of the Daimler-Benz engines in his ears. Suddenly he heard another voice. A voice? Or was it something inside of him speaking?

"Quitting, huh? Just like that! You get a couple of scratches, and you want to let down and quit. Isn't that just dandy? So Freddy's gone, huh? How do *you* know? You can't tell from here! But, no, you don't even want to *try* to get back to Casablanca, where maybe he could be saved *if* he's still alive. No! You just want to quit and make *sure* that he dies. Okay, quitter! There's hard earth down there. Dive in *and make sure of death!*"

The little voice kindled a spark of anger within him, and it flared up into a bright hot flame. Quitter, huh? The heck he was! Maybe Freddy wasn't dead! Please, God, let that be true! He'd get Freddy back. Honest he would. He'd get Freddy back, no matter what. This wasn't the end for either of them. Remember how they had once kidded that the Nazi was not yet born who could polish off either of them? Well, that was true. Yes, doggone it, that was *true!* Casablanca? Okay! You bet! It was hard to move, and that darn gray veil made things hard to see. But he'd get through just the same. Casablanca, here we come! Here we—

[Pg 245]

The wheels of the bullet-riddled Messerschmitt 110 touching hard ground seemed to snap something inside Dawson's head, and drag him back from another world. In a daze he looked about and saw that he was rolling along the Casablanca field. Above him, the air was filled with Allied aircraft. A sharp stab of fear passed through his heart when he realized that this Nazi plane had been in the air with those other aircraft. He vaguely remembered they had spotted him way out from Casablanca, closed in, and then dropped into escort position.

And now *he* was down on Casablanca base! He'd made it, but he hadn't realized it until just now! Could a pilot fly a course while semi-conscious? Maybe he could, because Dave had very little recollection of this flight except for the very start. And—Wait! *Freddy Farmer!*

[Pg 246]

As the thought flashed through his brain, he lurched upward out of the seat and looked back.

Fresh fear and terror gripped him. Freddy was still slumped lifelessly against the side of the pit. His face seemed even paler, and it was covered with more dots of blood. Dawson started to call out, when he heard the pounding of many running feet. He turned his head in that direction and saw a large group of figures, led by Colonel Welsh, racing toward the plane. He waved frantically with one hand and called out.

"Ambulance!" he shouted. "Get the ambulance at—"

At that exact moment a dark cloud swooped down on top of him. A great roaring started up inside his head. He knew that he was tumbling headlong out of the pit and down onto the wing, but he was absolutely helpless to do anything about it. Something, probably the wing stub, hit him one last and final smash on the head, and there was nothing but darkness, and utter silence.

Dave Dawson found himself suspended in a world of clear, fresh-smelling and soothing white when he again opened his eyes. It did not puzzle him that all should be white, because his brain was too contented to bother figuring it out. His whole body felt contented, too. A lulling warmth enveloped him, and he did not care whether anything ever changed again. This lulling warmth and this soothing contentment were all that he could desire. [Pg 247]

However, that perfect spell of both mind and body was not long-lasting. As complete consciousness finally returned, the aches and pains took charge of his body, and his brain awakened fully with a terrible memory.

"Freddy! Freddy Farmer!"

Hardly realizing that his lips had gasped out his pal's name, he struggled to push himself up. But even as he started the effort, other hands were placed upon him and he was gently pressed down to his original position. A position that he then realized was flat on his back in a hospital bed. And then the face of the owner of those gently pressing hands came into his vision, and he recognized Colonel Welsh.

"Don't, son," the Intelligence Chief said softly. "Just let yourself go, boy, and relax completely. Farmer is all right. Shot up a little, just as you were, but he'll pull through with flying colors." [Pg 248]

"You're sure, sir?" Dawson choked out. "You mean it? You wouldn't kid a—"

"My word of honor," Colonel Welsh stopped him. "He's weak, yes, from the loss of blood, just as you are. But he'll be all right, just as you'll be all right after a period of mending and resting. And if you'll promise to get another good sleep, I'll have you moved into Farmer's room so that you can be together. And, son—"

"Hey!" Dawson blurted out, as the thought suddenly came to him. "The President's party, and—"

He would have said more, but Colonel Welsh put a hand to his lips. "Don't waste strength talking, son," he admonished with a smile. "Believe me, everything is perfect. The war conference is under way right now. And never mind giving me a report, either. Both you and Farmer have babbled it all in the two days since you've been here. I don't know what to say, Dawson. Wonderful isn't half the word that's needed. I can only say that it is another great debt that civilized man owes to you two. But for what you did, just you two alone, there's no telling what terrible changes there might have been in this war. We caught the Nazi agent here who sent the signal of the President's coming to that secret base. He was one of von Steuben's men my agents had been watching, hoping he would lead them to bigger fish. But it turned out *he* was the big fish here at Casablanca. We caught him at his hidden radio, but the message had already gone through. He admitted it, even boasted about it, saying that it was too late for us to do anything. No matter how many planes we put in the air, some of those Junkers would get through in time. That was no lie. Some of them, and maybe all of them would have gotten through, because we had no idea from which direction they would come to deliver their attack. Or when, so that we would be ready. But you and Farmer—"

Colonel Welsh stopped talking, blinked his eyes, swallowed hard, and smiled. [Pg 249]

"All I can say," he finally got out, "is that I thank God from the bottom of my heart that you two are fighting on our side. And, son—"

The Chief of U. S. Intelligence was about to add that the President of the United States had said that he wished to see Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer before he left Casablanca and personally decorate them for their brave and gallant service above and beyond the call of duty. But Colonel Welsh decided to wait until another time, because what use is it to tell a fellow anything when he is fast asleep with a happy and thoroughly contented smile on his face? [Pg 250]

— THE END —

A Page from

DAVE DAWSON WITH THE EIGHTH AIR FORCE

After carefully checking the readings of his "black light" instrument dials, Dawson raised his eyes and scowled out at the ocean of inky darkness that seemed to sweep in on him from all sides.

"Right on course, unless those instruments are haywire, which of course they're not," he murmured. "But just the same, I'd sure like to get out of these clouds. The darn stuff must stretch all the way to China!"

As he spoke the words he absently fingered the switch button of his radio, but when he suddenly realized what he was doing he snatched his hand away as though the thing were red hot.

"Radio silence at all cost, chump!" he growled at himself. "And stop worrying about Freddy. He's somewhere right back there behind you. You saw his ship as clear as could be only thirty minutes ago! So take it easy."

Yes, only thirty minutes ago Freddy Farmer had been right there at his right rear in the other plane. Sure! But kingdoms have fallen,

Transcriber's Notes:
Page 92: Changed givin to giving
Page 127: Changed thanks to tanks
Page 144: Changed Washingtán to Washington
Page 146: Changed blust to blurt
Page 161: Changed tto to to
Page 180: Changed Georing's to Goering's

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA ***

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