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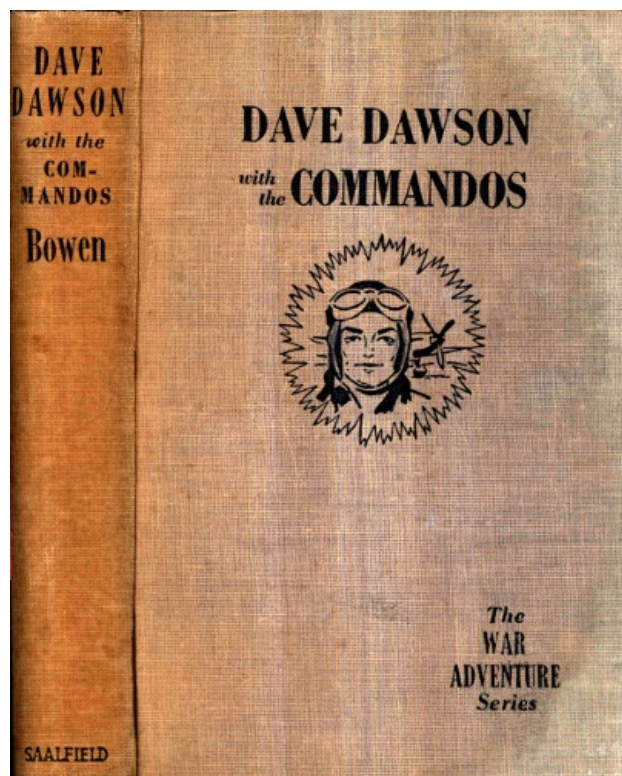
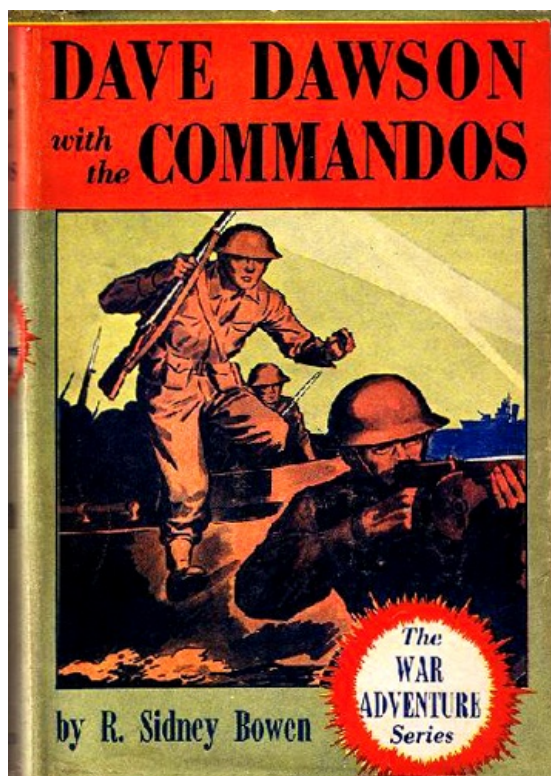
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE COMMANDOS ***



DAVE DAWSON WITH THE COMMANDOS

by R. SIDNEY BOWEN

Author of:

"DAVE DAWSON AT DUNKIRK"
"DAVE DAWSON WITH THE R. A. F."
"DAVE DAWSON IN LIBYA"
"DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL"
"DAVE DAWSON, FLIGHT LIEUTENANT"
"DAVE DAWSON AT SINGAPORE"
"DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET"
"DAVE DAWSON WITH THE AIR CORPS"

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CHAPTER ONE

Strange Orders

The waiter came over to the table and smiled politely.

"Is there anything else I can get you two gentlemen?" he asked.

Dave Dawson looked up from his empty plate and shook his head emphatically.

"No thanks," he said. "I'm close to the bursting point right now. Anything more and I'd need a second stomach to hold it. You can bring the check, please."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said, and started over to the cashier's nook.

"I say, just a minute!" Freddy Farmer stopped him. "I'm not quite filled yet. I'll have another piece of that pie, please. And you might bring me another pot of tea. With cream."

The waiter blinked and stared, but caught himself quickly.

"Yes, sir, at once," he said, and hurried away.

Dave groaned and made a little gesture with his hand.

"There's a name for guys like you, pal," he said. "But it isn't polite to say it in public. For the love of mike, Freddy! What have you been doing, tossing it under the table when I wasn't looking? Man! You've packed away enough chow to feed a regiment."

"I was as hungry as a regiment when we came in," the English-born air ace said placidly. "You've no objections, have you?"

"Not a one," Dawson grinned. "Go ahead and kill yourself. But when you feel the explosion coming on, let me know. I'll want to be leaving in a hurry."

"Have no fear," Freddy Farmer assured him. "There will be no explosion. Good grief! Can't a hungry chap eat without you staring constantly? After these last five weeks I feel as though I'll never get enough food into me. You Americans certainly do a thing for fair, when you have a go at it."

"Meaning what?" Dave echoed absently as he stared across the hotel dining room at two rather

tough-looking, yet well dressed civilians seated at a table. "What are you talking about this time?"

"Why, about what I said," Freddy replied. "These last five weeks! Or have you forgotten already? If so, I'll refresh your memory. For the last five weeks we have been attending one of your Commando training schools, or rather, I should say, Ranger training schools. We completed the course only yesterday, and here we are on leave awaiting orders. We both took English Commando training last year in England. But it was certainly nothing like the training we've just completed here in the States. You Americans really—I say! Are you listening to me?"

"Huh?" Dave grunted, and looked at him. "Were you saying something, pal?"

Freddy pressed his lips tight and blew air through his nose.

"How you ever became a commissioned officer, with such manners, I'll never understand!" he snorted. "Of course I was saying something! But don't let me bore you further. I can see something frightfully important is on your mind. You do have a mind, don't you? Well, what is it? I'll be patient, and listen."

"Oh, skip it," Dave grinned. "Sorry from the bottom of my heart, sweetheart. Go ahead. Put the record on again."

"Like Shakespeare, I never chew my cabbage twice!" Freddy snapped. "No, never mind. I insist upon knowing the reason for that puzzled look on that homely face of yours. Out with it, my lad."

"Just a couple of fellows eating on the other side of the room," Dave said. "I've caught them eying us quite a bit. Came in just after we did. No! Don't look right now, dope! It's not polite."

Freddy checked his turning head and flushed slightly.

"Rubbish!" he mumbled. "But what's wrong with two people looking at us? Frankly, I think we look rather pukka in our U. S. Army Air Force uniforms, and wings, and all that sort of thing. Or perhaps I present an interesting contrast to your sloppy appearance."

"Boy! You must have strained a brain cell on that!" Dave growled. "Okay! So people look at us. But there are about twenty other officers in this dining room. And these two guys—Well, if I were going to rob a bank, or maybe kidnap somebody, I think I might be tempted to make a deal with those two. Okay! Take a sneak look now."

Freddy twisted around and made as though to brush something off his left shoulder with his right hand. He took a quick look across the dining room and then turned back to Dave.

"Phew! They are a nasty-looking pair, aren't they!" he breathed. "But maybe they're house detectives, or something. I've always read in your American detective books that hotel detectives are generally horrible-looking creatures."

"Say, maybe you've got something there, pal!" Dave said with a laugh. "*That's* what they've been doing!"

"Eh?" the English youth echoed. "What have they been doing?"

"Counting the knives and forks and spoons, as the waiter put them in front of you!" Dave shot at him. "I bet you a buck they search you before you leave."

"Well, they'd certainly—!" Freddy gasped before he caught himself. "Blast your ears, Dave! You made me fall right into that one. Right you are! My turn will come, my good fellow. Seriously speaking, though, have they really been giving us more than usual notice?"

"I'd call it that," Dave said with a shrug. "But maybe my imagination's going a little bit haywire tonight. No, not that, exactly. I mean, waiting for orders makes me think all kinds of things. Darn it all, the picture just isn't complete, if you get what I mean."

Freddy Farmer shook his head and looked very grave.

"I'm afraid I don't, old chap," he said. "Something bothering you that I don't know anything about?"

"Nope," Dawson said. "Nothing that you don't know about. It's the set-up we're in now. Five weeks ago we volunteered to take the Commando training course. Colonel Welsh, Chief of all U. S. Intelligence, thought it would be a good idea if we took it. So we did. So we completed training yesterday. So we came down here to New York on leave until orders should arrive. But we had to say where we'd be stopping. Okay. So far, so good. But how long do we stay here? What happens next? What orders are we going to receive? And when? And how will they come to us? See what I mean? It's all hanging in the air. Nothing definite. Heck! We might be at a movie when a phone call came through from Colonel Welsh or somebody, and we wouldn't be here. I mean, it strikes me that we should have been told to report to somebody every day to see if our orders were ready. But—"

Dave let the rest slide, and gestured helplessly. Freddy nodded slowly, and pursed his lips.

"You're quite right, Dave," he murmured, and frowned. "It does seem a bit queer, when you come to think of it. I—Good grief! Do you suppose, Dave?"

Dawson looked at him with one eyebrow cocked.

"Do I suppose what?" he asked.

At that moment the waiter arrived with Freddy's second slice of pie and his pot of tea. The English youth waited until he had made his retreat.

"Do you suppose we failed horribly at the Commando school," he said, "and—and this is just a gentle way of letting us down? I mean, sort of give us a bit of leave here in New York to buck up our spirits, and then post us back to some air squadron?"

Dave didn't say anything for a moment. He thought back over the last five weeks of vigorous training that either made or broke a man.

"I don't mean to boast," he said slowly, "but if we didn't pass out of that training school with pretty fair marks, then there can't be more than a dozen or so who did. But now you've hit upon the thought that's been bothering me."

"Make that a bit clearer," Freddy said. "I don't quite follow you. What thought?"

"The Commando business," Dave replied with a little gesture. "We took the training because Colonel Welsh thought it would be a good idea. Does that mean we're Commandos from now on? Are we waiting for Commando orders? Or are we waiting for further orders from Colonel Welsh?"

"Good grief, yes!" the English youth gasped, and smiled faintly. "Fact is, though, I've been so jammed full of Commando tactics these last five weeks, that it didn't even occur to me that we might not continue along that line. Quite, Dave! Ten to one the Commando business is all behind us, and we're simply waiting for Colonel Welsh to dig us up another Air Intelligence assignment. But somehow—"

Freddy Farmer let the rest hang in mid-air, and gave a little half shake of his head.

"Somehow you hope not, Freddy?" Dave asked softly. "That what you mean, pal?"

Freddy grinned and nodded slightly.

"Frankly, yes," he said. "I enjoyed every minute of that Commando school. I fancy I'd like the chance to put into actual practice a bit of what I learned. Quite! It would be a bit satisfying to take a knife away from some Nazi blighter and toss him over my shoulder, the way they taught us."

"You can say that again!" Dave chuckled. "I received a lot of lumps learning that bit of self-defense. I sure would like to try it out on a Nazi tramp. And no rubber knife, either, like the instructor used. But, heck! I guess we're just hollering down the rain barrel, pal. Commando and Yank Ranger units are being formed in England, not here. That's where the finishing touches are put on. After all, we're a couple of pilots, not infantrymen. No, I guess Colonel Welsh figured it might be a good idea to round out our combat education a bit. So he suggested that we take the course."

"Probably," Freddy agreed with an unhappy sigh. "Just a bit of schooling to keep us out of trouble while he decided what job to set us at next. Oh well, I enjoyed the schooling—thoroughly!"

"It was fun, and how," Dave grunted. "But I sure hate to have all these tough muscles I built up go to waste. Doggone you, Freddy! Seeing you shovel that extra slab of pie into your face has made me hungry again! I guess I'll join you, at that. But without the tea!"

Dave turned to signal the waiter, and it was then that he saw the man in person heading his way. The waiter carried a white envelope in one hand, and he was taking the shortest route across the dining room. In his other hand he carried the dinner check. In true waiter style, he presented the check first. Dave glanced at the score and whistled under his breath. The hotel they had picked slip-out-of-the-hat style was not exactly favorable to a Captain's pay. However, he felt a little better when he realized that three fourths of the check was Freddy Farmer's obligation.

"Pardon," murmured the waiter. "Are you Captains Dawson and Farmer?"

"That's right," Dave told him. "I'm Captain Dawson. So that makes him Captain Farmer."

"A gentleman just gave this to the head waiter, sir," the man said, and held out the envelope. "He said it was to be given to either Captain Dawson or Captain Farmer."

"Thanks," Dave said, and took the envelope.

It was plain white and contained Freddy's name and rank, and his own, on the outside. There was nothing else written on the front side. He glanced at Freddy and then turned it over to pry up the gummed flap. He saw that two ink lines had been drawn across the sealed portion. In that way it was possible to tell if the letter had been opened. He peered at the two ink lines and knew that the letter had not been unsealed.

"What do you suppose?" Freddy murmured.

"Could be from the management asking us to leave because you eat too much," Dave grunted, and wedged a finger under the corner of the flap. "But my guess is that it's what we've been waiting for: word from Colonel Welsh. He has a habit of doing things this way, you know. But pardon me! It's addressed to us both. Do you want to open it, my little man?"

"Stop your silly chatter, and open the blasted thing!" the English youth snapped. "I'm on pins and needles."

"Give me time!" Dave growled, and struggled with the flap. "The darn thing seems nailed down as well as gummed. Okay. Here goes for the news."

He got the flap torn open and pulled out what was inside. It was a single sheet of fool's cap paper, and the words on it were neatly typed. He read the two paragraphs that made up the letter, and his scowl deepened with each new word. Freddy, watching him, twisted and squirmed in his chair with suspense. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer.

"Here!" he snapped. "Pass it over, if you don't know how to read!"

"Take a read," Dave said softly, as his scowl remained. "Take a *good* read, and then *you* tell me, pal!"

CHAPTER TWO

Night Attack

It was all Freddy Farmer could do not to snatch the letter from Dave's extended hand. He took it, settled back in his chair, and bent his eyes on the typed words. Stunned amazement spread all over his wind- and sun-bronzed face as he read the two paragraphs.

"Upon receiving this you will leave your hotel and proceed to Six Hundred and Ninety-Seven (697) River Street.

"The route you will follow to this address is as follows. Walk from your hotel south to Cort Street. Go west along Cort Street to Tenth Avenue. Then south to River Street, and east to Number 697. There ring the bell under the name, Brown. Be sure to follow these route directions exactly.

"X-Fifteen"

Freddy read it through twice, and then raised his eyes to meet Dave's.

"X-Fifteen?" he murmured softly. "That's one of the code identifications that Colonel Welsh uses! So he must be here in New York, and not in Washington."

"Could be," Dave grunted, and started to push back his chair. "The Colonel gets around a lot, you know. Well, I guess that's us, pal. Certainly screwy orders. That's quite a walk from here. But maybe after you've had Commando training you're a sissy if you take a cab. So—Well, what do you know?"

"Eh?" Freddy Farmer ejaculated. "What do I know?"

Dave stood up and half nodded his head at the other side of the dining room.

"Our rough tough-looking friends have vanished in thin air," he said. "They aren't around any more. Must have got sick of giving us the eye, and pulled out."

"Their perfect right!" Freddy snorted, and got up also. "You were probably imagining things, anyway. Right you are. Let's get on with it. We—Half a minute, my fair weather friend! You haven't left enough money for your share of the dinner."

"One fourth of the bill, plus tip," Dave grunted scornfully. "Read it and weep. Three fourths of that went inside you, sweetheart. I love you like a brother, but I refuse to foot your food bills. Nix! And double nix!"

"Phew, so I did!" Freddy gasped as he ran his eye down the list of things served them. "And the trouble is, I'm still hungry. Oh, very well. Share and share alike, with a tightwad like you. Even figured it out to the penny, too! Now, if you were with me in England—"

"I'd be pleading with the cops not to have you shot for stomach hoarding!" Dave snapped. "Pay up, and shut up. Or pay it off washing dishes. You'd look cute in an apron, Freddy. I could meet you later and let you know what Colonel Welsh has to say. I—"

He stopped and grinned wickedly as Freddy threw him a rapier glare. The English youth paid his share and then joined him as Dave walked out of the dining room. They got their hats from the check girl, and went on out through the hotel lobby to the street. The dim-out had come to New York City, and it made both of them think of London, and other war-scarred cities they had seen.

For several blocks they were too contented with their own thoughts to speak. But when they were almost halfway to their destination, Freddy Farmer broke the silence.

"You know, Dave," he said, "this makes a chap feel rather silly. It's like a game you'd play in school, or something. I mean, why in the world have us follow this particular route? You'd think we had valuable information, and were taking this route to some secret headquarters to throw off

possible pursuit. Blasted queer, I call it!"

"You tell me something about war that isn't screwy at first glance," Dave grunted as they turned the corner into Cort Street. "But Colonel Welsh knows his business, and if he wants us to walk all over town to report to him, then we walk all over town. But he sure did pick the darker streets. This one right here makes me think of a coal mine. Watch your step, Freddy, or you may spill into an ash can or something. In this section of town they don't always put them right on the curb. And—"

Dave stopped talking abruptly, and he also pulled up to a quick halt. Freddy went on a pace or two, then stopped and waited.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Think you were running into one of them? An ash can, I mean?"

"No," Dawson grunted, and moved forward again. "Thought I saw something moving up ahead—somebody ducking into a doorway. Doggone it! I must be getting the jimjams. You'd think I were trying to steal across Berlin and give the Gestapo the go-by. Good gosh! This is New York, for cat's sake! And—*Freddy!*"

Dave had only time to bark out his pal's name as two shadows came charging out of a night-darkened doorway. He sensed them, rather than saw or heard them. It was more that sixth sense, that science calls premonition, that put him on the alert and made him drop halfway to one knee and shoot his hands up and out in front of him.

One of the shadows came at him like a streak of black lightning. He wasn't sure, but in the split second he was allowed to set himself he thought he saw the dull gleam of a knife in an upraised hand. Maybe so; maybe not. He didn't bother to make sure. The silent attacker was coming upon him too fast. There was no time for thought. There was only time for action—furious, split second action for which he had been training these last five weeks.

And so action it was! He dropped like a flash, ducked his head, and then stiffened his legs and shot his body upward, half turning it at the same time. He felt the top of his head crash into a broad chest, and he felt his hands lock about the wrist of the hand that held the knife. A quick pivot on the balls of his feet, and a bend downward that brought the attacker's arm down across his shoulder. He heard the gasp of pain, heard the clatter of a knife hitting the pavement, and then he was arching his back and twisting viciously. The result was that his helpless attacker flew over him like a sack of wet wheat, and slammed down on the pavement on his side. Dave clung to the wrist, but the attacker's greater weight pulled it free, and the man went rolling over and over toward the gutter.

In a flash, Dave dived after him, but the attacker seemed full of coiled steel springs. He was up on his feet in a flash and speeding down the badly lighted street. Impulsively Dave streaked his hand to where his holstered service gun should have been. Only it wasn't there. It was back in the bureau drawer in his hotel room! He took a couple of leaping steps after the fleeing shadow, but checked himself and swerved sharply as a second shadow virtually flew past him. He shot out his hands, got hold of jacketcloth, but all the good that did him was that he ripped off a piece of a jacket as the second shadow went by him and down the street.

"Dave! You all right?"

He turned to see Freddy Farmer at his elbow. The English youth was breathing hard, and fingering the right side of his jaw.

"I'm okay, but boiling!" Dave grated. "I had my bird cold, so I thought. But he must be made of rubber. I couldn't stay with him. What's the matter with your jaw?"

"The blighter's head!" Freddy Farmer muttered. "We connected violently. Say, Dave! Those beggars had knives. There's one! And there's the other. Phew! Wicked-looking things, aren't they?"

The English youth had stooped down and retrieved two knives out of the gutter. In the bad light Dave and Freddy saw that they were mates. Each was about seven inches long, razor sharp, and with a needle point. Dave squinted at them and whistled softly.

"You see what I see, Freddy?" he breathed. "They had knives exactly like those at the Commando school! Looks like a couple of thugs stole a couple."

"But as you said, Dave," Freddy cried, "this is New York! I know your underworld characters use machine guns, and such. But do they also go about the streets knifing people to steal their purses?"

Dave didn't reply at once. He stood scowling down at the pair of knives, as cold, clammy chills started rippling up and down his spine. He knew full well that anything can happen in New York City, and usually does in time. But to be knifed for the few dollars he carried, instead of being blackjacked, or held up at the point of a gun, was something that just didn't jell right in his brain. He also was hit by another equally disturbing thought. The light had been so bad, and the action so swift and short lived, he hadn't got so much as a flash glimpse at either of the attackers. But for general build—well, he couldn't help but think of the two hard-faced men back in the hotel dining room.

"I'm nuts, completely nuts!" he chided himself aloud. "It just couldn't have been!"

"What couldn't have been?" Freddy Farmer wanted to know.

"Those two, just now," Dave replied. "I had the flash thought that they might have been that hard-faced pair in the dining room. But they didn't come at us from behind. They were ahead of us. Besides, they left before we did. Well, which of these do you want for a souvenir?"

"Neither," Freddy replied. "I suggest we turn them over to Colonel Welsh. Those are Commando knives, right enough. He might be interested to know that some of your American underworld chaps also carry them."

"Or—" Dave started to say, and then stopped himself with a snort of disgust. "Doggone, but my imagination is going haywire tonight! Must be something I ate."

"You don't think they were underworld beggars?" the English youth demanded. "Good grief! You're not thinking of Nazi agents, are you?"

"Well, I did give it a whirl for a second or two," Dawson confessed with a shrug. "But that's plain silly. No Nazi agents should have any interest in us, right now."

"I don't know about that," Freddy grunted as they started along the street again. "The Gestapo beggars are quite keen about revenge killings, you know. And we've been lucky enough to send a few of them to where they belong in days gone by."

"Okay, Nazi agents!" Dave snorted. "They read those route instructions before we did, and were waiting for us in the dark doorway! See? It doesn't make sense, Freddy. It's all cockeyed to drag Nazi agents into this thing."

"You're right, of course," the English youth murmured. "But all I can say is, praise the good Lord for our Commando training. I'm still shuddering, thinking of one of those things slicing into my hide. And my beggar almost got me, I'll frankly confess."

"Well, mine didn't exactly send me a letter," Dave echoed. "I'm sore we didn't stop them, though. After that scare it would have done me a world of good to go to work on his mug. Well, one thing, and that's final. From now on I'm not going to leave my gun parked in a bureau drawer. Let the public laugh and snicker. If I'd had it, I could have clipped that bird in the leg and brought him down. But, boy! What a pair of broken field runners they were!"

"Let's try and forget about them, if you don't mind," Freddy said with a little shudder. "And let's put on a bit of speed. My nerves never were of the best, you know."

The remark brought a laugh from Dave.

"Listen to him lie, will you!" he cried. "Pal, if your nerves aren't the best I ever came across, then I'm Uncle Bay-Window Goering. But I was just about to suggest, myself, that we get over on Tenth Avenue where there's more light and fewer darkened doorways. Not too fast, though. I've still got some jelly in my knee joints."

The rest of the trip, though, was made without incident or accident. And in due time they were standing in front of a five storied brick building that was Number 697 River Street. The street was dimmed out like all the rest, but it wasn't half so dark as had been Cort Street. Also, there were plenty of people passing by on the sidewalks. They stared up at the building front in silence for a moment. It showed only one lighted room, and that was on the third floor.

"Well let's go up the steps and push Mr. Brown's bell button," Dave eventually grunted. "There's an entryway light there, so we should be able to find it. Let's go."

They went up the stone steps to the small outer foyer that contained a double row of bell buttons. They found the one that had "Brown" printed on the plate card, and Dave stabbed it with his thumb. They didn't hear the ring inside, and for a couple of minutes they stood there just waiting.

"Give it another go, Dave," Freddy suggested.

Dawson lifted his hand, but froze it in mid-air as the shadow of a figure appeared on the other side of the door. There was the sound of a locking bolt being shot, and a key being turned. Then the door was pulled inward to reveal the figure on the other side. Both Dave and Freddy gulped and stared. Standing in the lighted doorway was a Sergeant of infantry, complete with side-arms. The Sergeant flashed them both a searching look, then stepped back, opening the door wider.

"Come in, sirs," he said. "And follow me, please."

CHAPTER THREE

Eastward To War

For a long minute Dave and Freddy just stood there and stared at the infantry Sergeant as though he were something escaped from a museum. Then they snapped out of their collective trance and stepped in through the door. It was then that Freddy let the question pop off his lips before he could stop it.

"Is Colonel Welsh here, Sergeant?" he asked.

The non-commissioned officer looked at him with a faint puzzled frown.

"Colonel Welsh, sir?" he echoed. Then, shaking his head, "No, sir. There's no Colonel Welsh here. My orders are to take you to Major Barber. Follow me, please."

The two flying aces exchanged looks, shrugged, and then followed the Sergeant up the stairs. On the landing of the third floor the Sergeant turned right along a hallway and finally came to a stop in front of the fifth door down on the right. He motioned politely for Dave and Freddy to wait, then knocked and went inside.

"I don't think I like this, Dave!" Freddy whispered when they were left alone. "You heard him say that Colonel Welsh wasn't here. What the devil do you suppose is up?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dawson replied with a scowl. "I'm beginning to suspect, though, that it's something very hush-hush. I still wish I hadn't left my service gun in the hotel. Here, Freddy. I'm probably acting silly, but you never can tell."

As Dave spoke the last he fished out one of the Commando knives and slipped it into Freddy Farmer's hand. The English youth took it without a word and let it slide into his pocket out of sight.

"Think we're foolish to wait here, Dave?" he breathed a moment later. "After what's happened tonight, we may be simply asking for more trouble. It's certainly a mixed up mess."

"Plenty screwy," Dave grunted with a nod. "But I'm a curious cuss. And I'm just sore enough to follow this whole cockeyed business through to the end. But keep on guard, Freddy. Back to back, pal, and so forth."

"Quite!" Freddy grated, and hunched his shoulders as though to get himself set to spring at a split second's notice.

Another minute, and the door opened and the Sergeant reappeared. He pulled the door wide, stood to one side and motioned for the two air aces to enter. They stepped through into a plainly furnished outer office. The Sergeant closed the door, walked past them and opened a door on the right.

"In there, sirs," he said. "Major Barber is waiting."

"And just who is Major Barber?" Freddy Farmer demanded, and didn't move.

The Sergeant started to grin but cut it off instantly.

"He'll tell you, sir," he said. "Go in, please."

The two youths hesitated a fraction of a second longer; then by mutual accord they stepped through the second door and into a smaller office. It contained a desk, a few chairs, a filing cabinet or two, and a lone picture of President Roosevelt on the wall. Seated at the desk was an iron gray-haired Major in the uniform of infantry staff. He smiled and rose from his chair as they entered.

"Evening, Captains Dawson and Farmer," he said, and extended his hand. "Glad to see you here. Sit down, both of you."

The two youths shook hands with him, and then settled themselves in chairs. The Major reseated himself and rearranged a few papers on his desk. Dave watched him closely, and spun his brain in an effort to try and figure out just what the picture was this time. Presently the Major looked up and gave them both a quizzical smile.

"Of course you're not wondering anything, are you?" he asked with a faint chuckle. "Any trouble on the way down here?"

Dave stiffened slightly. Things began to click a little in his head. He gave the senior officer a long searching look.

"No, not a thing, Major," he lied quietly. Then with a little gesture of one hand, "Should something have happened?"

That seemed to please the Major, for he grinned broadly. A moment later he took a card from his pocket and passed it across the desk.

"Time to unmask, I guess," he said. "There's my identification. You can both relax. Sorry things had to be so mysterious, but that's the way we have to work sometimes."

Dave took the card and held it so Freddy Farmer could see it also. He took one look, gulped, and shot a quick glance at the grinning man in infantry staff uniform. The card, which contained a small picture, plus a left thumb print, stated that the holder was one Major E. J. Barber, officer in charge of all Commando units in training in the United States. It was signed by General Marshall, and also by Colonel Welsh.

The name was suddenly very familiar to Dave, but he couldn't place it exactly for a moment. Freddy Farmer beat him to it.

"I say!" he gasped. "Major Barber! Of course! You served originally with the British, sir. You helped build the original British Commando force. You won the Military Cross, and the Distinguished Service Order for those first Commando raids on Occupied Norway. And now—?"

Freddy stopped as though embarrassed at blurting out so much. The senior officer widened his grin and nodded.

"You've unmasked me, Farmer," he said. "That's right. And now that Uncle Sam is in it, I'm fighting under my own country's flag. But that's just the same as fighting under England's flag. From now on the two countries are going to become more and more like one big country, I think. Well, satisfied with my identity now, eh?"

Dave gravely handed back the card, and looked at the man.

"So it was a test?" he murmured, and placed the captured Commando knife on the desk with his other hand. "Do I feel a sap! That idea never even occurred to me. But they were as near the real thing as I ever hope to see. Thank goodness I wasn't carrying side-arms!"

"Eh?" Freddy Farmer ejaculated, pop-eyed. "A test...? Good grief! You mean those two chaps who had a go at us tonight? But I say—!"

The English-born air ace couldn't go on. He stopped abruptly and shook his head in stunned bewilderment. And as though his brain didn't realize what his hand was doing, he took out his own Commando knife and placed it on the table beside Dave's. Major Barber picked them both up and gently tapped the needle points against a fingernail as he looked admiringly at the two youths.

"Check and double check," he finally said. "That's just what happened. And I might add, you almost caused two of my best men to resign from the Commando service, or the Rangers, as it will become known as time goes on. Tonight was the first time that either of them had lost their knives. They were on the phone just a few minutes before you arrived. They declared that if there were any more like you two I wanted tested, I'd have to get somebody else. In fact, they begged me for a couple of days' leave to rest up from the rough going over you gave them. My congratulations!"

"Thanks, sir," Dave mumbled as he suddenly had a funny feeling in the stomach. "Holy smoke! If I'd been able to keep my grip on my man, I'm afraid I'd have broken his arm right off, and probably his neck. But a test! Why? I mean—that is—well, you do this sort of thing often, sir? I mean—"

Dave stopped and floundered about for suitable words. The Major tossed the two knives on the desk and leaned forward.

"Not every day, Dawson," he said quietly. "But often enough. Let me explain. As yet our Commando units are not organized or completely whipped into shape for action as all-American units. Some, however, who have gone through the training have shown that they are as good as they'll ever be, short of actual experience against the enemy. Those men we pick out and send across to get that actual service with operating British Commando units. With that action experience under their belts, they make fine instructors for the units we are sending over to England for final polishing up."

The Major paused to catch his breath and clear his throat.

"Each man selected for immediate active service is ordered to report to me here," he continued presently. "He does not know that he is reporting for Commando duty, so the last thing he's thinking of is an attack upon his person here in New York City. That way I can tell for sure if he is the man that I want to send across in advance of the regular Commando forces. My two men, both of whom have seen actual Commando service with me, carry out the test and report to me. Up until tonight they rather enjoyed their work. They're tough, and they can take a lot of punishment. But it seems you two gave them a little extra to take tonight."

As the senior officer paused, both Dave and Freddy continued to sit silent and motionless. To tell the truth, their brains were spinning just a little too much to make comment possible. But in a few seconds Freddy managed to unhinge his tongue.

"So—so we're going across for Commando duty, sir?" he blurted out. "But I thought this Commando training was just a—well, a stopover between jobs Colonel Welsh had for us. I—"

"Hold everything, Farmer!" Major Barber laughed, and held up a hand. "I know you two are airmen, and it's the air where you shine the best. But—well, this is a bit different from my regular procedure. You're not going across as strictly Commando material. No, that's not right, either. You'll be all Commando. Don't worry about that. But in addition, there'll be an extra little assignment for you two to carry out."

"Sounds interesting, sir," Dave said eagerly, as the other paused. "What's the extra little assignment?"

The smile faded from Major Barber's face, and he shook his head vigorously.

"No soap, Dawson," he said. "You're not going to find that out right now. In fact, not until after you have arrived in England. And incidentally, you're leaving for England tonight."

Coming right on top of everything else that had happened, the Major's last statement brought both boys up straight in their chairs. They exchanged wide-eyed glances, and then focussed their gaze on the senior officer again.

"Leaving for England tonight?" Freddy Farmer echoed breathlessly. "I say! That's wonderful! Positively marvelous!"

"Figured it might please you, Farmer," Major Barber said with a smile. "Yes, all *three* of us are leaving for England tonight. You'll have me for company, if you can stand it, as far as Botwood, in Newfoundland. An Army bomber is waiting at Mitchel Field for us right now. At Botwood, though, we'll part company. At Botwood you two will get further orders."

The Commando chief paused for a moment and stared thoughtfully down at the desk top. Eventually he raised his eyes and gave a little half shrug.

"I don't want you two to be too much in the dark," he said slowly, "so I'll tell you that this show, if carried out successfully, will have a marked bearing on whether or not the United Nations open up that second front that everybody is yelling their heads off about. And—take it as a sincere compliment, if you wish—a good chunk of that success is going to rest on your youthful shoulders."

"Well, that clears up everything, sir," Dave said with a grin. "Now we know what this is *all* about."

"Stop fishing, Dawson," Major Barber chuckled at him. "It won't do you the least bit of good. Not that I don't trust you two as much as I'd trust my own father and mother. But that's not the point. As we all know, the fewer who know about a surprise, the more of a surprise it is. And I definitely want this little business to *be* a surprise to Hitler and his bunch of cutthroats. So until the time is ripe, nobody is being told a thing about anything."

Grave and serious as the conversation was, Dave couldn't stop the smile that tugged at his lips. The Major spotted it and cocked an eyebrow.

"Something strike you funny, Dawson?" he asked.

"No, not funny, sir," Dave replied instantly. Then with a flash side glance at Freddy's intent and grave face, he went on, "I agree with you that it's best to wait until the time is right for final instructions. Besides snoring something terrible, Farmer, here, often talks in his sleep."

It was just the thing needed to ease the mounting tension. Major Barber burst into gales of laughter, and Freddy Farmer practically shot straight up out of his seat, and turned all the colors of the rainbow. Dave put out a protective hand.

"Take it easy, pal!" he cried. "I've got a witness to anything you do. Better wait until we're alone."

The red remained in Freddy's cheeks, but he made no move toward Dave. He simply regarded him with scorn, rather like something the cat had dragged in. Then he looked at Major Barber.

"Your two test men gave you a complete report on tonight's little affair, sir?" he asked. "They told you everything?"

The senior officer blinked, and stared at Freddy as though trying to find out what was behind the words.

"Why, yes, I believe so," he said. "But was there something they left out?"

Freddy looked at Dave with friendly pity in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dave," he said quietly. "I know I promised, but—well, that last remark from you deserves the punishment of the truth. Sorry, and all that. But you asked for it, old man."

"Say, what is this?" Major Barber demanded, leaning forward. "What truth about Dawson?"

"Then they didn't tell you that part, sir?" Freddy Farmer murmured. "That it was Dawson who threw himself flat to the sidewalk and screamed for the police while I battled those two chaps?"

"Ouch!" Dave cried, and clapped a hand to his forehead. "Will I never learn to keep my big mouth shut!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Next Stop, England!

Grey skies covered the world from north to south, and from east to west. Standing on the tarmac of the now world famous Botwood field, from which countless planes had been flown by unsung air heroes to eagerly awaiting pilots on the other side of the Atlantic, Dave and Freddy tugged their flying suit collars a bit tighter and looked at each other, bright-eyed.

"Some sight, hey, pal?" Dave grunted, and swept a hand toward the array of war planes of all descriptions that lined all four sides of the field. "It would kind of make Adolf feel sick, if he could

get a look at that bunch."

"He'll hear them, if not see them, soon enough!" Freddy replied with emphasis. "And I hope I'll be in one of them that's right over his head. I say! What beastly weather, though!"

"This?" Dave echoed, and looked at him in surprise. "Why, I should think it would make you feel homesick. I've seen plenty of weather just like this on your tea-drinking island. Holy smoke! Every time the sun comes out in England, you birds don't know what it is that's happened for the first couple of minutes. What's the matter, pal? Down in the dumps because you've been hooked for a bit of possible action?"

"No, not a bit of it," Freddy sighed. "Just the usual unhappy feeling. Man! How I'd love to be given a war assignment without having to worry about you being along to probably mess up the whole business! But I suppose that's the cross I must bear."

"You'll bear a punch in the nose, if you don't look out!" Dave growled. "But, kidding aside, I wonder what comes next? Major Barber dropped us like hotcakes the minute we arrived in that Army bomber. Told us to go get breakfast, and have a look around. Well, we've been doing that for a couple of hours now. Me, I could do with those further orders he was talking about."

"Me, too," Freddy said with a nod. "But I fancy he'll get around to it when he's good and ready. This isn't the first time we've been kept in the dark as to what things were all about."

"Nor will it be the last!" Dave grunted. "But I don't blame the Major a bit. In this war you can tell a secret to the Sphinx, and first thing you know it's all over town. But that Major Barber is a good guy. And plenty! Me for him, any day in the week. I'll wait, if he says so."

"Nice of you," Freddy chuckled. "You blasted well will, and jolly well like it, too, my fine friend."

"Okay, okay!" Dave growled. "I was only pointing out—Oh, skip it! What type bomber would you like to go across in, Freddy? There're all makes here."

"Any one of them, it doesn't matter," Freddy replied, "just so long as it gets me to England, and soon. I say! Have a look at those two transports coming in to land! They don't plan to ferry those big things across empty, do they? I don't see any stores of equipment laying around here waiting for transportation across."

Dave didn't reply for a moment. He stared at the two huge Curtiss-built troop transports that were circling the field and coming around into the landing wind.

"Those aren't new jobs waiting to be ferried places," he grunted after a moment or two. "They've seen service. They're not right off the factory assembly line. They're—Well, what do you know!"

Dave breathed the last as one of the two planes touched ground and braked to a gentle stop. The fuselage doors opened and U. S. Commando-garbed troops started pouring out. The second transport landed and started unloading its cargo of fighting Commandos. There were forty-five in each plane, complete with equipment, and looking as though they were ready to land on the French side of the English Channel any time the whistle was blown.

"Which means we're going to have company on the ride across, I guess," Dave spoke again. "Some of the boys who also passed Major Barber's little check test with flying colors. Let's go over and see if any of them were in training with us. I think I recognize a couple of them from here."

"Right you are," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Let's go over and see."

They hadn't taken more than a dozen steps apiece, however, before a headquarters orderly came running up to them.

"The Field Commandant wants you to report to his office at once, Captains," the orderly informed them. "It's over there at that corner of the field."

"I see it, and thanks," Dave answered for both of them. "On the way, now."

Inside the field office, they found Major Barber seated with Colonel Stickney, Commandant of the field. He smiled at them and pointed at a couple of empty chairs.

"Were you beginning to think I had forgotten about you two?" the Major asked. "Have a chair, and relax. Colonel Stickney, here, will give you your further orders."

The two youths seated themselves and looked respectfully at the Field Commandant. Colonel Stickney was the kind of a man who brushed formalities aside and got right down to brass tacks. Maybe that's one reason why he was one of the most able officers in the U. S. Army Air forces.

"You two are taking off at ten o'clock tonight," he said. "You're not going across with the ferry bombers or troop transports, however. I've got two Lockheed P-Thirty-Eights that are waiting to be delivered in England. You'll each take one of them. For the crossing extra gas tanks have been fitted. As you both probably know, we've been ferrying pursuits across, as well as bombers, for several weeks now. They fly without guns, or ammo, and have extra tanks fitted. You drop the extra tanks into the sea when you've used up their fuel. Naturally, you switch them in first so's to be carrying less weight on the last half of your trip."

The Colonel paused and stared down at his fingers for a moment or two.

"You saw those two Commando transports that just sat down?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, "Well, those troops are being carried across in the ferry bomber flight that'll take off before you do. Your P-Thirty-Eights make faster time, of course, so the take-off times will be set so that you'll catch up with the flight of ferry bombers a hundred miles or so this side of Ireland. Obviously, it will be part of your job to escort them along the final lap to Land's End, England."

The Colonel paused again and caught the look the two youths quickly exchanged. He grinned faintly.

"No, it's not going to be like that in your case," he said bluntly. "Your P-Thirty-Eights will be armed to the hilt. I hope you won't have to use your guns, though!"

Dave looked at him and leaned forward a bit.

"You have reason to believe that we might, sir?" he asked quietly.

The senior officer shrugged and plucked at his lower lip.

"No, I haven't," he said after a long pause. "Anything can happen in this cockeyed war, however. As I said, those Commando troops you just now saw climb from those transports are going across to the other side by air. It will be the first time that ferry bombers have taken troops across in any numbers. Tonight's trip may prove to be the beginning of transporting troops to Europe by air. To date, and contrary to general belief, not one single plane that's been ferried from here to the other side has been lost due to enemy air action. However, as in all things, there has to be a beginning sometime."

Colonel Stickney stopped talking and nodded his head for emphasis.

"The taking of those Commando troops out there to England has been kept as much of a secret as is humanly possible to keep a secret," he said at length. "Right now, not one of them knows that he's going across by bomber tonight. That doesn't mean a thing, though. The Nazis may be women and children killers, but they are no fools. They're every bit as smart as we are, and don't let anybody kid you they aren't. For that reason there is *no* reason to believe that they haven't found out about this little thing we're trying tonight. Fact is, I'm assuming that they have found out. That's why you two are acting as escort for the ferry ships. In short, in case some Occupied France-based Nazi planes come out to smash up our aerial convoy. If any do, then it will be up to you to see they don't get to first base. You understand?"

Dave nodded, but Freddy Farmer looked puzzled.

"Get to first base, sir?" he echoed. "Where's that base located?"

The other three suppressed their laughter, but they couldn't help smiling at Freddy's innocent inquiry.

"An American baseball expression, Farmer," Colonel Stickney explained. "I mean, it's up to you two to see that any Nazi raiding planes don't even get a chance to get close enough for action. Get it, now?"

"Oh, quite, and sorry, sir," Freddy said, and blushed.

"Think nothing of it, Farmer," the other said kindly. "Yank slang is a language all its own. Takes time to learn it. And when you have, the next generation below you is talking an even different jargon. But that's the American kid for you. Well, if you've got it all straight, and there are no questions, I guess that's all I have to say. Are there any questions? You'll be given flight charts and flight signals to use en route later, of course."

"All clear to me, sir," Dave spoke up.

"Quite, sir," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Can't say I hope you get your wish, though, sir."

"Huh? What's that?" the Field Commandant demanded.

"I mean, that we won't have to use our guns," Freddy replied with a smile. "A bit of Nazi action at the end of the trip would suit me fine. Successful action from our point of view, of course."

"Check, and how!" Dave breathed before he could stop his tongue.

Colonel Stickney tried to give them the hard eye and stern face, but found it too difficult.

"Knowing of the air records of you two," he grunted, "I'm not surprised to hear that from you. Just the same, I hope you *don't* have to use your guns, either of you. It'll be a mighty big responsibility you'll be flying with tonight, Captains. Don't either of you forget that for a single instant!"

"Quite, sir," Freddy said evenly, and there was no twinkle in his eye now.

"Also, check," Dave grunted, and meant it.

The senior officer glanced at his watch and nodded.

"That's all, then," he said. "Captain Jones, the Field Flight Officer, will show you the two planes you're to fly. Better look him up and test hop the two ships to make sure they're in condition for

the ocean hop. And in case I don't see either of you again, good luck, both here, and on the other side. I'll be keeping my eye on the communiqués."

The two youths thanked him, saluted, and went outside.

"Well, we're going to England," Dave said when they were alone and walking along the edge of the field. "We know that much for sure, anyway."

"Right you are!" Freddy cried happily, and did a little jig to express his feelings further. "Home to dear old England. I can hardly wait...."

"For a pot of that dish water you call tea!" Dave interrupted with a laugh. "Well, there's the Atlantic out there, pal. You can start swimming right now, if you want."

"I don't," Freddy snapped. "The blinking Navy can have the water. I'll take the air. But I wasn't fooling in there, Dave. I really do hope we meet up with a couple of Nazi beggars in Messerschmitts."

"And they call the Germans blood-thirsty!" Dave jeered good-naturedly. "What a guy! One minute he's singing songs of his dear old homeland, and the next he's saying how he hopes to knock off a brace of Germans on the way. You want everything, don't you?"

"Very much so!" the English-born ace cracked at him. "Particularly if it's Nazi pilots and observers. I want all I can get of those dirty blighters."

"Well, I guess I'm with you there, pal," Dave chuckled. "The fewer Germans I can leave living in this world, the better I'll like it. Well, let's go hunt up this Captain Jones and get a look at those two winged babies we've got dates with tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Man's Wings

A thin pale line of light marked where the eastern horizon met the night sky. Settled comfortably in the pit of his Lockheed P-Thirty-Eight, Dave Dawson nodded his head and half raised his free hand in a form of salute.

"Greetings, dawn," he murmured. "Nice to see that you're with us again. Now if you'll just brighten up enough to let me make sure that that really is Freddy's plane off my left wing, then everything will be pretty okay."

For a little under six hours he had been driving the Lockheed across the cold grey waters of the North Atlantic with only the dark of night, the stars, and an occasional blink of Freddy Farmer's navigation lights for companionship. The take-off at Botwood, and the flight up to now, had been totally without incident or accident. Now, though, dawn was coming up in the east. The light of a new day was spreading across the face of a war-torn world. And in time of war no man can tell what the new day may bring for himself, or for anybody else, for that matter.

"But we should be overtaking the ferry bombers soon," he grunted the thought aloud. "And at least that will be something to break the monotony. Boy! I sure take my hat off to the ferry pilots. Night after night, tooling planes across to England, with nothing to do but sit and let her ride the air. Personally, I'd go nuts. But—Ah, there you are, Freddy, old pal. It really has been you all the time."

He spoke the last as sufficient dawn light spread up out of the east to permit him a good look at the other P-Thirty-Eight that was keeping pace on the left. The two air aces waved to each other, and waggled wings in salute. But neither of them spoke over the radio, for that was the one fixed rule of ferry flying across the North Atlantic. Maintain radio silence at all times, and keep it! Too many Nazi stations were open and waiting to pick up ferry plane radio signals and take a cross bearing on their exact position, and send out their shore-based long range fighters to reduce the number of planes that were heading for England.

And so the two youths simply saluted each other silently, and drew in to closer formation—where they could make faces at each other, and go through the kind of gestures that only airmen understand. After a few minutes of that long distance horseplay, however, they tired of it. And both of them concentrated on searching the brightening skies ahead for their first glimpse of the bombers being ferried over. It wasn't long before Freddy Farmer's eagle eyes scored another "first."

Dave saw him waggle his wings vigorously and point ahead and a bit to the left. He looked in that direction, and just when his straining eyes were about to smart and water he saw the cluster of black dots outlined against the light in the east. He counted them, and heaved a little impulsive sigh of relief when they totalled twenty-one. Twenty-one bombers had taken off from Botwood. He stared at the dots, watched them grow larger and take on their rightful outlines, and wondered in which one Major Barber was riding. He didn't wonder in which ones the advance contingent of Commandos was riding, because he knew that. Every one of the ferry bombers had

some of the Commandos aboard.

"And it's up to me and Freddy to see that they reach England in good shape," he grunted aloud. "Well, no reason why we can't see that they do just that. The way I feel now, I'm set to tackle a couple of dozen long range Nazi fighters. And Freddy must feel the same. So that makes a total of forty-eight we could take care of nicely, and I doubt that Goering would send out more than that number. Hold it, kid! Are you trying to get a little vocal cord exercise, or are you trying to prove to yourself you're quite a hot pilot? Why not shut up and tend to your knitting, and let come what will come?"

With a tight grin and a nod for emphasis, he continued flying toward the group of ferry bombers. Presently he wagged his wings at Freddy and signalled with his free hand. The English youth answered with a nod of his head, and the pair took up escort positions above and to the rear of the twenty-one planes winging down the home stretch to England.

Some twenty minutes ticked past, and suddenly Freddy Farmer came swerving in sharply toward Dave's plane. As Dave saw his pal cut in, the back of his neck started to tingle, and his heart started to pound a little harder against his ribs. He knew at once the reason for Freddy's sudden maneuver, but as he swept the dawn-tinted skies ahead with his eyes he was unable to spot anything to justify it. But that didn't stop the tingling at the back of his neck, nor the increased pounding of his heart. Freddy, of course, had sighted enemy aircraft, and that he couldn't see them didn't mean that Freddy was all wet.

Anyway, he stopped peering at the skies ahead and looked at Freddy swinging in to wingtip nearness. Across the short stretch of air space that separated them he saw the flush of excitement in Freddy's face, and he imagined that he could see the bright, brittle light of battle in his pal's eyes. Freddy had shoved open his "greenhouse" and was sticking an arm up through the opening and pointing wildly ahead and a degree or two to the south.

Dave squinted in that direction, and squinted hard. But all he got for his efforts was an ache in his eyes. He could see absolutely nothing but the advance glare of the new sun that was racing up out of the east. True, his imagination caused him to "see" all sorts of other things. But he had only to brush a hand across his eyes, or blink, and the "other things" wouldn't be there any more.

Then, suddenly, he saw them!

Three moving dots, so low down that they were practically in line with the horizon, and completely backgrounded by the yellowish orange rays of the coming sun. The instant he spotted them he pinned them in his vision, and breathlessly waited for the moment when they would take on sufficient outline for him to tell their type. On impulse he bent his lips to the flap mike to ask Freddy the obvious question. But he checked himself in time, and spoke not a word. Radio silence had been the order. And radio silence it had to be, even if the whole darn Nazi Luftwaffe was tearing out for a crack at the ferry bombers.

"They could be R.A.F. planes headed out to give us a hand with the escorting," he murmured.

Even as he spoke the words, however, he knew that he was simply whistling in the dark. If it had been decided for R.A.F. planes to fly out from England and meet them, they would have been informed of that fact before leaving Botwood. No, those three dots weren't R.A.F. planes. So there was only one answer. They were Nazi long range fighters, and Colonel Stickney's words about German Intelligence not being stupid were bearing fruit. Word of this ferry bomber-Commando aerial convoy to England had reached German ears. And there were three Nazi planes tearing out to do something drastic about it.

For a moment or two Dave took his eyes off the three dots rushing up out of the dawn light and glanced at the bomber formation prop-clawing toward England. Ice coated his heart, and his throat became dry and tight. Twenty-one bombers heading for England, unarmed. Twenty-one bombers, each of which carried its crew *and* a certain number of highly trained Yank Commandos!

"And it's up to Freddy and me to see that they get there!" Dave muttered grimly.

In the next instant a wave of blazing anger swept through him. What did Colonel Stickney think Freddy and he were? A whole confounded fighter squadron? It wasn't fair to give them complete charge of such an important aerial convoy. More fighter pilots should have been sent along to help them out, just in case. Doggone it! What did they think Freddy and he were? Cats with nine lives apiece? Darn it...!

The wave of anger vanished just as quickly as it came. A cold calmness took charge of Dave, and he deliberately reached up his free hand and twisted the ring on his electric trigger button to "Fire." Then he turned his head and glanced over at Freddy. A set grin was on the English youth's face, and as their eyes met Freddy lifted his right hand with the fingers closed and the thumb sticking straight up. Dave nodded and returned the thumbs up sign.

"After all, there're only three of them," he grunted, and switched his gaze back to the advancing dots. "If Freddy and I can't handle three of the tramps, then we just don't belong!"

The dots were no longer dots. They had taken on definite shape and outlines. And they were as Dave expected them to be, three long range Messerschmitt One-Tens. At that very instant the two wing planes broke away from the center plane to opposite sides, and took up positions for a

three direction attack on the ferry bomber formation. Dave shot out his hand and shoved the throttles of the P-Thirty-Eight's Allison engines wide open. Then he eased the nose up a hair, and with Freddy right at his wingtip he went streaking up over the ferry bombers and straight for the center Messerschmitt.

Not a word, of course, had been spoken between them. But there was no need for words. Too often had they tackled three enemy planes in spread out line formation not to know exactly what should be done, and to do it instinctively. And so, wingtip to wingtip, they slammed straight at the center Messerschmitt as though it were the only enemy craft in the air, and they were bent on its immediate destruction.

When they were still a ways from it they both opened fire and sliced a shower of hissing bullets across the sky. If they got any lucky shots into the center Messerschmitt, they didn't know. But hitting it was not their big idea. On the contrary, they counted on exactly what happened. The pilot of the center Messerschmitt didn't like the idea of two P-Thirty-Eights boring in at him. He started to return the fire, then lost heart and slammed down in a sharp dive.

But even before the German broke away from the fight, Dave and Freddy were completing the rest of their maneuver. Like streaks of greased lightning, each whirled off to his side and went thundering in for a broadside attack on the two other Messerschmitts about to close with the helpless ferry bomber formation. Maybe the pilots of those two Nazi planes figured that they had actually remained hidden in the rays of the dawn sun. Maybe they figured that Dave and Freddy had decided to make sure of at least one victim, and pray the other two would miss the bombers and over-shoot and have to come back. In fact, maybe those Nazi pilots figured a lot of things. The point is, though, they figured all wrong. For a couple of moments they had a chance at the bombers that was as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. But in the next they had a couple of flying wild men on their necks.

The impulse to twist around and see how Freddy was making out with his man was strong in Dave as he went cutting in at his victim with all guns blazing. Naturally, though, he didn't dare take out even that small amount of time. Even if Freddy and he got their respective Messerschmitts there was still a third boiling around some place in the sky. And so he tore in savagely, and thrilled with wild joy as he saw his tracers cutting into the Messerschmitt from its two spinning props clear back to the double-finned tail. The Nazi gunner-observer returned his fire, and the pilot tried to whip around and into the clear. For all the good it did him he might just as well have climbed out and tried to walk the dawn sky back to Germany.

The Messerschmitt seemed suddenly to fly smack into an invisible brick wall in the sky. The plane fell off sharply to the right, and came way up by the nose. For a brief instant it hovered there in the air. Then red flame belched out from the two underslung Benz-Daimler engines, and in the next split second the whole business was just a mass of fire slithering down toward the rolling grey-green swells of the North Atlantic.

"Save a seat for Hitler, where you're going!" Dave yelled as he pulled his P-Thirty-Eight up and around. "He'll be joining you before very long. And—"

The rest died in his throat, and his heart seemed to zoom up and jam against his back teeth. It was at that moment that he saw Freddy Farmer's plane flip-flopping and half spinning down out of the sky as though either it were completely out of control—or its pilot were dead. And thundering down with blazing guns after Freddy were the two other Messerschmitts.

"No, no, it can't happen!" Dave sobbed wildly, and whirled off his climb and down into a dive. "Freddy boy! What happened? They didn't get you! *They didn't get you!*"

Those and other words of anguish spilled off his lips as he hammered his Lockheed down in a wing-screaming dive. So great was his excitement, and so great the terror that clutched at his heart, he failed to see that Nazi bullets weren't coming very close to Freddy's plane. As a matter of fact, the Germans were shooting half-heartedly. With the Lockheed headed straight for the North Atlantic, they figured that the finish of their victim was inevitable.

But they hadn't figured on Dave, nor the terrific diving speed of his plane. As a result the "fun" for one of them was short-lived. Though his heart shed tears of blood for Freddy Farmer, Dave's grip on the controls was rock steady, and his eye to the ring sight keen and sharp. A two second burst from his guns was all that was needed. A longer burst would have been sheer waste of ammunition. The Nazi's wing came off as though hacked clean by a knife. What was left spun like so much stiff paper tossed into a whirlpool, and then broke up in a shower of flying wreckage.

One Nazi less, but what of it? Freddy was but a couple of hundred feet from the water now, and still flip-flopping helplessly downward with the remaining German pecking away at him. Stark reality was like white hot knives twisting about in Dave's heart and in his brain. Tears flooded his eyes, and he unconsciously hammered his free fist against the already wide open throttles.

"Dear God, please no!" he sobbed. "Don't take Freddy. Don't take Freddy away. I need him! England needs him. The whole decent part of the world needs him. Please don't...!"

Dave never finished the last, for at that exact instant a miracle seemed to take place right before his startled eyes. Freddy Farmer's plane stopped flip-flopping and spinning around abruptly. As though someone had reached down and stopped it, the Lockheed came up onto even keel. But it did much more than that! It came up past even keel and on up into a power zoom. Its guns

yammered out sound and flame, and perhaps for the infinitesimal part of a split second the pilot of the third and last Messerschmitt was the most stunned and bewildered man in the whole wide world.

But only for that flash of time. In practically nothing flat he was no longer capable of thought, and less of action. He was just a dead man hunched over the controls of a diving plane—that is, the bullet-shattered wreckage of a diving plane. Before he had had the chance to blink or move a muscle, Freddy Farmer had pinned him cold to the dawn sky. And, not a little bewildered himself, Dave saw the Messerschmitt fall apart in mid-air, and Freddy Farmer, grinning from ear to ear, come tearing up past him and level off the top of his zoom. Automatically, Dave pulled up out of his own dive and swung around to join Freddy Farmer. The English-born air ace was still grinning, and he was holding up one hand, forming an "O" with thumb and forefinger, and extending the other three straight upward. Dave gaped at him a moment longer, and then shook his head to drive the cobwebs and mist away.

"So, just another Freddy Farmer trick!" he growled, and shook a fist at the English youth. "I might have known that you were simply slipping out of a tight jam. And to think I was beginning to pray for you—you bum!"

Freddy, of course, didn't hear the words, but he saw Dave's moving lips, and probably guessed what they were saying. His mouth opened in silent laughter, and he made a gesture with one hand, which was just the same as his lips saying:

"Weren't getting worried, were you, old chap?"

CHAPTER SIX

Nazi Wrath

Like so many huge birds of prey coming home to roost, the twenty-one ferry bombers slid down to a landing on the R.A.F. field at Land's End at the southwest tip of England, and went trundling over to the tarmac line and the waiting mechanics. When the last had touched earth, Dave and Freddy cut their throttles and slid down also. They landed together and taxied that way up to the line. When he reached it Dave cut his ignition, climbed out and hurried stiff-legged over to Freddy's plane.

"What was the big idea of giving me such a case of heart failure?" he demanded of his pal. "Holy smoke! That little business took fifteen years off my life, if it took a day. In future, don't do that to me, see?"

Freddy legged down and pulled off his helmet and goggles.

"You think I was just having sport?" he snorted. "Far from it, my lad. I missed my man completely. A blasted good pilot he was, too. Next thing I knew two of them had me all wrapped up and were ready to send me some place I had no fancy to go to. Much, much too close for comfort, so the only thing I could do was fake being hit and spin the bus downward. That at least threw off their aim a bit. And when I pulled out and up in the last second, they were—"

Freddy paused and grinned broadly.

"Well, the remaining blighter was too surprised to do anything about stopping me," he said. "But thanks for taking care of that other beggar. I might not have surprised both of them. Fact is, I fancy you saved my life again, old thing. I'm grateful."

"You should get tossed in the duck pond for giving me such a scare!" Dave growled, but softened it with a grin. "Well, here's England. Aren't you going to drop down and kiss the ground, or something? *This* is England, Freddy!"

The English youth smiled, and there were stars in his eyes.

"Yes, England again," he whispered softly. "How wonderful to return to it from uncivilized lands where they eat raw things and call them hot dogs, and talk through their teeth, and drive ninety miles an hour even to funerals! Yes, blessed England! It's like being reborn. Like—like—"

"Like waking up from a beautiful dream!" Dave snapped, and waved a hand at the sky that was now overcast. "See? No sun over here! And just thirty minutes off shore we had plenty of it. What have the weather gods got against you English guys, anyway?"

Freddy didn't have time to think up a kidding come-back for that one. They both turned at the sound of footsteps behind them, and saw Major Barber hurrying over toward them. The Commando Chief was grinning from ear to ear, and he looked as if he wanted to hug and kiss them both. He didn't, however. Instead, he grabbed each in turn by the hand and nearly shook his arm off at the shoulder socket.

"I hope some day it will be my chance to return that little favor of life saving!" he cried. "And that goes for everybody aboard the ferry bombers. I had a front seat, and what you two did sure was something to see. You seemed to have a little trouble, Farmer. Hey! You didn't get wounded, did

you?"

"Him?" Dave snorted before Freddy could even shake his head. "The Nazis haven't made that bullet yet. No, sir. He just wanted to show you how fancy he could get when there're Messerschmitts around. I've just been telling him that if he pulls that on me again, I'll probably shoot him down myself. But it was pretty cute, wasn't it, Major? He should be given his wings any day now, I say. Practically a fighter pilot."

"Don't mind Dawson, sir," Freddy spoke up. "He's always that way. Pretty cool in a fight, but when it's all over he simply goes to pieces and says the craziest things. No, I wasn't hit, fortunately. I had a close call, though, and had to do a little something extra to get out of it. We're all here, though. And that's that!"

"And it's plenty!" Major Barber said with a grim nod. "It proves this sort of thing can be done on a large scale. That is—"

The Major paused and grinned.

"That is, if we have fellows like you two along," he added. "Well, stick around for a bit, will you? I've got things to do, but I want to talk to you again. There's the mess shack over there. I guess it won't make either of you mad to take aboard some breakfast, huh?"

"Oh, quite, quite!" Dave mimicked at Freddy. "And, of course, a pot of tea, what, old tin of fruit?"

Freddy Farmer groaned and shook his head, and looked helplessly at Major Barber.

"It's so utterly useless and futile, sir!" he sighed. "I mean the way Dawson murders the King's English. Something really should be done about it. Would you suggest gagging him, sir?"

If the Major replied, nobody heard it. At that moment the air raid siren mounted atop the Operations Office let forth with its blood-curdling wail. Without thinking, both Dave and Freddy spun around and dived for their planes. In nothing flat they were in the pits and rocketing their ships across the field. As Dave pulled his clear and went twisting around and upward, he snapped out of his action trance long enough to look at the fuel gauge. A sigh of relief spilled from his lips when he saw that he still had enough high octane for thirty-five minutes of flying.

"And lots of things can happen in thirty-five minutes!" he shouted aloud.

"Quite!" came the sudden and startling voice of Freddy Farmer over the radio. "And there are the blighters! Off there to the southeast. Fancy they got annoyed when they learned the bombers got through, and decided to have a go at a ground strafe. Tally-ho, Dave! And there's the R.A.F. chaps coming up to join in the fun. But we'll get first cracks at the beggars."

"Sure, but remember about last time!" Dave shouted back at him. "No funny business. Get your man this time, and no fooling around. Okay, kid! Up and at 'em!"

As Dave snouted the last he lifted the nose to a steeper angle, and went wing-screaming up toward a group of ten Nazi long range fighters that were bearing down on the Land's End field. Twisting in the seat, he glanced down back at the swarm of R.A.F. Spitfires and Hurricanes that were racing up off the field. A pleasant warmth surged through his body, and there was a glad song in his heart.

"Just like the old days!" he cried happily. "Flying with the dear old R.A.F. again. Yeah, good! Plenty good!"

As though to echo his words, he heard Freddy Farmer's guns blast away. The leading Nazi plane swerved, then dropped by the nose and started down with one engine smoking badly. Dave grunted and ruddered his P-Thirty-Eight a little to bring his sights to bear on another Nazi plane.

"Okay, first blood for you, Freddy!" he sang out. "But it's my turn, now, and how!"

His words were no crazy boast. They were simply a statement of cold fact. And as his guns started hammering out made-in-America doom, his statement was proved. A second Nazi would-be ground strafers seemed to jump straight up in the air. That is, the fuselage went upward. The wings remained at the lower level for a moment, then went slip-sliding away. The fuselage fell over by the nose and went down like a bomb as two objects popped out of it and soon became a pair of Germans going down by parachute.

The swift double kill obviously took some of the lust for battle away from the other Nazi pilots. The formation swerved this way and that, and then broke up into pairs that made half-hearted passes at the ferry bomber-covered field below. But they all should have stayed home. By then the pilots of the locally based R.A.F. squadrons were in the scrap, and their arrival just about settled things for the Germans. A couple of them did linger around a little longer, but that was very stupid of them. They went down like nailed clay pigeons, while their pals went streaking back across the Channel to their temporary homes in Occupied France.

When Dave and Freddy came down out of the air and landed, an orderly was waiting for them.

"Group Captain Farnsworth wishes to see you two officers at once," he told them.

"Guess breakfast waits, pal." Dave grinned at Freddy. "Let's go. I guess Major Barber is with the Group Captain. I don't see him around any place. So maybe this is it."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't be too sure," Freddy murmured.

Dave looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Nothing, I hope," the English youth grunted. "But I believe I've heard of Group Captain Farnsworth. Very much of a stickler for rules and regulations. And—well, after all, this is an R.A.F. field, you know."

"So what?" Dave demanded as he stared, puzzle-eyed. "What's that got to do with it? Hey! What's eating you, anyway?"

Freddy shrugged and started walking toward the Field Commandant's office.

"Let's go and find out," he said. "I could be wrong, of course."

"You could be nuts!" Dave growled, still mystified. "And I think you are!"

The English youth let that one slide. He simply hunched his shoulders once and walked with Dave over toward the office. They reached it in time, knocked, and went inside when a rasping voice told them to do so. Seated at the desk inside was a heavy-browed, red-headed man in an R.A.F. Group Captain's uniform. The decoration ribbons under his R.A.F. wings showed that this was not the first war he had fought in. And they also showed that he had not exactly kept his feet on solid earth all the time in either war. But his eyes were his outstanding feature. They were like frosted cubes of ice that seemed to melt everything that came into their range of vision. Dave looked into those eyes and gulped a little.

"Captains Dawson and Farmer reporting, sir," he heard his own voice say. "You wished to see us, sir?"

"Blasted right I do!" the words came smashing at him. "Just who the ruddy blue blazes do you think you two are? A little special air force all your own?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

More Orders

Dave was filled with the sudden desire to have the office floor open up and permit him to drop down through out of sight. Those frosted ice cube eyes pinned him in his tracks, and held his own like powerful magnets. He couldn't have turned his head to see Freddy's face if he had wanted to. He gulped and moistened his tongue.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" he managed. "I—"

"Never mind begging my pardon!" the owner of the frosted eyes flung at him. "Just answer my question. Who the devil do you two think you are? Who gave you permission to take off from this field and engage enemy aircraft?"

Dave was too stunned even to begin to think up an answer. Instead, he listened to Freddy Farmer speak for them both.

"I'm afraid we didn't stop to think, sir," the English youth said. "When we heard the alarm siren we simply jumped for our planes. It was like that. I realize we shouldn't have, sir. But—well, I was in the air by that time. And it seemed the right thing to keep on and have a go at the Jerry ships. I'm sorry, sir. We're both sorry, sir."

A touch of sudden anger slashed through Dave, and the words were out of his mouth before he could check them.

"I'm not, sir!" he cried. "I'm never sorry when I get a Nazi, no matter how or where I get him. We saw them coming, and it was our job to do something about it. That's all there was to it!"

The Group Captain stared at Dave and made a solid line with his brows.

"Not sorry?" he barked. "Who said anything about not being sorry? I demand, however, that you apologize to me, and to my fighter pilots!"

"Apologize?" Dave gasped, as he seemed to lose his grip on things. "For what? For knocking off a couple of Jerry planes, for cat's sake?"

The senior officer looked sterner than ever; then the ghost of a smile quivered at the corners of his mouth.

"Certainly, Captain Dawson," he said without so much bite in his voice. "This is *our* hunting ground. And goodness knows too few Jerries come over our way to make us eager to share them with a couple of wild flying mad-men. So you both owe us an apology for poaching on our game grounds. But we'll take the apologies for granted. Sit down, you two. You deserve a chair at least, I fancy."

Dave came close to missing his chair, he was so surprised and relieved. He looked at the now grinning Group Captain and let his breath out slowly.

"Gosh, sir," he gulped, "I thought you meant it there for a minute."

"I still do!" the other said with a nod and a chuckle. "It wasn't fair of you, at all. According to Major Barber you had your air sport earlier this morning. Not cricket, you know, to horn in on our doings. Congratulations, nevertheless. Fact is, those blighters might have done a bit of damage if you hadn't got at them so soon. My chaps must have been taking cat naps. Well, Farmer? Glad to be back in England?"

"Very much so, sir," Freddy replied, and beamed all over his face. "One of the happiest moments of my life."

For a brief instant shadows crossed the Group Captain's face, and he looked grave and filled with concern.

"I hope there will be many more, equally happy, Farmer," he said presently. "No. Never mind the questions. I have no idea what's in store for you two. But I certainly know you were not brought back over here just to have a spot of leave. You'll doubtless learn soon enough, though. Meantime, I'd better get on with my part of the business—that is, give you the instructions Major Barber left with me."

"Left!" Dave gulped. "You mean, sir, the Major has gone?"

"Quite," the other replied with a nod. "While you two were stealing Jerry planes from us. I believe he had intended to remain awhile, but a call for him came through from your American Headquarters in London. I detailed him a plane, and a pilot to fly him up there."

"And he left orders for us, you say, sir?" Freddy Farmer prompted respectfully.

"Quite correct," the senior officer told him. "You are to remain here until you've had a bit of breakfast and some rest. Then I'm to detail you a two-seater plane. It's as if I were running a blasted aerial taxi company, or something. Anyway, sometime today, when it suits your collective fancy, you are to fly to the Lewes Base, on the South Downs, and report to the commanding officer. Squadron Leader Parkinson is his name. He has a Spitfire squadron. A fine bunch of lads, too. You'll like them all, I'm sure. Well, there're your orders as Major Barber left them with me. Now, how about a spot of food, eh?"

Dave didn't move. He acted as though he had not heard the question. He simply sat staring puzzle-eyed at the Group Captain.

"Report to a fighter squadron, sir?" he murmured presently. "You mean we're back in the R.A.F. again?"

"I don't mean anything of the sort," the senior officer replied with a little gesture, "for the reason that I have no idea whatsoever. That's truth, really. I simply know that you are to report to Squadron Leader Parkinson's base. What happens after that, I haven't the faintest idea."

"A bit queer and very hush-hush, for fair," Freddy Farmer grunted, and scowled at the opposite wall.

"That's the blasted war for you," the Group Captain chuckled. "Nothing means very much until after it's happened. However, much as the R.A.F. would like to have you back in its membership, I do not believe that is to be in your case. As I said, or should have said, neither of you was brought back to England for anything of the usual sort. A blind bloke can see that it's for some very important reason. And certainly most secretive, too."

"You're telling us?" Dave groaned, forgetful for the moment of the other's senior rank. "It's plenty secret, and how! Freddy and I have been guessing our heads off since the start of this business, and neither of us can come up with anything that even seems close!"

"Phew, yes!" Freddy breathed heavily. "We Britishers are very good at the hush-hush business, but the Yanks are certainly going us one better this time. And if I don't get some kind of an inkling soon, I'll be going balmy."

"Well, I wish I could help you out, but I can't," the Group Captain said with a sympathetic laugh. "Sometimes, though, it's best not to know what one's in for—until it happens."

The somber note in the other's voice sent a little icy chill rippling through Dave. True enough, Freddy and he certainly hadn't come over to England just to have a good time. They had come over to take part in some Commando operation. That much Major Barber had admitted. But—and it was a big but—he had said they were to handle an extra, a very special job. What job? What kind of a job? Unfortunately, there just wasn't any answer to that one. The answer would be theirs—in the near future. Perhaps!

"I get what you mean, sir," Dave said to the Group Captain with a faint grin. "And maybe you're right, sir. But—well, just the same I don't go much for this sitting on pins and needles stuff. I think I'd rather know, and get my worrying over with first. As you say, though, that's war."

"Quite," the senior officer grunted, and got up from his chair. "So let's leave it at that, what, and have a bite to eat?"

"Absolutely, sir!" Freddy cried, springing to his feet. "No sense fighting a war on an empty stomach, if you don't have to."

"Just name one time when yours was empty," Dave laughed.

"Right now!" the English youth snapped, and gave him a scornful look.

They followed the Group Captain out and over to the officers' mess. There they ate their fill, and when the senior officer had taken his departure they went outside and started wandering around the field. Their legs were still a little stiff from the Atlantic crossing, so a little exercise wouldn't do either of them any harm. At the end of an hour or so they had had enough. They hunted up a hutment orderly, and were shown a couple of bunks where they could catch up on a little much needed sleep and rest.

It was late in the afternoon when the orderly awakened them. He told them that there had been two raid alarms sounded while they had been asleep. However, no Jerry planes had put in an appearance.

"The Commandant told me to find out when you would be taking off, Captains," the orderly added later. "There're two Spitfires just ferried here from the factory, waiting on the tarmac. The Commandant says as how he would like you to deliver them to the squadron you're going to. Shall I have them revved up?"

Dave dug sleep seeds out of his eyes and looked at Freddy. His pal did likewise, and nodded.

"Might as well," he grunted. "There's nothing more to be learned here. Might just as well get on with it."

"Check," Dave said, and turned to the orderly. "Do that, will you, and thanks."

Half an hour later the two air aces were out on the tarmac, and ready to leave. They were about to climb into their Spitfires when Group Captain Farnsworth came over to them.

"Just wanted to say goodbye," he smiled, "and wish you all kinds of luck."

"Thank you, sir," Dave grinned. "And we're sorry about those two Jerry planes. I promise that next time we won't be so selfish."

"Oh, quite!" Freddy Farmer echoed.

The Group Captain chuckled and made a little gesture with both hands.

"That's quite all right, chaps," he said. "All is forgiven, I assure you. Frankly, next time—if there is one—I hope you get double the number of blighters. Well, goodbye. Thumbs up, and all that sort of thing. I certainly envy you."

Dave shot him a sharp questioning look, but the Group Captain shook his head firmly.

"No, I really don't know a thing, Dawson," he said. "On my word, I don't. I'm just imagining, that's all. And there's blessed little else a Group Captain can do in this crazy war. Well, on with it, you chaps. And luck, again."

Dave and Freddy thanked him for his good wishes, shook hands, and then legged up into the pits of their Spitfires. They taxied out to the far end of the main runway, and waited there with props idling over for the signal from the Operations Tower. It came, and they gunned their engines together and went rocketing forward.

"Well, here goes for the next stop," Dave grunted as he lifted his Spitfire clear, and nosed up and around toward the overcast sky. "And I sure would like to know what is the next move in this cockeyed arrangement of things?"

He spoke the question aloud, but the gods of war in their high places refused to answer. They simply nudged each other, grinned, and winked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sudden Chaos

"This is getting me down, and giving me a sweet pain in the neck!" Dave groaned, and rolled over on the grass. "Do you think that Major Barber has forgotten us?"

Freddy Farmer opened his eyes just to show that he was awake, and sighed contentedly.

"Does it really matter?" he murmured. "Personally, this suits me quite nicely, thank you."

Dave scowled and contemplated jabbing Freddy in the ribs. But his pal looked so perfectly relaxed that he didn't have the heart to. So he simply deepened his scowl.

"Fine guy, you are!" he growled. "A week ago you were as keen as mustard about what Major Barber cooked up for us. And now? Now you're just a lazy bum!"

Freddy opened one eye and glared.

"That's a downright lie, my good man!" he snapped. "I got a Messerschmitt One-Nine yesterday, didn't I? And one of those new Focke-Wulf One-Nineties the day before? What more do you want?"

"Action!" Dave grunted, and stared brooding-eyed at the row of Spitfires on the near side of the field. "I admit it's swell to be serving with an R.A.F. fighter squadron again. It's okay, but—but, doggone it, we didn't come way over here for this! Even Group Captain Farnsworth agreed with that. But it's been a whole week now since we arrived here. I'm beginning not to know what to think, or hope."

"Then don't do either," Freddy commented sleepily. "Terrible strain on the brain, you know. Must confess, though, I've been wondering a little myself, in odd moments. Does seem a bit queer we haven't heard from Major Barber. Could be that the whole show, whatever it was, was called off."

"There you go!" Dave groaned. "Always taking the joy out of life. Me, I've almost talked myself into getting in touch with Major Barber and finding out what's what."

"I wouldn't," Freddy cautioned. "Doubtless you'd be told off quite properly. The Major struck me as that sort of a chap. If and when he wants us, we'll be sure to hear about it, I fancy."

Dave groaned again and sat up straight. A strong feeling of having been cheated out of something was gnawing at him. He knew that he shouldn't feel that way. As a member of an R.A.F. fighter squadron it was his job to concentrate solely on his work, and let all other things go hang. A soldier must be all soldier no matter what his duty, or where he had to perform it.

Yes, sure. That was all very well. But too many intangible things had happened to let his mind stay at rest, and his attention to stick to the daily sweeps across the Channel to Occupied France that he took part in. There had been something big, very big, in the wind. Was it still so? Or had that sleepy Freddy Farmer spoken the truth about the whole business having been called off? It was a tantalizing thought, like a termite in his brain. And the galling part of it all was that there really wasn't a single thing that he could do about it, or should do about it, if he had any sense. Start fishing around Major Barber and he might end up by getting bounced back to the States. It was for him simply to—

The rest was cut off short as the raid alarm rang in the Operations Hut. He and Freddy sprang to their feet as one man, and went tearing over. The rest of the pilots on "stand to alert" reached there at the same time. Squadron Leader Parkinson stuck his head out the door, and barked the orders.

"Five Heinkels sighted coming across! Twenty thousand. Course, north-northwest. Get after the beggars!"

Dave and Freddy wheeled with the others to dash for their planes, but stopped short as the Squadron Leader called them both back.

"Not you two chaps, this time," he told them. "Just received other orders for you. Buzz over to Horsham Commando H.Q. Take one of the squadron cars. You're to report to a Yank Major. Barber is the name. Better hop along at once. He sounded urgent over the phone. Glad to have had you with us for the short spell. Luck, chaps!"

The Squadron Leader ducked back inside to continue with his raid alarm duties. Dave and Freddy just looked at each other, then spun around and tore over to the motor park. They were expected, for the Corporal in charge pointed out a fast R.A.F. Daimler, and swung open the gates for them. Dave dived in beside the wheel, waited just long enough for Freddy to light beside him, and then kicked the engine into life and slipped it into gear. Three minutes later they were on the winding dirt road that eventually finished up in the Southeast English town of Horsham.

"Hot dog!" Dave cried happily, and boosted the speed up another ten miles. "I guess this is really it, this time, pal!"

"It won't be, if you hit a tree!" Freddy cried, and grabbed for a strong hold as Dave took the next turn. "Be careful and stop playing speed demon. Five or ten minutes longer won't make any difference!"

"Will to me!" Dave laughed, and held his speed rate. "Can't wait to find out what the Major has to say to us. Gosh! And I was beginning to think—! Oh well! Everything is wonderful, now. So why bother with the past?"

"Quite!" Freddy snapped sarcastically. "Blast to the past. Just concentrate on this winding road, if you possibly can. I've got enough grey hairs, as it is."

"What do you think it'll be, Freddy?" Dave asked, ignoring his last remark. "I mean, what do you think he'll have to say to us?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," the English air ace replied. "But I have a feeling it won't be all sugar and honey. Everybody's been too deep down serious about things to suit my fancy. Particularly the Major's reference to the little extra job for us. We've been detailed little extra jobs before. Only they weren't *little!*"

"So what?" Dave laughed. "Wouldn't be getting the wind up, would you, pal?"

"Certainly!" Freddy threw at him. "And your gay eagerness doesn't fool me a bit. You're a little jittery inside yourself."

"And how!" Dave agreed instantly. "The heart's got a swell case of jitters, if you must know. Always like that when things are mysterious and unexplained. But war is no pink tea, hey, Freddy?"

"Not a bit of it!" the English youth replied with feeling. "Our job, though, is to do the best we can—while we can."

"Atta boy!" Dave cried, and took a hand off the wheel to press his friend's knee. "The old fight, always. You're making me feel better, now. Bring on your mysterious assignment! What do Farmer and Dawson care?"

"I'd hate to tell you," Freddy grunted, and lapsed into brooding silence.

In another few minutes the car streaked over the crest of the last hill, and down there in the shallow valley was the town of Horsham. At first glance it was nothing but another town, like any one of thousands of English towns. But on second glance Dave spotted lots of little things that made Horsham just a bit different. Man-made things, to be exact. Woods completely surrounded the town, only not all were woods. Mostly it was perfect camouflaging that concealed from prying Nazi eyes flying above the tremendous amount of activity that was taking place.

It concealed the row upon row of Commando tents. It hid the various groups of Commandos going through attack preparations and practice. It concealed the long lines of motor trucks that would carry them to embarkation points. It concealed a countless number of things. But on second glance Dave saw quite a bit of what was hidden, and his heart started hammering against his ribs, and the blood surging through his veins. If there was a last stop before the great adventure, whatever it was, Horsham must certainly be it.

Fully convinced of that fact, Dave eased off the Daimler's speed a bit, and went down the slanting road and into the town. They had to stop to ask the location of H.Q., but after that they found it with no trouble at all. It was located in a picturesque two story grey stone house on the far side of the town. An armed sentry came forward as Dave braked the car to a halt. He learned their identities, told them to wait, and went inside. He was out again in less time than it takes to tell about it.

"You are to go in, at once," he said, and saluted with his rifle at present arms.

Dave and Freddy climbed down out of the Daimler, and went up the stone steps into the house. A sentry stationed inside pointed at the open door to the right. They stepped through it and snappily saluted Major Barber, who sat half hidden behind a huge desk piled high with maps and what not. He smiled and rose to greet them.

"Leave any rubber on those tires?" he asked, glancing at his wrist watch. "You certainly got over here fast. You were driving, weren't you, Dawson?"

Dave grinned and went pink.

"Guilty, sir," he said. "But I was in a hurry. For a whole week, now—"

"I know," the Major stopped him. "But wars aren't won in a day. I suspected you'd be wondering yourselves sick, but there were other things to take care of first. Sit down, though. Sit down and relax. It's time you learned a few things about when the balloon goes up."

Dave and Freddy seated themselves in chairs, but neither of them relaxed even a little bit. They sat on the edges of their chairs, and fixed their gaze unwaveringly on the U. S. Commando Chief. He let them sit in tingling silence a moment or two while he seemed to collect his thoughts and choose his words. Eventually, he leaned forward on the edge of his desk with his elbows, and locked the fingers of his two hands together. He spoke quietly, but there was a firmness to his voice that sent Dave's heart beat mounting upward.

"Tomorrow night we are making a combined United Nations Commando raid on a section of France which, if it is pulled off successfully, will leave the Nazis hanging on the ropes for quite some time to come. In fact, there is every possibility, and hope, that this raid will open the door wide for a general United Nations invasion of the Continent."

The Major paused abruptly, and stared hard at Dave and then at Freddy.

"The attacking force," he continued a moment later, "will total close to fifteen thousand men. They will be men and officers from every branch of the services—air, land, and sea. The objectives to be aimed at total three times the number aimed at, and reached, in the combined Dieppe raid a short time ago. As a matter of fact, it has been all that's happened since the Dieppe raid that prompts us to launch this biggest one of all. The Dieppe raid scared Hitler silly, and his Generals, too. Shortly after the Dieppe raid large reinforcements were withdrawn from other active fronts and rushed to the French coast area. Naturally, United Nations Intelligence here and in France has given us complete details on the moves Hitler has made since Dieppe. One move is proof positive of how the Dieppe raid really affected him. Field Marshal von Staube, of the Army, and Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault, of the Air Force, are now in complete charge of operations in the Occupied France coastal zones."

The senior officer paused again, and Dave caught his breath in astonishment at the news. Von Staube and von Gault? If there were two men in all the Third Reich responsible for Adolf Hitler's blood-shedding successes across bowed Europe, those two were the ones. Von Staube and von Gault! The former the brains of the Army. The latter the brains of the Luftwaffe. Oh yes, and quite true! Their names seldom appeared in newspaper, or over the Berlin radio. Other names were featured. Other figureheads such as "Uncle" Goering received the publicity, and the praise for every triumph, big or small. But it was von Staube and von Gault who had made everything possible. And if they had been transferred to France—

"Then Hitler sure is worried, plenty worried!" Dave heard himself speak the thought aloud.

"No doubt about it!" Freddy Farmer echoed. Then, addressing the Major, he asked, "There is absolute proof of this, sir?"

"Absolute proof!" the senior officer replied emphatically, and picked up a small photo off the desk top and held it out. "Take a look. Taken the day before yesterday, and smuggled across to us. The uniforms will tell you which is which, in case you've never seen their pictures before."

It was a picture of two high ranking German officers standing beside the running board of a German Staff car, and obviously in deep conversation. The picture was not any too clear, because it had been taken at a distance with a long range lens. But it was clear enough for Dave and Freddy to recognize, from other pictures they had seen, the thin, cruel, hawkish face of Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault, and the beefy, moon-faced, thick-necked figure of Field Marshal von Staube. Dave handed the photo back without comment. But Freddy had another question.

"It was taken in Occupied France, sir?" he asked.

The Major held the photo up and pointed out the spire of a church that was faintly visible in the background. Part of it was missing as the result of an exploding shell.

"That's the church in the little village of Evaux," he said, "across the Seine River from Rouen. I recognize it, because I've been there many times since that shell struck. Matter of fact, I happened to see that shell do its work. It was a week before Dunkirk. No, don't worry. That picture was taken in Occupied France. And those buildings in back of them, but on this side of the church, are their combined Headquarters."

The Major nodded slightly for emphasis, and dropped the photo on the desk.

"A force of fifteen thousand men," he said a moment later. "Navy men, army men, and airmen. The time schedule has been worked out to the last split second. And the schedule has been checked and rechecked, I might add. At the first show of darkness tomorrow evening, navy vessels will take aboard the ground forces, at designated points along the south coast here. At the right moment the ships will put out into the Channel and proceed toward the French coast. At a designated time bomber flights will go over and blast all strong points for a thirty-five mile radius about the French coastal city of Le Havre. Le Havre will be the pivoting point of the entire raid. All operations will fan out north, south, and east from Le Havre.

"Fighter squadrons, of course, will go across to keep a protective cover over the bombers against Nazi night fighters—if any are able to get off and come up at them. Fighter squadrons will also protect transport planes filled with Commando Para-troops. Needless to say, each unit in the attack has its own time schedule, that dovetails in with the general schedule for the raid. And each unit, whether land, sea, or air, has its own individual objective to take and hold, or, as in many cases, to take and completely destroy. Clockwork is the keynote to the whole thing. Every man knows just what he is supposed to do, and what he's supposed *not* to do, incidentally. There will be losses, heavy losses, probably. But our losses will be nothing to what the Nazis will lose in man power, war materials—and morale!"

The Major paused for breath, and to think over his next words. It was all Dave could do to stop from squirming about on the edge of his chair. A hundred questions quivered on the tip of his tongue. But he had just enough sense to remain silent and bide his time. Soon enough the Major would tell Freddy and him what fighter flight they were to fly in. As a matter of fact, that bit of information was the next thing that came from the Yank Commando Chief's lips.

"You will go over with the squadron with which you are now stationed," he said. "The Two Hundred and Third Fighters, with Squadron Leader Parkinson in charge. That unit will go over as part of the cover for the Commando Para-troops. Parkinson will be supplied with his own time schedule, and will, of course, acquaint you with all those details later. Well, there you are. That's the general picture of the little surprise we'll have for Adolf Hitler tomorrow night. And if it comes off as we have planned, and as it *must* come off, this world will be a much better place to live in much sooner than most people expect. The Nazi high lords, in particular!"

As Major Barber seemed to pause for the last time, and leaned back in his chair, Dave was thrilling to the thought of so gigantic a raid, and such a devastating blow against the barbaric forces striving to conquer the civilized world. At the same time there was a certain feeling of frustration within him, a feeling of keen disappointment. It was as though he had been built up for a terrific let-down. He sneaked a glance at Freddy's face and could instantly tell from the expression he saw there that Freddy was not exactly one hundred per cent pleased himself. Dave hesitated a moment, and then took the bull by the horns.

"It should be something, and how, sir!" he said enthusiastically. "But back in New York, you

mentioned something about a little extra job for Freddy and me. You still have one?"

Major Barber grinned and leaned forward again.

"I was wondering if you had forgotten that bit," he said with a chuckle. "Yes, there's still a little extra job for you two. But *little* is hardly the word. Your fighter plane unit will go as far inland as the village of Salernes, just north of Rouen. That's where your bunch of Commando Para-troops will step off, and go down. But you will not return to this side with the Two Hundred and Third Spitfires. You two will bear south and across the Seine to Evaux."

"Evaux?" Dave echoed, and gulped. "And when we get there?"

There was no grin on the Major's lips now. Neither was there a smile in his eyes.

"When you get there," he said in a calm, steady voice, "you will kidnap von Staube and von Gault and fly them back here to England. *That* is the little extra job that has been selected for you two to carry out. Think you'll like it, eh?"

For all the gold in the world Dave couldn't have spoken a single word at that moment. His head had seemed to fly up off his shoulders and go floating away. The rest of him was frozen to his chair as solid as Arctic ice. It was impossible for him to move, and doubly so for him to think. Kidnap Field Marshal von Staube, and Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault?

CHAPTER NINE

Orders For Eagles

It seemed a lifetime to Dave before the ability to think fully returned, and three times as long before the power of speech was once again his. He turned his head slowly and stared at Freddy Farmer. The English youth was sitting like a statue of stone, eyes fixed on Major Barber, and blank amazement spread all over his face. In an abstract crazy sort of way the picture he saw made Dave think of somebody socked by a five pound blackjack loaded with buckshot. Freddy Farmer wasn't exactly out cold. But he might just as well have been.

"Did you hear what I heard, pal?" Dave finally compelled his lips to say.

Freddy jumped a little as though stuck with a pin, and turned to look at him.

"I don't know," he said in a rather vacant tone. "I could be mistaken. This could be just some crazy nightmare."

"It is," Dave grunted, and switched his gaze to Major Barber. "Only the nightmare part hasn't arrived yet. You're—you're not kidding, sir?"

Major Barber grinned and shook his head.

"No, Dawson," he said. "That was straight from the shoulder. But I don't blame you for going into a tail spin. I'll admit it's quite an order to hand out."

"Quite an order, he says!" Dave mumbled, and shook his head. "You wouldn't want us to pick up Adolf Hitler for good measure, would you, Major?"

The senior officer laughed and gestured with his two hands, palms upward.

"That would be nice," he said, "but I doubt that Adolf would ever get that close to possible activity. After all, he has to save himself for the future, you know. If little Yellow Belly, of the trick mustache, should get himself killed, what would become of the world? And he got wounded in the last war, you know. It's in the official German records. A gashed finger opening a can of beans, I think it was. No, we can skip Hitler. I'm not expecting too much of you fellows."

"Thanks," Dave grinned. "For a moment, I thought it was something that was really going to be tough. One question, though. I take it that von Staube and von Gault have agreed? They won't put up any objections when Freddy and I pop into their H.Q. and say, 'Let's go, boys?'"

Major Barber started fishing through his pockets. He finally sighed, stopped, and looked annoyed.

"Darned if I didn't lose that wire I got from them, okaying the whole business!" he said in mock seriousness. "I guess you'll just have to take my word for it that everything is all arranged. All this kidding aside, though, if you two fellows think—"

"Just a minute, sir!" Freddy spoke up sharply. "That's just the point. I'm not yet back where I *can* think. But if you're imagining that we're refusing this *little* extra job, please dismiss it from your mind at once. Personally, I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world."

"And you can say that again for me, pal!" Dave echoed. Then, looking at the Major, "You just simply threw a curve when we were expecting a high, hard one. Heck, sir! We're all for the idea. Freddy and I have a little motto we try to stick to. It's: We'll try anything once, and maybe twice. So forget it. Count us in. I've heard of tougher assignments, though I don't just remember where,

or when!"

The senior officer chuckled and gave them both a look of frank admiration that was almost as satisfying as receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor, or the Victoria Cross.

"Don't worry," he presently said quietly. "I didn't have half a doubt for even a second. I was simply getting a kick out of the way you two received my little bombshell. However, I must be deadly serious about this. It isn't an everyday assignment. You stand one chance of bringing back those two, and nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine chances of not living to see the next sun rise. There is one big thing in your favor, though, as regards pulling off this stunt successfully. It's that nobody but a wild-brained chap like me would ever think of trying it. In other words, the fact that it is practically impossible makes it just that much more possible. If you get what I mean?"

"Close enough, I guess," Dave grunted. "In other words, if and when we do show up at their H.Q., neither of them will think its strictly on the level. And while they are mentally fanning the air trying to get the picture, we'll have the perfect chance to grab them."

"Exactly," Major Barber said emphatically. "You could go in there dressed as Santa Claus and they wouldn't disbelieve you any less. However, I don't plan for you to pop in dressed up as a couple of Saint Nicks."

"Well, that's good news, anyway!" Freddy Farmer got out with a sigh of relief. "To get down to cases, though, sir, just what do you plan for us to do? Perhaps it would be better if we got on with that part of the business."

"Good old Freddy Farmer!" Dave chuckled. "Always has to find out things. Just can't wait."

"Well, I guess there's no sense in his waiting any longer," Major Barber grunted with a grin. "Or you either, Dawson. Yes, I have plans for you. Every move worked out in detail. Before I explain them, let me say this, though."

The Commando Chief paused, and all signs of merriment left his face. It became set and firm, and his eyes grave.

"The old saying about 'the best laid plans of mice and men,' and so forth, applies here very much," he went on presently. "I've plotted out every move you are to make, taking in, I hope, every little thing that might happen to the contrary. But that's exactly the point. I mean, something that I haven't even dreamed of *may* happen. And *if* it does, the chances are that your operating schedule will be knocked forty ways from Sunday, and you'll be strictly on your own, and in the keeping of God."

"That sort of thing has happened before, and we're still here," Freddy Farmer murmured, but with not the slightest trace or hint of boasting in his voice.

"And how!" Dave breathed softly, as for the instant his brain raced backward in memory. "Fact is, nothing has ever worked out exactly as we planned and expected. And I don't think it ever does."

"I'm making that thought unanimous!" Major Barber said grimly. "But we can always hope there'll be a first time. And I'm hoping this will be it. Now, edge up closer to this desk so's you can get a good look at this mosaic reconnaissance map of the area that concerns you two."

The Major waited while the two air aces hitched their chairs closer. Then he picked up a pencil and touched the tip of the sharpened point to the mosaic map.

"Your fighter squadron will cross over the French coast here, at Cany," he began. "It will proceed as transport plane escort, as I said, as far as Salernes on the northern fringe of Rouen. There the Para-troops will bail out and float down to take and destroy an objective assigned to them. Incidentally, it happens to be one of the largest airplane fuel depots in all of Occupied France. Anyway, when the Para-troops have gone down, the transport planes will turn and start back to England, with Parkinson's squadron still acting as escort. You two, however, will pull out and head south across Rouen, and on over the river to Evaux, here."

The Commando Chief put the pencil point on the location of the small French town, and then lifted his eyes to look at Dave and Freddy.

"One point I'd better mention," he said. "Squadron Leader Parkinson has no idea of what's been cooked up for you. Therefore you'll have to use your heads as to how you quit the squadron. You could go down as though shot, and keep radio silence in case he buzzes you as to what has happened. However, it'll still be pretty dark by then, so maybe you can just drop out, and that'll be that."

"We'll manage that part okay," Dave grunted. "Don't worry about that."

"I'm not," Major Barber said. "Too many other tricky things to worry about. Now, when you have crossed to the southern side of Evaux—here, where the Seine makes its biggest loop southward—you will both step out, and head down by parachute. Of course, searchlights may be probing around for you by then. And no doubt there'll be anti-aircraft stuff whizzing up at you. However, it'll be your job to get out of the searchlights and bail out. Before you leave, though, there'll be a little lever in each of your planes that you are to pull. Pulling that lever will touch off a fire bomb that will fire your plane exactly sixty seconds later."

"I get it!" Dave murmured. "So the anti-aircraft gunners will think they've made a couple of direct hits?"

"Right!" Major Barber told him. "Also, that you two have been instantly killed. As soon as your planes burst into flame the searchlights will swing that way, of course. But no pilots bailing out by parachute will be seen. So they'll believe what we want them to believe. Now comes the tricky part, and look closely at this mosaic map. You two should touch ground fairly close together. Ditch your parachutes, of course, check your directions by the compass each of you will carry, and make your way to this cluster of shell-shattered farm barns that you can see right here."

The Major paused while the two youths bent closer and had a good look at the cluster of shell-battered farm barns clearly pictured in the mosaic map.

"That shouldn't be hard, I don't fancy," Freddy Farmer said. "They're right in the center of the U formed by the Seine."

"That's it," Major Barber said with a nod. And then he continued, "When you meet, you will proceed due north for no more than two miles. At the end of two miles you will come to a dirt road. See it pictured there? And see that pile of rubble there? That was once a church until a Nazi Stuka came along in June of Nineteen Forty. There you will meet a German guard."

"And give him the works!" Dave said eagerly, as he thought of those five weeks of intensive Commando training.

"No, don't!" Major Barber caught him up sharply. "That German guard will be an American Intelligence officer posing as a Nazi. He's been in that area for over a month now. That's how long ago we started working out this little job for tomorrow night. He's your connecting link with all that happens from then on. Confound it! I skipped one of the most important items!"

The Commando Chief paused and snapped his finger in vexation.

"I forgot all about mentioning that stowed in your cockpits will be a Nazi uniform with all the insignia and markings of a German regiment stationed in that area," he went on. "Don't forget to take them with you when you bail out. And put them on when you touch ground. They're *Ober-Leutnant* uniforms, by the way. It'll be better for you to pose as a couple of officers so's you'll have the jump on any rank and file you might possibly bump into.

"Anyway, when you spot this German soldier walk up to him and say, 'Tell me the time, my watch is broken.' He will answer, 'But mine is broken, too.' By that answer you will definitely know that you have met the right man. He is to be known to you as Jones. So if you call him by any name, call him Jones. Anyway, he'll give you a picture of how things stand. He'll tell you exactly where the two Nazi big shots are at the moment. In which building of their H.Q., I mean. He'll tell you how many others are about. And he'll put before you a plan how to pull the others away so that you can make your little surprise visit on von Staube and von Gault. Most important of all, though, he will know the exact location of a Nazi Dornier Do. Seventeen that you two can use to cart your prisoners back here to England. Naturally, there is a small flying field close to the Evaux H.Q. that both von Staube and von Gault use, but not the whole Luftwaffe in general. Jones will have all the dope on that, and of course, he'll do everything he can to make your job easier. He has been groomed for his part to the nth degree. So have no worries that anything will slip up at his end. Once you have nailed von Staube and von Gault—and I suggest right here that you slug them good, and bind them right up with wire you'll be carrying—Jones will run the interference for you. That's a football expression, Farmer. You get what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," Freddy grinned. "Dawson, here, made me go to some of the games when we were in the States. In hot weather, too!"

"They weren't regular games, as I told you," Dave said with a laugh. "Just spring practice and scrimmages. But he knows what you mean, sir."

"Good," Major Barber grunted. "Well, I guess that's about all the points. We'll go over them later, of course. Several times, until you have each little detail down pat. One last thing, though, about arriving back here in England. Try to make Two Hundred and Three's airdrome. There'll be certain parties there to take over your prisoners. And of course, when you cross over English ground be sure and put on all your navigation lights. And keep flashing the letter M with your signal light. That'll stop any anti-aircraft shells from coming up to greet you. Well, I guess that's about it. Are there any questions? Any part of the plan that strikes you as not measuring up to snuff?"

Neither Dave nor Freddy said anything. For the moment they were too busy with their own thoughts to ask any questions. And their thoughts were indeed in high gear. To Dave the whole thing looked easy as apple pie. Every step they would take had been carefully thought out and considered from every angle. It would almost be like acting out a book they had read; knowing exactly what to do next, and how it would all come out in the end.

Yes, it seemed a cinch. But that was exactly the point. Cold, hard common sense, and the memory of experience, told him that it wasn't going to be any cinch. Far, far from it. The eerie tingling sensation that rippled through the back of his neck was all the proof of that statement he needed. Plan, and plan, and plan. It made no difference how much, or how long, you planned. There was always that unknown something, that unexpected something, lingering in the background. It would pop up at you, as sure as man is a foot high. And when it popped—

Dave didn't bother finishing the rest of that thought. He drove it from his mind, and glanced at Freddy Farmer. He could see that their thoughts were very mutual indeed.

"Got anything you want to ask, Freddy?" he said.

The English-born air ace frowned, and then shook his head.

"No, can't think of a question at the moment," he murmured. "It's all expertly cut and dried. All we have to do is follow the instructions. No, I haven't any questions."

"That goes for me, too, sir," Dave grinned at the Commando Chief. "The only thing left, now, is to pull it off. And of course, we'll both pitch our arms off to do just that."

"And, please God, may your arms hold out!" the Major said fervently.

CHAPTER TEN

Victory Wings

Black night hung like a velvet curtain over the southeast coast of England. As though even the gods had decided to give the United Nations forces a break, not a single star was showing. Sullen dark overcast stretched from horizon to horizon, and just off the coast a thin protective fog hovered above the waters of the Channel. On the drome of the Two Hundred and Third R.A.F. fighters, twenty-one Merlin-powered Spitfires, Mark Fives, stood waiting to be streaked aloft into the night sky. From prop to trimmer flap on the rudder, every plane had been checked and rechecked by skilled mechanics as well as the pilots themselves. Not a nut, bolt, or strand of bracing wire had been overlooked, or taken for granted. Upon those Spitfires, and the steady-eyed eagles who would fly them, depended the lives of many brave men. The Commando Paratroops who would be taken over by transport plane, and then dumped off to go down and do their job of destruction, and later fight their way back to the seacoast and the British Navy boats waiting to take them back to England. In many wars, and before many battles, had elaborate and detailed plans and preparations been made. Never, though, in the history of all the world, had any military operation been as minutely arranged and prepared for as this morale-jolting raid about to be launched against Hitler's blood-letting forces in Occupied France.

For a while Dave and Freddy had gathered together with the other pilots of Two Hundred and Three and hashed and rehashed the part that the squadron was to play in this lightning bolt blow against the two-legged forces of all things dirty and evil in Europe. In time, though, they drifted away from the general gathering and started wandering alone and aimlessly about the field faintly marked out by tiny flares. They had covered quite a bit of ground before Freddy finally broke the silence.

"Gives a chap a bit of a spooky feeling, all this, doesn't it?" he said. "Like sort of sitting around waiting for an unexploded bomb to go off."

"Something like, yes," Dave grunted. "But this'll be more than just a bomb when it goes off. More like an ammo dump, I'd say. And a couple of dozen of them, too. How do you feel, Freddy?"

"Scared stiff, and absolutely pink!" was the prompt reply. "And you?"

"Ditto!" Dave echoed. "My knees are sure getting to know each other, the way they're knocking together. I don't dare sit down for fear they'll freeze solid, and won't let me get up. Boy! I sure wish it was time to get going!"

"Won't be long, now," Freddy murmured with a look at the radium-figured dial of his wrist watch. "But I agree with you. I'll feel much better once we get in the air, and are getting on with the show. Remember all of Major Barber's instructions?"

Dave laughed and then whistled softly.

"Twenty years from now you could ask me, and I'd be able to recite them word for word," he said. "The Major should be a school teacher, or something. He can sure put details in your head, and make them stay there. He's a swell guy, the Major is."

"That he is!" Freddy echoed the statement. "A bit of all right. No doubt his ancestors were English."

"Listen!" Dave shot back quickly. "I said the Major was a swell guy, see? Just skip casting slurring remarks about him, see?"

"As if—!" Freddy blazed, and then saw the grin on Dave's face. "Well, his ancestors didn't come from the Belgian Congo, like one chap's I could mention!"

"Stop talking about yourself!" Dave threw at him. "Besides, we were originally talking about this raid. What do you think our chances are, Freddy?"

The English youth was silent for a moment. He walked a few steps forward, staring unseeing at the ground.

"I don't know," he said finally. "My brain refuses to try and figure the odds. Which is just as well for my nerves, I guess. I'm only hoping it comes off as easily as the planning makes it appear. One thing, though. Selecting me to go along with you is just about the finest honor I ever received."

"Oh, think nothing of it, my friend!" Dave said with an airy wave of his hand. "Back in New York when Major Barber asked me if I thought you were well enough trained to—"

"Rot!" Freddy cut in harshly. "I was being serious, Dave. True, we've seen quite a bit of the war. And we've accomplished an odd job or two here and there. But there are plenty of men older than us, better trained, and far more experienced in this kind of thing. It was a mighty high honor to pick a—well, you might say, a couple of kids like us."

"You've got something there, pal," Dave said gravely. "But as the Major pointed out, age doesn't mean a thing in this war. Kids and grown men alike can turn out to be heroes with the right stuff. And, not to boast, there are a couple of points in our favor. We're pilots, experienced ones. We know that area pretty well from the first year of the war. We also speak German well. And—well, there're a couple of other good points about us, but skip them. The main point is that the Major selected us. As far as that goes for me, it's okay. I don't care about why he picked me as one of the pair. I only hope and pray I live up to the trust he's put in me."

"Quite, and me, too!" Freddy Farmer breathed as though in prayer. "I suppose I feel as I do every time we're handed a tough assignment, but I truly feel that I want to accomplish this job tonight and tomorrow dawn more than I've ever wanted to accomplish anything. It's—it's as though my whole life had been built up to this night. Do I sound crazy?"

"Nope, not at all," Dave told him quickly. "You're simply saying the words I couldn't think up. Say, how long now? I'm getting so jittery to get going that if I wait much longer I won't have the muscle co-ordination to hoist myself up into the pit. How long, Freddy?"

"Twenty minutes," the English youth replied. "Steady on, Dave. Don't let it get you down, old chap. Things will start soon enough. Be like I am, calm, cool, and—"

"A cockeyed liar!" Dave finished with a laugh. "But thanks for the effort, pal. Your voice does have a soothing effect upon me, at times. And note that I said, at times!"

"Gratitude for you!" Freddy snorted angrily. "But of course, I expected that kind of a comment, coming from you. By the way! I hope you checked to see if your Nazi uniform was stuffed in the pit?"

"I did," Dave replied, and laughed. "And my rigger mechanic saw it, too. Made him plenty curious. The bundle, I mean. He couldn't tell that it was a Nazi uniform. I thought it best to offer some kind of an explanation, so I told him that it was an extra uniform in case I got shot down in flames, and burned the one I was wearing."

"Good grief!" Freddy gasped. "What a crazy thing to say! And what did he say?"

"He didn't," Dave chuckled. "He didn't say a thing—to me. He just walked off, muttering something about all Yanks being a little balmy."

"And he wasn't far from wrong!" Freddy Farmer leaped at the opening. "Particularly in your case. But let's start on back to the tarmac, shall we? They should be starting up the engines for a brief warm-up soon. And it isn't good to, give the other chaps the idea that we're trying to snub them."

"Nuts!" Dave snorted. "Those guys are regular. They wouldn't think anything like that, ever. But let's get on back, anyway. I want to give my bus one more check, just for something to do. Oh-oh! There go some of the egg boys. Happy landings, fellows! And smack them plenty, the bums!"

As Dave spoke the last he and Freddy threw back their heads and stared up into the dark sky that was suddenly filled with the roaring thunder of many bombers winging out across the Channel to "lay" their "eggs" as planned. For a couple of minutes both sky and earth trembled from the steady thunder of powerful engines. Then gradually it faded away in the southeast.

"Boy! That was a bunch of them!" Dave exclaimed with a whistle. "The whole raid area will probably be flat as a pancake by the time the Commando troops arrive. Gosh! I hope their eggs don't scare von Staube and von Gault away!"

"Or make the blighters hide in some bomb shelter where we can't find them!" Freddy echoed with a little nervous laugh. "Well, let's buzz over. There's the first of the Merlins starting up. Getting close now, Dave."

Dawson didn't comment. He licked his suddenly dry lips, swallowed hard a couple of times, and hurried with Freddy across the drome to the line of twenty-one Spitfires on the tarmac. Pilots gathered in small groups were breaking up, each man going over to his plane. Dave went over to his, and Freddy to his own which was next to it. Both knew their planes by heart, but from force of habit they each made one last and final check, and found every little thing just as they knew it would be.

Then they met between the two planes and waited for the engine fitters to climb in the pits and kick the Merlins into life. The whole drome, now, was echoing and re-echoing to the roar of Merlin engines. But to Dave and Freddy, and everybody else for that matter, the thunderous roar

was the sweetest music on earth.

"Well, have you two got it all straight, eh?"

They both spun around at the sound of the voice shouting above the Merlins' roar. Squadron Leader Parkinson stood there dressed and ready for flight. He was calmly smoking a cigarette, but there was a flashing, eager-to-be-off look in his eyes. Dave nodded and answered for himself and Freddy.

"All okay, sir!" he shouted back. "We go off second with Green Flight. Up to ten thousand, and fly line astern by flights until we pick up the Para-troop transports five miles off shore."

"Right!" the Squadron Leader said with a nod. "Then spread out in top cover. Green right, blue left, Red center, and Purple Flight covering our tails. Right you are, lads. Good luck to you both. If any night Messerschmitts or Focke-Wulfs put in an appearance, don't let the blighters go any place but down!"

"And with flames for company, sir," Dave added with a grin.

"Quite!" the Squadron Leader echoed the statement, and started to turn away. He checked his movement, however, and turned back to give each of the two youths a searching stare.

"I meant that," he said a moment later. "About good luck to you both. I don't know a thing, but I fancy you didn't go over to Commando H.Q. yesterday just to have a spot of tea. Anyway, mighty glad to have you with us—until you have to peel off, and go on your own. Cheerio, until we meet again sometime!"

Without giving either of the boys a chance to say anything, Squadron Leader Parkinson flipped a hand to his goggles in salute and went quickly away.

"Jeepers!" Dave presently ejaculated. "Maybe we should wear signs on our backs, or something! That Parkinson is no dumb bunny, what I mean!"

"Oh, quite," Freddy said. "But after all, old chap, we're not strictly R.A.F. these days, you know. And—well, I fancy it must have struck everybody a bit queer, our just joining up with the Squadron wearing U. S. Army Air Force uniforms. Plenty of Yank squadrons over here, now, for us to be assigned to. And that call from Commando H.Q. would start any chap thinking."

"Yes, I guess that's right," Dave said with a nod. "But here's hoping the birds on the *other* side of the Channel aren't so bright. But why should they be? Oh, nuts! I'm just yelling down a rain barrel. Well, Freddy, old tin of herring, Papa will look after you as best he can. But try not to get in my way, and on my neck too much, see? I've got important things to do from now on."

Freddy took the extended hand, and the pressure of Dawson's grip told him all he needed to know.

"You mean that the other way around, I fancy!" he snapped. "And I warn you, young fellow, this is absolutely your last chance! Mess up this show tonight, and I'll definitely leave you behind in all doings in the future. I'm completely fed up with shielding your mistakes from our superiors each time we go out on a show. Those things in the leading edge of your wings are guns, understand? They shoot bullets. But bullets meant for Nazi planes, not British or Yank or French or Polish or Canadian. Please have sense enough to remember this time. So don't forget! This is your last chance to prove you're the type to tackle big things with me."

"Boy! What a soap box artist you'd make!" Dave cried with a chuckle. "Give that vocation a thought, if you last out this war, Freddy. And right now stop breaking my fingers! What do you think you're doing? Cracking walnuts! Go on! Get into your ship before I break into tears. A tender babe like you, going along on a man's job! There should be a law, or something."

"Rot!" Freddy snapped, but his voice was a little husky. "Well, happy landings, Dave, old thing. See you anon at that cluster of shell-battered barns over in Occupied France."

"I'll be there waiting, sweetheart," Dave said. Then as a parting shot, "And don't forget the ripcord ring. You have to yank it hard for the thing to open. Very necessary, you know."

"I'll do my best to remember, Dave," Freddy Farmer assured him.

And the two air aces climbed up into their Spitfires.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Silent Wings

France! The once brave, fighting nation now helpless in the steel-gloved hands of its ruthless conquerors. Some vowed that treachery in high places had doomed France. Others vowed it had been the vast superiority of the enemy in all things. And others vowed there was some other reason for the swift and devastating defeat of the once proud republic. But what did it matter, the reason, now? Or what would it matter until after the war had been fought and won by the United

Nations? The fact was that France was in chains: helplessly, but not hopelessly, enslaved by a gang of war bandits who even insulted their own intelligence, what little there was of it, by referring to themselves as men and human beings.

That was the one fact, the one great truth. And as Dave shoved open his greenhouse and stuck his head out to look down at the carpet of night shadows that was France, a sharp ache came to his heart, and he unconsciously clenched his free hand into a fist of promised vengeance. It had been a long time since he had flown over France. At least so it seemed, so much had happened since then. Last year? No, that couldn't be. Five years ago at the least. Maybe more. But not just last year. It couldn't have been. Yet it was so.^[1]

"Keep your chin up, old girl!" he whispered downward. "Maybe this isn't the beginning. But *the* day is coming. It's coming just as sure as the rain grows little apples. Britishers, Yanks, Dutch, Belgians, Canadians, Poles, and your own Free French. That's a promise, *La Belle France*. Thousands and thousands of them, with all the stuff they'll need to cut Hitler down to snake level. Believe me, old girl!"

With a grim nod for emphasis, he pulled his head in and shoved the greenhouse shut. He was flying Number Two on the right in Green Flight, and Green was on the right of the general squadron formation. The Para-troop transports were a thousand feet below, thirty-five of them drilling steadily along into France. At the coast anti-aircraft batteries had opened up with a savage fire and searchlights had crossed and crisscrossed the heavens. But not for very long. A few squadrons of low flying Hurricane bombers had jumped on the guns and lights, and given their operators too much trouble for them to be able to concentrate very closely on the huge aerial cavalcade passing by overhead.

As for Nazi night fighters, there hadn't been the sign of one so far. Perhaps the bombers earlier had chewed up their dromes and parked planes so that there weren't any in condition to take to the air now. Or maybe, the odds being so much against them, the Nazi pilots were simply executing that well known German military maneuver. In short, never fight unless there are three of you to one of your enemy.

"And then again," Dave continued the thought aloud, "maybe they are waiting until we get deeper in, and near our objective. Then they'll swarm up and dive down to try and do their stuff. Yeah! Maybe they know these are Para-troop planes. And what fun it would be to pick off the poor devils floating down by parachute. Just like shooting fish in a barrel!"

Dave's heart skipped a beat as he thought of that possibility. And on impulse he tilted back his head and stared hard at the still overcast sky. Were there Nazi fighters up in that inky sky? Flocks of Hitler's vultures tagging along on silent wings, ready for the moment to scream down and strike? Dave's heart beat a little faster, and the palms of his hands became cold and clammy. He shook himself and returned his gaze to straight ahead.

"Cut it out, kid!" he growled at himself. "Get back on the beam. You've got plenty of other things to worry about, without wondering about Nazi night fighters tagging along upstairs. Just keep your thoughts on what Freddy and you have ahead of you."

As he spoke his pal's name he turned his head and peered at the next plane on his left. He knew it was Freddy's Spitfire, but he could only see it as a darker moving shadow against the general background. A sudden longing to talk and crack wise with Freddy was his. But, of course, he made no move to speak into his flap mike. Squadron Leader Parkinson would do all the talking. Nobody else was to say anything unless addressed by the Squadron Leader. Not that the Nazis below didn't know that enemy planes were up there in the skies. Their ears told them that. Radio silence had been ordered simply to avoid all chance of an unguarded or thoughtlessly spoken word giving Nazi listening stations a clue as to what was actually taking place.

And so Dave killed the urge to talk with Freddy Farmer, and continued to hold his position in the Flight formation, and keep his eyes skinned for the first glimpse of Nazi night fighters that might suddenly come gun yammering down and in among the Para-troop transports. Seconds ticked by, and became minutes, however, without a single German pilot sticking his nose into the business. Then, presently, as Dave glanced at his cowled dash clock, he saw that the two formations were only one minute away from their objective point in the air. By straining his eyes, and peering hard, Dave could just make out the winding grey ribbon that was the Seine River winding past the city of Rouen. The city, itself, was in total blackout, though a light did show here and there. Staring at them, Dave wondered if brave Frenchmen down there were playing their part in this gigantic undertaking, risking the Nazi death decree by showing lights that might guide the United Nations planes in the air. There were many Frenchmen like that. They mounted up into the thousands—far more than the rest of the world realized, let alone heard about. Steel-hearted men, women, and, yes, children, who fought the Nazi beasts twenty-four hours a day without guns, or cannon, or tanks, or airplanes, but with their hands, and feet, and their brains. They were not people living on the brink of death. They lived in the *middle* of death. Night and day, week after week, month after month, and on and on until death, or victory, ended their misery.

Finally, the last minute was over and a part of time history. Dave glanced down and saw the shadows that were troop transport planes opening up wider formation. He imagined, if he didn't see, the tough, painted-faced Commandos stepping out and going down by parachute. He wondered if they were all Americans in that bunch down there. He hoped so, and told himself that was so. It gave him a thrilling feeling to have helped escort those boys over from England.

And what they wouldn't do to the Nazi tramps they met on me ground! There was no fighter on earth like a Yank, once he got started. Not even the Australians could get tougher than Uncle Sam's fighting fools. They—

The rest of the thought folded up in Dave's brain. At that instant he heard the savage snarl and yammer of aerial machine guns. And he had only to jerk his head around and look up to see the stabbing tongues of yellow-orange flame etched against the black sky. Nazi fighters were rushing down to enjoy a field day of killing and slaughter. But that's what *they* thought! There was good old Two Hundred and Three between them and the Para-troop planes. Two Hundred and Three, that had one of the best records in the R.A.F. for bringing down enemy aircraft.

"So come on down!" Dave grated, and slid his free hand up to twist the firing ring of his trigger button on the stick. "Come on down and get slapped in the face for keeps. We'll—"

"Tally-ho, chaps!" came Squadron Leader Parkinson's cry over the radio. "Company here. Let's entertain the blighters, or make them go home. After them, chaps!"

"And how!" Dave shouted happily, and started to whip his Spitfire around and up toward the part of the night sky etched with streaks of yellow orange. "We'll show—"

The rest died on his lips as common sense suddenly got the upper hand of him, and roughly jogged his memory. Heck, yes, of course! Was he nuts? He couldn't go kiting up there to do battle with those Nazi night fighters. And neither could Freddy Farmer. This was the end of the line for them. This was where they got off and changed trains. They had an exact time schedule of their own. And if they wasted minutes fooling around with those diving night fighters of Hitler's, their whole schedule could very well be thrown completely out of whack.

"But it's like quitting!" Dave groaned as he checked his turn and started to peel off and down toward the south. "Like getting the wind up and running out on the boys. And they're such swell guys. Oh nuts! Would five minutes make any difference? I might smack a couple in five minutes, stop two of them from maybe cutting down through us and spraying those Para-Commandos going down to earth. I—"

He groaned aloud again, for he knew that he was simply talking words that didn't mean anything. He had a job to do. Freddy had a job to do. And Two Hundred and Three had a job to do—*without them!* Major Barber hadn't kidded around on that point when he'd given Freddy and him the instructions. At the jump off spot, Freddy and he were to peel away from the squadron and get on about their own little job. And that meant peel away no matter if the whole German Luftwaffe dropped down on top of Two Hundred and Three.

"But just let me get back to England!" Dave whispered as he went roaring southward. "Just let me get back so that I can tell those boys, and have them understand how it was we pulled out and left them in the soup. Just let me do that!"

With a savage nod for emphasis, Dave squinted ahead at the searchlight beams that were now cutting up from the city of Rouen, and then looked to the right and to the left. Freddy Farmer's plane was on his right. He could see it quite clearly, now. There was beginning to be quite a bit of light. However, it was red light from explosions on the ground below that reflected upward. And those explosions meant that some of the Commandos had already landed and were going into planned action.

"Give it to them, boys!" Dave shouted impulsively, and shook his free fist. "Give them the works, and not once over lightly, either. Sock it to them where it hurts!"

As though a Nazi anti-aircraft gunner on the ground wanted to help out, a shell exploded with a terrific roar just on the right to punctuate Dave's last sentence. It was close enough to send his Spitfire jumping a bit, and he almost slipped into a spin before he regained control. When he did he spent a couple of very anxious moments waiting to see if shrapnel pieces had done any serious damage. None seemed to have, though, for the Rolls-Royce Merlin in the nose continued to roar out its song of mighty power and pull the Spitfire through the night air at close to four hundred miles an hour.

That single exploding shell, though, was but the first greeting of many. As Freddy and he went clipping across Rouen, and over the twisting Seine, it seemed as though all the anti-aircraft batteries in Europe had opened up on them. And there were so many searchlight beams poking upward and swinging back and forth, and around in circles, that the sky ahead and on all sides was like a shimmering white fishing net. And the searchlight beams certainly were *fishing* for the two Spitfires.

A dozen times one caught Dave's plane cold and blinded him for a split second or two. But just as an anti-aircraft battery would take a new sight on him, he would manage to whip out of the brilliance of the "Peeping Tom" and into blessed black sky that hid him from view. And just as many times he saw lights catch Freddy's plane, and make the English-born air ace do his trick dance before getting out of sight again.

As a matter of fact, the closer they came to Evaux the more guns started shooting at them, and the more searchlights sprang into action. The sky was lighted up almost as though it were high noon. There were few "black" spots, and cold sweat trickled down Dave's face as shells seemed to burst right on top of his wings, and even inside the cockpit—which of course they didn't.

"We're going to have to be good!" he muttered, as he dropped the Spit's nose and cut down into momentary concealment. "Plenty good, or they'll see us step off, and start a man hunt by the time we've reached the ground. And that mustn't happen. Those birds down there have got to think we're still in the ships when they see them catch fire. And so—well, it's up to us to make it good."

As he spoke the last he put his lips to the flap mike.

"Better get out of here, Freddy!" he shouted.

It was the signal they had arranged in Major Barber's office, the only words they would speak over the air. But they would mean plenty. Dave's speaking those words was the signal for them both to bail out in the next possible second, after yanking the lever that started the time mechanism of the fire bomb. So the instant the words were off Dave's lips he cut deeper into the dark area in the sky, yanked the fire bomb lever, shoved open the greenhouse cowling, unfastened his safety harness and got up on the seat.

With his foot he moved the stick over to the right to tilt the Spitfire in that direction a little. Then, after bracing himself, he dived out and down, holding his breath for a couple of split seconds for fear he had done it wrong and would get practically cut in two by the Spitfire's tail plane. But he had done it right, and he went spinning end over end down through the night air that grew darker the lower he fell. He counted up to twenty, then tightened his grip on the rip-cord ring and jerked it hard.

"You'd better work," he muttered, "or I'll be plenty sore at the manufacturer!"

For a moment more he went on spinning downward, and then invisible hands hooked onto his body and he was jerked back up toward the night sky. For one awful instant he almost lost his grip on the bundled up German uniform he had grabbed before he bailed out. He managed to hang onto it, however, and presently he was floating earthward, while high above anti-aircraft shells painted the heavens with red and yellow and orange. And the dazzling white beams of the searchlights made a moving, swaying background for the display of war's colors.

"So far, so good," Dave muttered, and impulsively crossed the fingers of his free hand. "Now, if Freddy has bailed out safely, and is on his way down, everything is okay, okay."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Invisible Death

"All right, cut out enjoying yourself! There's the ground down there some place. And it's coming up, fast. Pay attention to your knitting, pal!"

Dave wasn't sure whether he had spoken the words aloud, or whether they had simply been spoken in his brain. Anyway, he stopped twisting his head this way and that to admire the display of bursting colors high overhead, and started peering down through the gloom in the direction of the ground. Just as he did that, though, there were two loud explosions in rapid succession. They were to the south and above his altitude, and when he jerked his gaze up that way he saw two huge raging balls of flame arc out across the sky and down, leaving behind long tails of winking sparks.

"Freddy's ship and mine, going up in smoke," he said softly. "Gee! What a rotten end for such a swell pair of planes. Spitfire Mark Fives don't grow on trees, darn it! Too bad we couldn't have used a couple of crates that had seen their best days. Yet that might not have been so hot if we'd run into Nazi night fighters sooner. Well, that's how it goes. Rest in peace, old gals!"

With a half salute toward the blazing Spitfires falling earthward, and followed downward every inch of the way by a couple of dozen Nazi searchlights, Dave switched his gaze toward earth again, and twisted around at the ends of his parachute shroud lines in order to pick out any faint landmarks that might be showing. It took him a couple of seconds before he saw the big loop made by the Seine as it wound past the city of Rouen. When he saw it a happy smile came to his lips, and he felt pleased all over. Unless a low wind caught him and did things with his parachute envelope, he should land practically in the middle of the Seine's loop, the exact spot, where he was to make his rendezvous with Freddy Farmer.

"Nice, very neat!" he grunted. Then with a little laugh, "But you know darn well, pal, that it's just bull luck. You didn't see that river loop when you stepped out, and you know it. But don't be dumb enough to admit that to Freddy when you see him!"

With a grin and a nod for emphasis, he started to bend his knees ready for landing. The night shadow-filled ground was very close, now. As yet, though, the shadows weren't clear enough for him to make out just what they were. Trees, rocks, buildings, or even maybe the cluster of farm barns where he was to contact Freddy again? And so he breathed a silent prayer that there were no trees directly under him, or at least that he'd be able to see them in time. It would be nice, he didn't think, to foul his 'chute on some top branches, and dangle there like a Christmas tree ornament until daylight when some Nazis came by and cut him down, or shot him down! And it wouldn't be the first time that sort of thing had happened, either!

"So don't even think about it!" he growled at himself. And with one hand still hanging onto the bundled up German uniform, he reached up both hands and grabbed hold of the shroud lines to ease some of his weight off the harness straps and make the landing that much easier.

Perhaps the gods were watching over him, or perhaps he was just plain lucky. At any rate, there were no trees under him, nor any big rocks, either, that could give him a nice case of twisted or broken ankle. As a matter of fact, there was just a nice patch of fairly soft ground, and he came to earth, and spilled the air out of his 'chute, without any trouble at all.

The instant he was on the ground, and had spilled air, he wiggled out of the harness, gathered up the 'chute and shoved it well out of sight under some bushes.

"Too bad they don't make these things so's you can use them to go on back up again," he murmured with a chuckle. "A parachute pickup! I must give that some thought when I get back to England, and have a little time on my hands. I—"

He cut the rest off short as part of what he had said came echoing back into his brain. "When I get back to England!" A cold shiver rippled down his spine, and his mouth went just a little bit dry at the thought. Here he was in the middle of Occupied France, with nobody knows how many Nazi butchers quite eager to cut his throat from ear to ear if they should find him. In Occupied France—on foot. His Spitfire was now just a heap of smouldering wreckage many miles away. When he got back to England? That would not come to pass until he had captured a Nazi plane and flown it across the Channel. Stealing a Nazi plane was his only avenue of escape. It—

He shook his head to drive away the bothersome thought.

"So what?" he grated at himself. "Freddy's in the same boat. And what you hope to do, you did once before, didn't you? Well, stop sniveling and blubbering around. Just make this the second time, that's all!"^[2]

All the time he had been carrying on the conversation with himself he had been changing into the uniform of a Nazi *Ober-Leutnant*. To his surprise and delighted satisfaction, he found that it fitted him perfectly. But when he gave that a second thought, why shouldn't it? Sure! Major Barber wasn't the kind of a man who did things hop-skip-and-a-jump style. The Major, of course, had made sure that the uniform would fit.

He stood up and moved around a bit, as though he were in front of a mirror.

"Nice, perfect!" he murmured. "Almost makes me *feel* like a Nazi. But not quite, though. Not in the old head, anyway. Now to check a bit, and get started. Mustn't keep Freddy waiting—if he's okay."

Turning slowly, he peered hard in all directions. The anti-aircraft fire had died down considerably, and not so many searchlight beams were sweeping back and forth across the sky. Still, there was enough light of battle toward the north to shed just a faint glow down on the ground. He saw that he was in the clearing of a small woods. Lucky for him to have dropped in so neatly. A glance at his compass gave him north, and after making sure that everything he was leaving behind was well out of sight of chance German eyes, he started forward due north. Unless his rapid calculations were all cockeyed, he had about half a mile to travel before he would reach the cluster of shell-battered farm barns.

Here was a chance to put more of his Commando training into practice, and as he moved forward he made less noise than an Indian stalking game. Every step he took was more or less planned and considered ahead of time. He didn't bump into any trees that loomed up out of the dark. Nor did he stumble blindly over stones and boulders, or go barging into bushes in his path. There was no way of telling whether German patrols were about. That was one detail that Major Barber couldn't give him. From now on his life was in his own hands. What he did, and when he did it, was strictly up to him. And it was the same with Freddy Farmer.

Freddy! The thought of his pal started his brain racing again. Where was Freddy? How was he making out? Had he come down okay somewhere near, and was he now making his own way toward the rendezvous point? Or—A cold chill slashed through Dave, and he refused to let himself finish that thought. If anything should ever happen to Freddy Farmer, he vowed he would spend the rest of his life hunting down Adolf Hitler to take personal vengeance out on the two-legged, mustached animal from another world.

"Listen!" Dave told himself. "Stop worrying about Freddy. If there is one lad who always keeps a date, no matter what, Freddy Farmer is the lad. Don't worry! That guy will get there, even if he has to slip through the whole darn German Army. Just worry about yourself. Just tend to your own knitting!"

Taking what comfort he could from his own words, he kept on moving north, eyes stabbing at the darkness ahead, and ears half tuned to the distant sounds of battle to the north. At the end of fifteen minutes he came to the crest of a small ridge. He flattened himself on the top and peered hard down the other slope. His heart did a little dance of joy, and he silently shook hands with himself. Down there, not more than a couple of hundred yards away, he could just see the dim outlines of the shell-blasted farm barns.

For a couple of minutes he remained glued to the ground, searching for any possible lights, and straining his ears for any sound other than the sounds of battle far away from him. He saw no

lights, however, and he heard no sounds. He got to his feet again, bent well forward and went down the far side of the slope with as much noise as though he were in his bare feet and walking on a velvet carpet. At the end of seven minutes by his watch he was hugging the tilting side of the nearest shell-blasted barn, and straining his eyes and ears more than ever.

Again he saw nothing, and heard nothing. But for three long minutes he forced himself to crouch motionless, crouch as motionless as a corpse. Then he started to purse his lips and let out the whistle of a night loon, the signal he and Freddy had agreed upon. But before the first note could reach his lips he heard the low call coming to him through the darkness from off to his left. For a split second, his nerves had been so tensed, it was all he could do to stop from letting out a wild yell of greeting.

But he didn't, of course. Instead he turned left, started moving slowly forward, and answered the loon call. Two, three more minutes ticked by, and then a little bit of the darkness seemed to move out toward him, and he felt Freddy Farmer's hands on his arm. It was so perfect an approach by the English youth that Dave gulped and was violently startled in spite of the fact that he had known Freddy was close. The hand on his arm tightened and he was pulled down onto the ground, or rather down into a small crater left by one of the exploding shells that had wrecked those farm barns earlier in the war.

"What kept you, old thing?" asked the whispering voice in his ear. "Been here for hours, scared stiff something had happened to you. Did you run into any Nazi patrols? There are some of the beggars about. One blighter almost stepped on my hand. Could have finished him easy, but he had some pals along. You all right, Dave?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Dave whispered back. "What do you mean, what kept me? I ran all the way! I didn't come across any Nazis, though. After this, better keep your hands in your pockets, pal. Well, let's have a look at the time. Don't want to be late meeting Jones."

As Dave breathed the last he slid back the little cover that fitted over the radium dial of his wrist watch, and took a quick look at the time. It told him that they had forty-six minutes to cover the two miles to the shelled church rubble where Jones was to meet them. He let Freddy see his watch, and then started to speak, but didn't as the English youth pressed something into his hand.

"A bit of burnt cork I brought along, Dave," the English air ace whispered. "I know we are wearing Jerry uniforms, but until we contact Jones we'd better blackout ourselves a bit, don't you think? There are too many blasted Nazis patrolling around. Better that we don't let them see us, even if we are dressed as Nazi officers. We can rub this stuff off later, if we have to."

"Check, and thoughtful boy!" Dave murmured, and started rubbing the black stuff all over his face. "And look, Freddy, your seeing Nazi patrols starts me thinking. We both want to get through to contact Jones, but at least one of us *must* get through. You get what I mean?"

"Quite," Freddy replied. "If we ran into trouble together, why, neither of us might get out of it. Going separately, though, one of us would probably get through to Jones. And if the other didn't show up-well, Jones would just have to team up with the chap who did. Correct?"

"Right on the button," Dave said. "I'd sure like your company, pal. But I think we'd better go it alone from here to that shelled church. Two miles. Let's say we make one mile in twenty minutes. Forty miles to the ruined church, and six minutes to play with, in case we have to. Okay. That's the way it will be. I guess we'd better get going now. Your face all blacked out?"

"Ready," Freddy breathed, and got to his feet. But he suddenly reached out and touched Dave on the arm. "Just had a thought," he whispered. "Might be a good idea for us to contact again halfway. There's an old bit of railroad track just a mile from here. Remember seeing it marked on Major Barber's mosaic maps? What say we meet there again in twenty minutes, twenty-three minutes at the most. Think that would be a good idea?"

"Checks with me," Dave replied. "If we don't meet then, the one who does reach the railroad will know more or less that the other fellow is probably out of the picture for good. Okay, Freddy. I'll be seeing you in twenty minutes, twenty-three at the most. Don't go sticking that nose of yours into any trouble. We'll probably have plenty of that later on."

"And see that you don't, either!" Freddy Farmer whispered right back at him. "I don't want to have to go back looking for you. And I'm afraid I would, you know. That's the trouble with liking a chap so much. Makes one do the barmiest things sometimes."

Dave smiled in the darkness, groped for Freddy's hand, and pressed it hard.

"That goes double for me, too, Freddy," he breathed. "But neither of us is going to have to go back looking for the other. We're going to meet in twenty minutes. So long. Be seeing you, pal."

The two youths squeezed hands for one brief instant longer, then parted, and went melting off into the darkness in opposite directions.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Falling Doom

A faint sound broke the silence of the black night! Was it the wind in the trees? The echo of the battle far to the north? A night animal stalking its next meal? Or was it one of Adolf Hitler's uniformed killers?

Dave Dawson didn't know. Perhaps it was just his imagination. Perhaps it was just his taut nerves snapping, and his brain playing him tricks. As yet he had not come across a single Nazi night patrol. And perhaps there wasn't a German within miles of him. But maybe there was! Just to make sure, he pressed himself close to the ground, turned his cork-blackened face toward his left wrist, and with his right hand inched up the cuff of his sleeve, and then removed the cover from the radium dial of his watch that was strapped about his forearm halfway to the elbow.

Twenty minutes? Twenty minutes had ticked by already? His watch must be wrong! It must have gone all cockeyed! It must have gained a couple of hours in the last ten minutes. He was dead certain he had looked at it not five minutes before. Yet his watch said it was exactly five minutes of the hour. Just twenty minutes since he had parted company with Freddy Farmer at those shelled barns. Twenty minutes? That meant he was late. Only three minutes left to reach the strip of old railroad track!

He had the feeling that he wasn't very close to it; that he couldn't cover the remaining distance in three minutes, and not make a lot of noise doing it. But—that noise he had heard just now! Was it a Nazi? Or was it Freddy closing in from his left. Had Freddy—?

The black night sky seemed to crash down on Dave's spine. Every muscle went limp, and every fiber of his entire being seemed to snap like a rubber band. White hot flame cut into his right shoulder, and fingers of steel circled about his neck. There was no air in his lungs, and dazzling white balls of fire spun around before his eyes. So this is how it feels when you are about to die? The thought pounded through his brain as the thunderous roar in his ears seemed to blast his whole body to bits.

It took perhaps a split second, or even less, for all those thoughts and emotions to register within him. And then experience and intensive training came racing to his rescue. He flung up both clenched fists with every ounce of his strength, shoved them between two arms and pried outward savagely. The steel fingers were pulled partly loose from his neck. At the same time as he thrust up his fists, he brought up his right knee with the driving force of a battering ram, and twisted to the left. A gurgle of pain was music in his roaring ears. Air poured down into his lungs and stung like sparks of fire. But strength was surging through him now, and if there was still pain he was too furiously engaged in whirlwind action to be conscious of it.

A grunting, gurgling hulk had half rolled and half fallen off from on top of him. He shot out his left foot, hooked his toes about a booted ankle, then kicked upward and outward. At the same time he twisted back and slammed stiff fingers right down into a puffy moon-shaped face. His palms slapping down over parted lips cut off the scream of pain that would have torn the night air apart if it had escaped. But Dawson had trained for this moment, and he wasn't slipping up on a single trick. Keeping the open mouth gagged with one hand, he streaked the other down to the neck, dug in his fingers and squeezed with every ounce of his strength. The hulking figure under him struggled desperately, arched his body upward, and tried to twist his head. That was the moment!

Quick as a flash Dave crooked a leg under the figure, held his grip on the neck, and dropped the other palm down to the point of the chin. That palm he jammed upward with a savage, vicious movement. No man on earth caught by that Commando trick had a chance. And the heaving hulk under Dawson was no exception to prove the rule. He was strong, though, and for a brief instant he resisted Dawson in a furious effort. Then the strength in him seemed to melt away. His head went flying backward and there was the sickening sound of snapping bone. Instantly the man went limp and still. And quite naturally, too. A man who has had his neck broken doesn't move very much. He can't. And in this case it was impossible, because the man was already dead.

A shudder shook Dave as he untwisted from the man and started to get up onto his feet. Death was a terrible thing to have to deal out, even to a black-hearted Nazi. But this was war, and a man's personal thoughts about things weren't to be considered. He—

The strength was suddenly sucked right out of Dave. He hadn't realized what it had cost him to take care of that hulking German who had stumbled across him in the dark. He tried to regain his balance, but couldn't in time. He went pitching headlong on his face. But that was perfectly okay, at least for a moment or two. He was filled with momentary pain from head to foot. And his lungs felt as though invisible claws were trying to pull them right out through his ribs. And so for two blessed minutes he stayed right where he was, stretched out on the ground, sucking air into his lungs, and letting his heart pump renewed strength through his body.

Then suddenly he remembered that he had only three minutes left. Holy smoke! He'd never make the railroad track now. Freddy would go on without him. Maybe he'd never be able to catch up. He'd—

"Dave! All right, old chap?"

The whisper was no louder than a breath of night wind in tall grass. Yet it seemed to explode in Dave's ears like cannon fire. For a split second he couldn't move, think, or function in any way at

all. His brain raced wildly; screamed at his muscles to go into action again. This might be the rest of the German patrol. That was an officer he had just killed. He'd felt the insignia and rank sewn on the man's uniform. Maybe the rest of the patrol was—

Just a split second, and then his thoughts were making sense again. That had been Freddy Farmer, of course! Good old Freddy Farmer. Freddy had come back to look for him, as he had promised. Dave turned his head to the right and stared at the motionless darkness.

"All okay here!" he breathed. "Had a little exercise, but it's okay now. But thanks for coming back, pal."

One of the motionless shadows moved, and Freddy Farmer was at his side.

"Didn't come back," the English youth said, and ran his hands over Dave as though to make sure. "Heard a racket, and guessed you'd stumbled into a blighter. Couldn't tell in the dark. Phew! That must be the biggest Nazi Hitler has!"

"Had," Dave corrected grimly. "And it was closer than I ever want it to be again. Guess I'm a pretty punk Commando. He must have heard me and played dead dog until I passed by. Gosh! I feel as if I didn't have a strip of skin left on my neck!"

"We'll have a look into that, later," Freddy said, and started to help Dave to his feet. "We've got to be getting along. We're behind schedule. Maybe it would be better to stick together, at that. Yes, it would. Come on, old chap. Can't spend the whole night chit-chatting."

"Okay by me," Dave grunted, and was just a little surprised when he found out the rubber had gone out of his legs. "Let's get going. And that's my last dumb idea for a while. Going it alone, I mean. Okay, give me your hand, Freddy. Let's keep contact that way."

"Right-o." The word just managed to drift to his ears. "I'll squeeze if I hear something on my side. You squeeze if you hear or see something on yours. And let's make it as fast as we can."

Dave just grunted faintly. He didn't bother to say anything. For that matter, there wasn't anything to say. Besides, he was too busy feeling and sensing his way forward through the night, and getting more strength back into his still aching body as soon as he could.

Then began a night journey that Dave vowed he would never forget as long as he lived. The closer they approached the area surrounding Evaux, the greater the risks they ran of bumping into Nazi soldiers. It seemed that they would take no more than a couple of steps before they would be forced to drop flat and hold their breath while a squad of German troops went past.

That fact worried Dave not a little as Freddy and he stole forward through the dark night. True, he had expected possibly to meet a few Germans. But not meet so many, so often. The more he thought of it, the more a gnawing little fear worked on his heart. Wasn't it just possible that the Germans were suspecting that an attack of some sort might be made on von Staube's and von Gault's headquarters? Were the Nazi expecting something like that, and so had they thrown out patrols all around the area? And if that *was* true, what chance would Freddy and he have of capturing the two Nazi big shots even with Jones' help? And what if they didn't meet the U. S. Intelligence officer posing as a German? Supposing something had happened to Jones—and he wasn't there?

The thought made a film of ice coat Dave's heart, and beads of clammy sweat break out on his forehead. After all, maybe Freddy and he were walking with eyes wide open straight into a Nazi trap. There were just too darned many German soldiers about for comfort. No two ways about that. Something was wrong. Or at least the eerie tingling sensation that had come to the back of his neck seemed to warn him that things were not as they should be, or he had hoped they would be.

On sudden impulse he stopped dead, squeezed Freddy's hand, and then melted to the ground close to a thick clump of bushes. The shell-smashed church couldn't be more than a quarter of a mile away now. But he wanted to confab with Freddy before they started down the last lap of their weird, nerve-jangling journey.

"What's up, Dave? Something wrong?"

"Not yet," Dave breathed into his pal's ear. "But that's just what I'm wondering about. Freddy! Did you ever see so many Nazis out on night patrol? The whole area is practically crawling with them."

"I know," the English youth murmured. "A blessed sight more than I fancied we'd be bumping into. What do you think, Dave?"

"In circles, up to now," the Yank-born air ace replied. "I don't know just what to think. Trouble is, I've got a sneaky hunch that the bums figure that something may be in the wind, and are doing something about it, by throwing out so many patrols. Right here is where this whole thing stops looking like a cinch. Supposing Jones isn't there at the wrecked church!"

"I refuse to answer!" Freddy hissed. "It just can't be that way. He's just got to be there. We'd be in a fine flat spin if Jones didn't show up. Don't even think about it!"

"I'm trying not to, but it's plenty hard," Dave murmured. "Well, I guess there isn't much sense, at that, in parking here and trying to hash over something we don't know anything about—yet. Let's

get going again. Can't be more than a quarter of a mile more. I've just been wasting time for us."

"Rot!" Freddy grunted. "I was about to stop and talk things over, when you beat me to it. But it does no good to talk. The only thing we can do is get to that shelled church—and find out what's what."

"Yeah," Dave murmured as they got into motion again. "And do I wish my cockeyed thoughts would leave me alone. Oh well! Live and learn, I always say."

Perhaps! But Dave Dawson certainly didn't enjoy living the next ten minutes. For one thing, each minute seemed a year long. And for another, they twice came within a hair's breadth of running smack into a Nazi patrol. And for a third, he felt as though he had died a dozen times over during every minute of those ten. Eventually, though, they reached the dirt road marked so clearly on Major Barber's maps. And but a short time after that they were huddled together deep in the darker shadows of the piled up rubble that had once been a church.

"So what?" Dave heard his own voice suddenly whisper. "Here we are, and—so what?"

"A little patience, I fancy," Freddy Farmer murmured. "Jones probably just wouldn't stand here waiting. It might look too suspicious to all those blighters moving about. Besides, we're several minutes late. Maybe he went for a bit of a walk, and will be back."

"Sure, that's probably it," Dave agreed, but only with his lips.

There was no agreeing with Freddy's words inside his head. A cold clammy thought seemed to fill his entire brain. No, not just a thought. Definite knowledge it was—though of course there was no proof. Just the same, though, he had the steady sickening feeling that the man called Jones was not going to meet them this night, or any other night, for that matter. However, he had agreed with Freddy with his lips, anyway. No sense building up a fear in Freddy that might be absolutely unfounded. Still—

"Steady, Dave!" came Freddy's sudden, cautioning whisper. "I heard footsteps coming along the road. Maybe this will be Jones. Steady until we get a look at the chap!"

Dave was steady enough—outwardly. But inside he was all just so much nervous jelly. His heart tried to slap out through his ribs as he himself heard the sounds of footsteps coming along the road. And the blood raced through his veins, and actually seemed to be trying to force itself out through the ends of his fingers and the ends of his toes. He was filled with the wild insane desire to snap the tension with a laugh, or with a shout. He curbed the impulse, though, and crouched with Freddy in the darkness as the footsteps came closer and closer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Satan's Calling Card

Closer, closer came the footsteps! They seemed to be mysteriously synchronized with Dave's beating heart. One beat, one footstep. One beat, one footstep. Another, and another. Dave stabbed with his eyes at the gloom, but he couldn't see a single moving shadow; couldn't see a single moving thing, even though there seemed to be a sort of pale glow all about from the reflection of raging fires, and exploding ammo dumps up Rouen way to the north. But he couldn't see a thing, and his straining eyes began to smart and water.

Then, suddenly, he felt Freddy Farmer stiffen rigid at his side. And he felt Freddy's steel-like fingers close over his own hand and press hard. And then Dave saw it, himself. Saw the faint outline of a German infantryman walking along the road. He wore a battle helmet, and crooked in his right arm was one of the deadly Nazi sub-machine guns. Jones? The word question streaked across Dave's brain and returned to the center to whirl like a top. Jones, or a real German soldier? There was only one way really and truly to find out.

Dave hesitated, then pressed his lips to Freddy's near ear.

"This is us!" he breathed. "Let's find out."

The English youth didn't make any reply. He simply rose silently with Dave, and together they stepped out of the darker shadows cast by the church rubble and approached the figure in Nazi uniform. They were practically in front of the man before they stopped, and Dave spoke the code words in flawless German.

"Tell me the time, my watch is broken."

The figure in German uniform stopped short and gulped in surprise.

"The time?" echoed a thick, heavy voice. "I do not know. I—"

The voice stopped, and in the next split second Dave swore he could feel every hair on his head turn grey. The man in German uniform snapped on the beam of a tiny flashlight he had taken from his pocket, and the beam hit Dave squarely in the middle of his *still blacked out face!*

For an eternity, it seemed, Dave stood rooted to the spot, unable to move a muscle. He knew that he and Freddy had made a fatal mistake by forgetting to remove the cork black from their faces. He knew that this man was not Jones. He was a real Nazi soldier. And Dave knew also that in the next split second the German was going to wake up the whole countryside with his wild yells, and the savage yammer of the sub-machine gun in his hands. He knew all that, yet he was powerless to do anything about it. It was as though he didn't have a nerve nor a muscle left in his body. He was just so much frozen bone and frozen blood. This was the end—and he couldn't do a darn thing to save himself. He—

It was a streak of black lightning that he saw moving at his side. Just a streak of black lightning. It had to be, because nothing else could possibly move that fast. But it wasn't black lightning. It was Freddy Farmer's body streaking through the air. Freddy Farmer's body that hit into the Nazi soldier with terrific force. The flashlight dropped to the road and winked out. There was a stifled moan of intense pain, and then the thud of two bodies falling to the ground.

By then Dave had snapped out of his trance. He flung himself forward and down. But he was simply in the way. Commando Freddy Farmer knew his stuff, and there, stretched out on the dirt road, was positive proof. There was now one less German soldier to shoot a gun at Adolf Hitler's bidding.

"Done for, Dave!" came Freddy's whisper. "Got him with his own knife, too. Horrible business, but couldn't be helped. Lend me a hand. We'd better drag him off the road, you know. Might be some more of the beggars come along. And it would be embarrassing."

Admiration and pride rose up to choke in Dave's throat as he bent down and caught hold of the dead German's feet. What a man was Freddy Farmer! A whole doggone army in himself. If it hadn't been for Freddy's lightning action, they both would have been full of German bullets right now. Prisoners, at least. But while he had stood frozen and helpless as an old woman, Freddy Farmer had whirled into action. How many times did this make that Freddy had saved their lives? One hundred? Or was it two hundred? Probably two hundred.

Together they carried the dead German back into the darker shadows of the church rubble, and dumped him down on the ground. Then, by silent mutual agreement, they crouched down beside each other, Dave to try and get his brain working again, and Freddy to get back some of his strength and wind.

"Remind me, Freddy," Dave said, and squeezed his pal's arm. "Remind me to love you for life and six days afterward. That topped anything I ever saw, pal. Thanks a million for keeping your head screwed on tight. Mine went completely haywire. Gosh! That was wonderful. Honest, Freddy!"

"Had to be done," the English youth murmured. "After all, you'd got a blighter earlier. Next turn was mine, so I took it."

"And how you did, thank God!" Dave said fervently. "I still can't realize that I'm not full of slugs, or that a flock of Nazis aren't on our necks."

"Well, forget about it," Freddy murmured. "Both alive, and that's all that counts. Point is, what the dickens do we do now? I've got a horrible feeling, Dave."

"I've had it for several minutes," Dave groaned. "Something went wrong with this Jones fellow. I have a feeling he's not going to show up."

"Man, will that make a mess!" the English youth muttered. "But perhaps if we wait a bit, and—I say, Dave? What's the matter?"

Dawson had suddenly jumped a little and then stiffened rigid. He had put his hands on the ground in back of him to make his arms serve as props for the upper half of his body. But both of his hands had not touched ground. His right hand had come down on a booted foot. And it was not one of the booted feet of Freddy's dead German. He was dumped down behind some of the rubble a good five yards away.

Dave heard Freddy's excited question, but his own tongue was stuck fast against the roof of his mouth. His right hand still pressed down on the booted foot in the darkness behind him. He knew, he could feel that there was a human foot inside the boot. And he also knew that the foot and its owner were dead!

"Dave—?"

"Steady, Freddy!" he whispered. "Get set for another shock. My right hand's on the foot of a dead man. I'm sure of it. A Nazi boot. But—"

Dave had to stop and swallow hard before he could go on.

"But not a Nazi inside," he said with an effort. "I think Jones showed up, Freddy, but—but he isn't going to be of any help to us, pal. We're right behind the eight ball. Right out on the limb, and somebody waiting to saw it off."

As a matter of fact, Dave wasn't conscious of whispering those words to Freddy. He spoke them without thinking as he slowly turned around and felt with both hands to confirm the terrible belief in his brain. Freddy turned too. Their hands touched several times as they explored the stiffened body stretched out on the ground. But neither of them spoke. Neither of them dared to,

for fear they wouldn't be able to control their tongues, and start screaming crazy things at the top of their voices.

Eventually, though, Dave thought he could trust his own tongue to say what they both knew, now.

"Jones," he got out. "It must be. A German uniform. Shot in the back. Uniform torn and ripped to shreds. The rats searched him for any secret identification papers he might be carrying. Please God that they didn't find any!"

"Amen!" Freddy Farmer said in almost a sob. "Of course you're right, Dave. It must be Jones, poor devil. Wonder what happened? Wonder how they managed to catch him? Blast this for a fine mess!"

"Another of this war's secrets that will probably never be known," Dave said in a dull voice. "Why, and how, we'll never know, Freddy. But one thing is sure, according to the way I look at it. The Nazis in this area are wise to the fact that something is up. Jones dead, here. All those patrols we had to sneak around. Freddy! I've got a darned strong hunch that this particular spot is the most unhealthy in all Occupied France for us. Maybe they didn't know that Jones was to contact somebody here, but—"

"But *we* don't know *if* they *do* know!" Freddy finished the sentence.

"Right!" Dave whispered, and got up on one knee. "So, unless we want to beg for it, let's get distance from this spot, and get it fast. You with me?"

"Quite!" Freddy murmured, and got quickly to his feet. "I say! How about my beggar's machine gun? Think it would come in handy?"

"No, leave it," Dave replied. "Traveling fast, and light, is our best bet. If we got cornered, the gun wouldn't be much help for long. No, leave the darn thing. But let's get out of here, and—"

The rest froze on the end of Dave's tongue. In that instant he heard sounds of running feet on the road. But the sounds were from more than one pair of running feet. Freddy Farmer heard them, too. Not a word was spoken. No time for words, now. Nor the need. Hands clasped for mutual guidance, the two youths melted across the dirt road to the other side, slid behind some bushes that bordered the road, and then stole forward in a direction parallel to the approaching running feet. When the running feet were almost abreast, the two youths froze stiff, and held their collective breath. As near as they could tell, six Nazi soldiers went pounding past their place of concealment. They heard a few German grunts, but were unable to catch the words that were spoken. As soon as the squad of Nazi troops had pounded by, the two youths struck off at right angles from the dirt road, and travelled swiftly and silently northward until they reached the shelter of a thick woods. They sneaked in past the first fringe of trees, and sank to the soft ground fighting for breath, and to ease off their pounding hearts.

For several minutes they simply lay there stretched out on the ground. Then, as though at some secret inner signal, they sat up and stared brooding-eyed at the darkness about them. It was then that Dave parted his lips to speak, but stopped as they heard the faint shouting of many voices coming from the direction of the shelled church.

"That cooks it!" he spoke aloud. "That shouting means they've come across your Nazi, I think, Freddy. They know now that somebody's around who shouldn't be."

"No doubt about it!" the English youth agreed bitterly. "And it means that we'd better be getting going again. But, good grief, where? They'll be crawling all over the place, now that they know something is definitely wrong. Oh, blast it, what a fine mess we've made of things! I almost wish my parachute hadn't opened. And to lose a perfectly good Spitfire just for this! Enough to make a chap weep!"

Dave leaned over and pushed his fist against his pal's ribs.

"Cut it out, Freddy, old sock!" he growled. "None of that kind of talk from you. Not like you at all. We're not licked, kid, until Saint Peter swings wide the Pearly Gates and invites us in. Get that old chin up, pal!"

"It's up high enough, I fancy!" Freddy muttered. But with a heavy sigh, he added, "But it still makes me want to break down and weep. Should have brought that sub-machine gun along after all. We could at least take some of the beggars along with us."

"Nuts to the patrolling Nazis!" Dave snapped. "We'll let them hunt for us until they're blue in the face. We've got things to do."

The English youth half turned and stared at him hard in the gloom.

"You haven't gone a little balmy, have you?" he demanded. "What have we *got* to do, now? Jones is dead. He was to be our big link with the rest of the business. What have we got to do now, save keep clear of those searching for us as long as we can? And it probably won't be any too long, at that!"

"Boy, oh boy, are you sunk!" Dave said with a harsh chuckle. "Your Nazi must have clouted you one on the head that I didn't see. Sure we're getting out of here. In fact, pal, you and I are going to a spot where those shouting bums over yonder wouldn't even think of looking for us, see?"

"No, I don't see," Freddy replied. "Just what are you driving at, anyway?"

"The middle of the enemy's camp, of course!" Dave threw at him. "Sneeze away those brain cobwebs, pal. The H.Q. of von Staube and von Gault, naturally! Aren't they the two birds we came over here to collect, huh?"

Freddy Farmer sat up straight, and even in the bad light Dave could see his popping eyes.

"Good grief!" the English-born air ace choked out. "The H.Q. for von Staube and von Gault, did you say?"

"You heard me!" Dave said firmly. "Look, Freddy. Figure it out. Jones is gone. We're on our own now. So what are we going to do? Let these darned Nazis chase us around Occupied France all night? Or head straight for von Staube and von Gault, and—well, trust to luck that we'll get a break somehow? Me, I'm for direct action, even if it does seem hopeless. Darned if I'm going to stumble around in this darkness a couple of steps ahead of a bunch of Nazis. Jones is gone. So that puts it squarely up to us. I say, let's give it a whirl. Heck, Freddy! That's the only thing we *can* do! Right?"

"Of course you're right, Dave," Freddy said quietly. "Sorry I acted such a fool just now. No doubt we're mad to think we can accomplish anything. But—well, as you say, let's give it a whirl."

"Atta boy!" Dave murmured, and squeezed Freddy's arm. "But for cat's sake, let's first get this cork black off our faces and hands. It won't help us now. And when I think of that Nazi snapping that light in my face—Boy! I died a thousand deaths in that split second. That's enough for one night. We play strictly Jerry officers from now on. And Jerry officers don't go wandering around with cork black all over them. So let's get it off."

Five minutes later both youths had removed every trace of the cork black with their handkerchiefs and some water from the small canteen fitted to their German army belts. They stood up and studied Dave's compass with its radium-painted needle.

"North and bear a bit left," Dave said, and slipped the compass into his pocket. "We're a good half mile from the shelled church. So we can't be more than a mile from the edge of Evaux where the H.Q. is located. Well, I guess there's nothing to do but get started."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Vulture Nest

Dave Dawson stole a glance at his watch and saw that there was little more than an hour and a half until daylight. An hour and a half in which to accomplish something which, if things had only gone as planned, should have been cleaned up a good two hours before! He clamped his lips tight to choke back the bitter groan that rose up in his throat, and peered out from behind the thick clump of bushes at the scene that lay before him.

He was hugging the ground on the south side of a small yet billiard table flat field. On the other side, and not two hundred yards from where he lay, was a group of small buildings which marked the beginning of the outskirts of the French village of Evaux. In front of the group of small buildings were half a dozen German Staff cars, motorcycles, a couple of armored cars, and a hundred or more Germans of all sizes and ranks. Busy bee activity was in progress, too. Cars were rushing up a road that led out of some woods, to brake scream to a halt in front of the buildings, where the occupants would leap out and go dashing inside. A dispatch rider would come tearing up on his motorcycle, and practically throw himself from it in his haste to get inside with his dispatches. And twice an Arado army cooperation plane slid down to a landing on the small flat field, and quickly taxied over to join the general hubbub.

For thirty minutes, now, Freddy and he had been hugging the ground out of sight of prying eyes and silently studying the layout before them. And their thoughts were far from happy ones. Somewhere over on the other side of the field, in one of the buildings—and they had a pretty fair idea which one it was—Field Marshal von Staube and Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault were receiving reports at the rate of about one every five minutes on the progress of the United Nations Commando raid on the Le Havre area. How that raid was making out, neither Dave nor Freddy could tell. They could hear the distant roar of coastal batteries, the crash of exploding bombs, and the terrific thunder of ammo dumps blowing up. And every once in a while they caught the echo of savage fighting in the air. But what had been accomplished, and what hadn't been accomplished, were two things beyond their knowledge at the moment.

"Thought up any plan yet, Dave?"

Freddy's quietly spoken question caused Dave to start a little. He chewed on his lower lip for a moment, and then shook his head.

"Not even close to an idea!" he grated. "At least not one that would give us even a Chinaman's chance. How about you?"

"Mind a blasted blank!" the English youth sighed. "Getting von Staube and von Gault away from that crowd over there would be as easy as getting Hitler out of his precious Berlin bomb shelter during an R.A.F. raid. I haven't even seen either of them poke their noses outside yet. And blast it! It'll be daylight soon."

Dave nodded soberly, turned slightly and stared toward the east. He was not looking for the dawn, however. He was looking at the very first thing he had noticed when Freddy and he had arrived at the edge of this field. It was the Dornier Do. Seventeen light bomber resting peacefully on the edge of the east side of the field. There were a couple of Messerschmitt One-Tens, and a single One-Nine, too, but Dave hardly gave them a glance. He stared longingly at the Dornier, and his pounding heart wept bitter tears.

If only Jones had not met his Fate! If only the man had lived, and been able to play his part in this life and death, victory and defeat struggle. If only—But what was the use of thinking about what might have been? The key man was gone. The one main link to success was gone. Whether they won out or failed depended solely upon Freddy Farmer and himself. But what could Freddy and he do now? What possible chance did they have against such overwhelming odds? How in the world could they be expected to perform the absolutely impossible? They were only human. They weren't miracle men who could simply snap their fingers, and, *presto*, magic was done. They—

For an instant his eyes strayed to one of the Messerschmitt One-Tens. There was an avenue of escape for Freddy and himself. Just a couple of guards watching over those planes over there. They could be taken care of in short order, and Freddy and he could get one of those One-Tens in the air and be on their way back to England before the others realized what was taking place. Sure they could! And they could explain to Major Barber how they'd found Jones dead, how they had been chased all night by Nazi soldiers, and how it would have simply been asking for certain death to attempt to kidnap von Staube and von Gault under such impossible circumstances. Darned right! They'd tell Major Barber—

Dave clamped down hard on his whirling thoughts, and his whole body grew hot with shame. A fine soldier he was! Just about as much courage as a new born rabbit. Just a quitter. Afraid he might get hurt? Afraid he might get killed? My, my, what a pity! Well, never mind. Just go on home, and Major Barber would pat him sympathetically on the back, and say not to worry, and that it was really too much to have asked of any man. Yes, yes. Just go to sleep, my little man. And sweet dreams! Maybe some day somebody else will grab von Staube and von Gault, and then everything will be just dandy!

"Dave! What in the world's the matter with you? Your face is as red as a beet! Don't you feel all right?"

Freddy Farmer's anxious words snapped Dave out of his bitter reverie. He stopped looking at the Messerschmitts and met his pal's gaze.

"Just learning how a guy can get to hate himself," he said evenly. "But skip it. I don't want to talk about it. Freddy?"

"Yes, Dave?"

The Yank-born air ace hesitated and stared for a moment over toward the other side of the field.

"When a fellow can't figure out a plan," he presently said slowly, "the only thing to do is to wade in swinging with both hands, and hope that some kind of a plan will pop up. You agree with that?"

"Quite," the English youth said evenly. "Fact is, I was just going to say that I think it's a bit too late, now, to bother about thinking up a plan. I think we should simply go on over there, and—well, trust to luck, I guess, that we'll meet up with a bit of luck. Maybe it's silly, and stupid, and —"

Freddy paused and shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"It is all of that," Dave said, and absently wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "But that's how it is. Me, I'm sick of playing Indians and cowboys, crawling around in the dark, and getting no place. I'm for barging right into the business. And if we get caught on the wrong end of a gun, then—then that'll be that."

"Let's stroll around the west side of the field," Freddy said, and started to get up onto his feet. "A chance those guards by the planes might get a bit curious, you know. I've noticed that none of the others have gone near them."

"Strictly for Staff use, is my guess," Dave grunted as he got up too. "Just in case something pops around here, von Staube and von Gault are making sure they'll get out fast. Makes Nazi generals sore as the dickens to get killed, you know. Can't strut any more, or order women and children hostages shot, or have any kind of fun. They—Jeepers! Holy smokes! That's an idea!"

"What?" Freddy demanded. "Shooting women and children hostages, and—"

"No, heck no!" Dave shot at him as they moved along toward the west side of the field. "Just had a sudden idea. But I've got to mull over it a little before it would make sense. And speaking of sense, good sense—"

"Is there a place for that sort of thing, now?" Freddy asked in a bitter voice.

"Darned right there is!" Dave said. "Let's use our heads before we lose them. Beginning with now, pal, we don't know a word of the English language. We talk strictly German from here in. Right?"

"Absolutely!" Freddy gasped. "Stupid of us, of course. Right you are, *mein Herr!* German it shall be."

The two air aces lapsed into thoughtful silence, and walked along the edge of the small field, and around the west side toward the cluster of Headquarters buildings. With every step he took Dave's heart was up in his throat, and pounding furiously. They were beginning to meet German soldiers and officers now, and he was filled with the gnawing fear that they would be stopped and challenged. After all, even the boastful, cocksure Nazis don't allow everybody to wander about an H.Q. location.

It so happened, though, that they were not challenged once. Those they met either believed they had a perfect right to be strolling along, or else they were too busy with their own thoughts to notice them. Anyway, they were able to keep right on going, and eventually were part of a group of Germans gathered in front of the center building in the cluster. They stood close together and listened intently to the flow of excited conversation. And what they heard brought happiness to their aching hearts, and made them thrill with pride clear down to the soles of their boots. Obviously the United Nations Commando attack was going very badly for the Nazis. Practically all of Le Havre was in Commando hands. Nazi fortifications there, U-boat repair docks, and stores of Nazi military equipment had been blown sky high. And the Commandos were spreading out to the north, south, and east like the unleashed waters of a flood tide. In addition Nazi air strength had been more or less bottled up and securely corked. Those cursed American bombers! Flying Fortresses, they were called. Nothing seemed able to shoot them out of the air! And their bombs? Something terrible!

It went on and on like that. And Dave and Freddy had all they could do to force grave, worried looks to their faces, when instead they wanted to dance and shout with joy. But though the group of Nazis were worried, and plenty, over the way things were going, they still had that blind dog-like faith in their high ranking officers. From a score of lips Dave and Freddy heard statements that the enemy gains were only temporary at the most. That von Staube and von Gault were simply biding their time, and would strike their counter blows soon. Yes, von Staube had called up powerful reinforcements. They were now on the way to the zone of battle. And von Gault was massing powerful air squadrons, all types. *Ja, ja!* Germany's swine enemies were fools to believe that *Der Fuehrer* had sent most of Germany's air power to the Russian front. The cursed United Nations forces would soon realize that, as German bombs blew them clear out into the Channel. But of course! Ah! Look! Here comes another courier plane. It is probably good news this time! Yes! See how fast he lands! He must have good news this time, and be eager to report it.

Dave and Freddy watched with the others as another Arado plane came streaking down to a fast landing, and taxied up close at quite a bit of throttle. A figure leaped from the rear cockpit and went dashing in through the door of the center building. Dave and Freddy crowded over to the door with the others. Unfortunately, though, it was slammed shut in their faces. The Germans outside looked sheepishly at each other and moved away a little. Dave and Freddy played their part in the general scene and started to edge around to a point where they might get a quick look in through one of the side windows of the building. After all, they didn't know *for sure* that von Staube and von Gault were inside. They were actually only assuming; taking it for granted that such was the case.

And so, as though by unspoken but mutual agreement, they began to edge away from the general throng and round to the side of the building. But they had barely reached the corner when suddenly a wicked-looking Nazi Major loomed up before them to bar the way. Dave's heart skipped a beat, and when he took a good look at the German his heart skipped a couple of more beats and started sliding down in the general direction of his boots. The Nazi, by the insignia on his tunic, belonged to the same regiment that Dave and Freddy were supposed to belong to. Was there any reason why a Major shouldn't be able to recognize two of his junior officers? There was none, of course. And Dave felt as though he were staring certain death right in the face.

"What are you two doing here?" The words came out like pistol shots. "Did *Herr* Colonel send you? A message for me, perhaps? I am needed back there? I don't know you, so you must be two of those new officers they sent us yesterday. Your names?"

"*Ober-Leutnants* Kloss and Mueller, *Herr* Major," Dave heard his voice say. Then wildly grasping at a straw of hope, he went on, "That is true, sir. *Herr* Colonel sent us with his compliments. He wishes that you return as fast as possible."

The Nazi Major scowled and looked terribly angry, and for a long second the whole world seemed to stand dead still for Dave. He felt as if he were walking along a tightrope over a yawning chasm. Only there wasn't any tightrope there. Somebody had yanked it away, and he was simply hovering in mid-air before he went crashing down to his doom. The very next words that came from the Nazi Major's lips might well spell doom for Freddy and for himself. If the Nazi asked questions they couldn't answer—if—

"Very well!" The words were suddenly barked out. "I will do as the Colonel wishes. You two remain here, however. Take this report and see that it is delivered to Field Marshal von Staube the instant he is free to see you. He knows that I am waiting. You will explain that I was needed

at the regiment's Headquarters. Simply give him the report, and then return to your posts as fast as possible. This is not a leave you are on, you know. Well? Did they not teach you to salute your superiors at that officer's school? They are sending us mere *children* these days!"

The Major had jerked a sealed envelope from his tunic pocket, thrust it into Dave's hands, and was standing there glaring at them both. With a tremendous effort Dave and Freddy snapped out of it, clicked their heels, and almost tore their arms off saluting. The Nazi grunted, glared some more, and then went strutting off bellowing a name. The name of his chauffeur, probably.

For a minute longer the two boys just stood there as though their boots were nailed to the ground. Then they turned and stared at each other, neither quite sure that he wasn't just asleep and going through a crazy dream.

"Don't ever hope for luck again!" Dave finally broke the silence. "We've played out our string, Freddy. Nothing that ever happens from now on could possibly top this. My gosh, my gosh! I'm soaking wet with my own sweat. I thought I was going to fall into a fear faint for sure. And my hair is pure white, isn't it?"

"Grab hold of me, Dave, and hang on hard!" Freddy said hoarsely. "I'm afraid I'll start running and keep running until I'm miles from this spot. Good grief, what luck! All we have to do is wait a bit, and then get invited right in there with them."

"Sure!" Dave muttered. "And then what, pal?"

A lot of the happiness drained right out of Freddy Farmer's face. He slowly sucked air into his lungs, and then promptly sighed heavily.

"Quite!" he murmured. "And then what? The beggars will no doubt have others in there with them. And what in the world can we do about it?"

"I don't know, yet," Dave grunted. "But—but we've got to do something, even if it's letting them have it in cold blood, Freddy. Major Barber wants them kidnapped, but—"

Dave finished the rest with a shrug and a gesture of his hands. Freddy Farmer made a wry face and swallowed quickly a couple of times.

"Yes, of course!" he got out with an effort. "It's war, and war's a beastly business. Still—"

"Me, too, pal," Dave said softly. "I hope with all my heart and soul we can figure some way. But one thing we're pledged to as loyal Commandos, Freddy. Those two go out of the war picture today, one way—or another."

Freddy Farmer didn't make any comment. He simply looked Dave in the eye, and nodded silently.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eagles' Courage

"If we have to wait any longer, Dave, I swear I'll fly apart in small pieces. This blasted suspense is getting me down something awful!"

Dave grinned at his English pal, and gave him a comforting nudge with his elbow.

"That makes two of us," he whispered. "But it's been only fifteen minutes, you know."

"Fifteen years!" Freddy corrected. "And look at that sun coming up! The more light around here, the tougher it's going to be for us, you know."

"You're telling me?" Dave murmured, and squinted at the first rays of dawn light stealing westward across the face of that part of France. "Swiping one of those Nazi planes in the dark is hard enough. But in broad daylight—well, let's not think about that little item. I sure wish, though, that—"

Dave never finished the rest of that statement. At that moment the door of the center building was jerked open and a fashion plate uniformed Nazi Staff Captain stood framed in the doorway. He swept black, cruel-looking eyes over the officers and men grouped about, and scowled angrily.

"*Herr* Major von Kummil!" he cried out in a rasping voice. "*Herr* Major von Kummil! Are you out here? *Herr* Field Marshal wants you at once!"

As the Nazi barked the words he jerked his head from side to side like a spectator watching the flight of the ball in a tennis match. Dave hesitated, then nudged Freddy Farmer.

"I think that means us," he whispered. "That's probably the Major who told us to wait. We've got to chance it, anyway. Right?"

The English youth simply nodded, and started pushing through the group outside the door. Dave was right at his heels. They stopped a few steps from the black-eyed captain, and saluted.

"*Herr* Major von Kummil was recalled to regimental Headquarters by *Herr* Colonel," Freddy spoke up in perfect German. "He instructed us to wait for *Herr* Field Marshal's pleasure."

The Nazi Captain stared down at them as though they were something the cat had dragged in. Then, as his gaze fell on the sealed envelope Dave held in his hand, his eyes took on a bright gleam. But Dave beat him to the punch.

"Our instructions were to deliver this in person, *Herr* Captain," Dave said.

"That is true," Freddy echoed. Then he suddenly added, "And besides, *Herr* Captain, I have been ordered to make my own report by word of mouth. It is impossible to put it in writing."

For a split second Dave thought that Freddy's words were simply to make sure that they both were admitted inside. But as he flashed a quick look at his pal and saw the odd look on Freddy's face, his heart looped over and the blood started to pound through his veins. Freddy was up to just more than getting inside that Headquarters building! There was something much, much more important than just that, in Freddy's head. Dave had only time for a quick look, but it was enough to tell him that Freddy was up to something.

"So?" the Nazi Captain suddenly got out in a sneering tone. "Very well, then. Come in, both of you. But do not be too long. Say what you have to say, and don't waste words, you understand?"

Dave nodded meekly, but trust Freddy Farmer to have his little final say! Freddy coldly returned the senior officer's looks, and then put just the faintest touch of sarcasm in his reply.

"But certainly not, *Herr* Captain!" he said. "It is not for me to add to *Der Fuehrer's* orders!"

"*Der Fuehrer?*" the Nazi Captain gasped, and stood there with his black eyes popping, and his bird-like mouth hanging open.

Freddy let it go at that. He nodded to Dave and then calmly led the way past the gaping Captain and in through the door. By the time they were inside a short narrow hallway, the Nazi had collected his wits.

"This way," he said, and led them down the hallway, and through double doors that opened off the right.

For some crazy reason the first thing that came to Dave's brain as he was ushered into a fairly big room was the quite unimportant realization that Freddy and he had actually been edging toward the wrong side of the building when they had bumped into that Nazi Major. They would undoubtedly have gained nothing had they been able to peek through the windows on that side.

That thought came and went, and then he was taking notice of other things that really were important. The room was exactly like other Nazi military Headquarters he had seen during his war career. Maps covered with little colored flags. A bank of field phones. Shortwave radio sets. Memos, dispatches, letters and any number of other kinds of military papers scattered all over the place. But the main attraction, of course, was the huge double desk at which sat the two Nazi high rankers who had been personally responsible for ninety per cent of Adolf Hitler's blood triumphs to date.

On one side was Field Marshal von Staube, lumpy, beefy, with a sweating red face, bald head, and neck the thickness of a telephone pole. And on the other side sat Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault, looking like a half starved vulture about to strike. His cruel, hawkish face was absolutely blood chilling to behold, and it was all Dave could do to suppress the shudder that started through him. The Number One and Number Two killers of the Third Reich. Adolf Hitler's two butchers. Himmler, of the infamous Gestapo, acted like a sweet little old lady when his acts were compared with the killing and plunder performed under the command of these two.

Dave looked at them, and his hand twitched as he had the sudden desire to go for the small but deadly automatic he carried in his tunic pocket. Neither Freddy nor he wanted to end it that way. But they would be true to their mutual vow. Though it cost them all the torture the Nazis could inflict upon them, today would be the last day of war for Field Marshal von Staube and Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault. These two would never—

"Well, have you lost your tongues? What are you here for? Where is your Major von Kummil? Speak up! Can you two young fools not see that I am busy?"

It was von Staube who spoke the words. Yet that is not quite right. He did not exactly speak them. His voice sounded more like an express train going through a tunnel. Dave stepped quickly forward, saluted with one hand, and held out the sealed envelope with the other.

"*Herr* Major von Kummil was recalled, *Herr* Field Marshal," he said. "We were intrusted to deliver this to you."

The German high ranker growled in his throat, snatched the envelope from Dave's hand, stabbed a thick finger under the flap opening and ripped viciously. He took out a fold of papers inside, glanced through them quickly, and then hurled the lot down on the desk.

"Fools!" he thundered. "Swine stupid fools! To tell me this by courier, when it could have been spoken over the telephone an hour ago! What do I care about the condition of your reserves? Should I tell the enemy to wait until we are ready to give them battle? Should I sit here and wait until arms and battle equipment have been issued to every German soldier. *Mein Herr!* What am

I commanding? German armies or packs of fools?"

The German bellowed the questions straight at Dave, and pounded his fat fists on the desk. Beads of sweat flew from his face, and his color mounted to where it seemed impossible that he wouldn't explode in small pieces in the next instant. Dave tried to think of something to say, but the German seemed not to want answers to his questions. He probably didn't even realize that he was looking straight at Dave. He was too busy with thoughts about something, some part of his plans, that had gone higher than a kite.

"Fools, stupid dogs!" he went right on roaring. "I order something, and I get nothing but words by courier! Well, we shall see about that. We shall see. There'll be a few swine heads fall before this day is done. And they will not all belong to our enemies. The—"

Words failed the big fat German Field Marshal. He dropped back into his desk chair mumbling and gurgling sounds that didn't make any sense. Dave noticed that von Gault was watching von Staube closely, but there was just a shade of worry in the Luftwaffe Marshal's cruel eyes. Perhaps von Gault had gone through this thing before, with disastrous results to himself. After all, von Staube was Number *One*. Anyway, the Luftwaffe Marshal was watching his partner in world wide crime closely, and was not looking at all happy.

Suddenly, though, as if a completely different person had sat down in Field Marshal von Staube's chair, the red rage faded from the German's face. He picked up the scattered papers and gave them another look. He scowled, tugged at his lower lip, and massaged his fat chin a little. Then he raised his eyes to von Gault's face.

"Perhaps it will not alter things much," he said. "Von Alder is not one to depend on, anyway. We will use the Sixth, Tenth, and Fourteenth, instead. All seasoned troops. They will probably do the job much better, anyway. But that von Alder. That one! How he will hear of this!"

The German Field Marshal checked himself as though suddenly realizing that Dave and Freddy were still standing there. He turned and gave them a curt nod.

"Return to your regiment!" he growled.

Dave started to salute and turn to leave, suddenly thankful of the chance to get out of there, and fast. But he didn't go all the way around. First he saw Freddy Farmer still standing at stiff attention. And next he saw the Nazi Captain's black eyes fixed steadfastly and questioningly on the English youth. It was then Dave remembered Freddy's crazy remark to the Captain. His heart stood still, and he impulsively moved his hand a little so that he could get at his pocketed gun that much quicker. Was this the show-down? Was Freddy going to make this the show-down? Would both of them have to blaze away in cold murder—Nazi style?

It seemed to Dave that he lived a thousand years standing there half turned to go out the door. Then von Staube's booming voice exploded through the silence.

"Didn't you hear my orders?" he thundered at the motionless Freddy. "Return to your regiment!"

"Your pardon, *Herr* Field Marshal," the English youth spoke up bold as brass, while ice formed about Dave's heart. "I have a report of my own. It has nothing to do with this other thing. May I ask, *Herr* Field Marshal, if your *pilots* have reported to you?"

Stunned silence spread over the room like a thick heavy blanket. Both von Staube and von Gault stiffened. So did the black-eyed Captain. As a matter of fact, so did Dave Dawson. And he was suddenly filled with the wild desire to catch up Freddy, and sling him over his shoulder, and make a dash for it. Freddy had gone nuts! Maybe a blow on the head when he had taken care of that Nazi soldier back by the shelled church. But Freddy was definitely off his trolley! What in the world did he think he was saying?

"My pilots reported to us?" Field Marshal von Staube echoed. "Of course. Why? Why do you want to know?"

For a second or so Freddy just looked at the German, then switched his gaze to von Gault.

"You know them all personally, *Herr* Luftwaffe Marshal?" he shot out the question. "You selected them, perhaps?"

The Luftwaffe Marshal looked angry, baffled, and just a little scared. He wet his lips a couple of times before he spoke. And when he did his voice was high and strained, as though it were an effort to get the words out.

"*Herr* Captain Kohle and *Leutnant* von Stebbins have been the two stationed here for weeks," he replied. "Of course I know them! Of course I appointed them as Headquarters pilots. What is the meaning of this?"

"A precaution," Freddy answered quietly. "*Der Fuehrer's* orders, at *Herr* Himmler's request. It is the Gestapo's eternal job to safeguard the lives of Germans valuable to the Third Reich!"

"*Gestapo?*" Field Marshal von Staube practically blew up with wrath. "*This* is a war zone. This is *Army* Headquarters. It is for the cursed Gestapo to—!"

The German stumbled to a stop, and just sat glaring at Freddy Farmer, and drumming his fingertips on the desk. For a split second Dave almost wanted to laugh out loud. If all this wasn't

so deadly serious, it would be funny. The German Army Staff and Himmler's Gestapo were like two tomcats on a back yard fence. They hated each other, but each knew that the other was very necessary to the German Reich. But of the two it was the German Army Staff who feared the most. Himmler had the inside track with Hitler. He had the *Fuehrer's* ear. And more than one German Staff head had gone rolling into the basket because that high ranker had tried to freeze out *Herr* Himmler. No, the German Army Staff didn't like the Gestapo one bit, but there was little they could do about it, yet. Just as long as *Herr* Himmler held Adolf Hitler's trust and confidence, it was well for the generals to watch their step!

And so Field Marshal von Staube choked off what he would like to have said, and just glowered and glared at Freddy.

"So, Gestapo, eh?" he suddenly blurted out with a sneer he couldn't hold back. "I suppose you suspect that spies are members of my Staff, eh?"

But Freddy didn't walk into the trap. He knew perfectly well that a Gestapo member as young as he looked wouldn't know *too* much.

"I suspect no one, *Herr* Field Marshal," he said with stiff respectfulness. "I have only been given my orders to carry out. If you wish to complain to *Herr* Himmler? There is the phone. He is in his Berlin Headquarters now."

Dave held his breath. Was Freddy begging for death? He must be mad. He *was* mad! What in thunderation was he trying to pull off? What did Freddy think all this insane business was going to get them? Dave didn't have the ghost of an idea. But whatever it was, it was all Freddy's party now. Dave didn't dare speak a word, or do anything. But when he glanced at his pal and saw the typical cold haughtiness of the Gestapo that seemed to surround the English youth, a wild thrill raced through him. Perhaps—just perhaps—Freddy wasn't out of his mind. Maybe he did have something by the tail.

At any rate, the bluff worked. Field Marshal von Staube made no move to reach for one of the many phones. And Dave felt a little as though he had been reborn. No, not reborn. More like a condemned man who has received a stay of execution.

"I will make my complaints at the right time, and in the right places!" the German Field Marshal suddenly boomed. "Well? What *is* your mission here, anyway? What about *Herr* Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault's pilots? What about them?"

Freddy Farmer made as though to reach into his upper left tunic pocket, but seemed to change his mind.

"Perhaps nothing, *Herr* Field Marshal," he said evenly. "However, there are one or two questions I should like to ask *Herr* Captain Kohle and *Herr* *Leutnant* von Stebbins. In your presence, of course, sir. And yours, too, *Herr* Luftwaffe Marshal von Gault. This much I can say. If they speak the truth, their answers to my questions may be very interesting, and enlightening."

Von Staube scowled still more deeply, drummed his fingers on the desk some more, and then looked across at von Gault. He seemed to see something in the other's eyes, though von Gault didn't nod or shake his head.

"*Herr* Captain!" von Staube suddenly roared at the black-eyed officer. "Go find the two officers mentioned, and bring them here at once. Just that, mind you! Bring them here, and keep your mouth shut!"

"At once, *Herr* Field Marshal!" the Captain gasped, and went out the door as though he had been kicked.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Steel Nerves

When the German Captain slammed shut the door behind him, and there were sounds of his footsteps along the hall outside, Dave slowly let locked air from his lungs and stole another glance at Freddy Farmer. The English-born air ace still stood at rigid attention, but there was not even a flicker of fear in his face. His expression was one of perfect coolness and calmness. It was as though he went through this sort of thing every day in the week, and doing it again were just a wee bit boring.

The two German high rankers stared at Freddy in sullen anger. But it was plain to see that neither of them had the desire to exert their supreme authority at the moment. In fact, it was a perfect picture of the Nazi system. The Army Staff vs the Gestapo. And the Gestapo was holding the whip hand because of events which had taken place in the past. Perhaps some day, when the Army Staff was sitting in the saddle, and was Adolf Hitler's favorite for the moment, Gestapo heads would drop like apples shaken from the tree. Right now, though, the Gestapo was the so-called power behind the throne. And so von Staube and von Gault were feeling their way—cautiously.

However, nuts to the German Army Staff! And likewise, nuts to the Gestapo! What was Freddy Farmer's game? What crazy insane goal did he think he was shooting at, anyway? Darn him for not giving out a single hint, or a tip-off. The least Freddy could do would be to shoot him a quick look that would tell him a little something. But, no! Freddy was acting as though he didn't know that Dave existed.

Worry and anger boiled around in the Yank-born air ace. Past friendship and experience told him, or at least tried to tell him, that Freddy hadn't suddenly blown his top; that he wasn't crazy, and knew exactly what he was doing. But if Dave only had some idea, then he would know how to play his part. But this waiting, this nerve-tingling silence! Dave wondered a little if he weren't going crazy himself. He swallowed and pressed his wrist comfortingly against the small gun in his pocket. And he pressed the upper half of his other arm against the hardness of his sheathed Commando knife hanging from his shoulder under his German tunic. If worse came to worse, he —

At that moment Freddy Farmer suddenly had a fit of coughing. He bent over a little and put one hand to his mouth. The two Germans looked at him in a sort of cold delight. But Dave didn't notice their looks. His gaze was fixed on Freddy. And suddenly his heart gave a great leap, and tingling warmth shot through him. Freddy had turned his head slightly, and for the fraction of a second their eyes met. But it was long enough for Dave to catch the quick half wink; to see the second and third fingers of Freddy's other hand quickly cross and uncross.

True, it told Dave nothing of his pal's game. But that didn't matter too much, now. At least he knew for sure that Freddy was playing a wild game, and that he was not completely crazy. There was method in his apparent madness, and he had signalled to Dave to be ready for anything, and to pray hard for a bit of luck.

Freddy had gained control of his coughing when the door opened and the Captain came in with the two Luftwaffe pilots. They were both young, and not bad-looking—for Germans. They clicked their heels and practically jerked themselves apart saluting von Staube and von Gault.

The Nazi Field Marshal simply answered with a grunt, and then fixed his angry eyes on Freddy's face.

"Captain Kohle, and Lieutenant von Stebbins," he said in a voice that was mostly a snarl. "Ask them your questions, but be quick about it. We *soldiers* have still a battle to fight!"

Freddy nodded stiffly, then backed up a few steps to a point where he could get a better look at the two new arrivals. As a matter of fact, he backed up to a point where he commanded an unobstructed view of the entire room. And *also* a point that put him not two feet from Dave's side.

"Ready, Dave! Gun and knife!"

Had Freddy spoken? Or was it a trick of his imagination? The thought question flashed through Dave's brain. And then he saw the lightning-like movements of Freddy Farmer's hands. A gun appeared in the English youth's right hand, and his Commando knife appeared in his left, perfectly gripped and balanced to be shot forward like a flash of light. In the next instant Dave had his own gun and Commando knife out, and he was listening to Freddy's even voice tossing words at the dumbfounded, stunned quintet of Nazis.

"Not a move, if any of you want to live! We're Commandos! There are others outside. This whole area is surrounded by Commandos. If you want to resist, go ahead. We've been training a long time for *this* little occasion. You! Don't move!"

The last was because the German Staff Captain had half jerked up one arm. It was probably an impulsive gesture of terror. If it wasn't, terror was most certainly on his face a split instant later. Freddy Farmer's left hand shot forward with a twisting, whipping motion. And the Commando knife wasn't there any more. It was a streak of light that went across the room and pinned the sleeve of the German Captain's tunic to the wall. The Nazi looked at it, and almost fainted. The other four gasped in terror.

"*Commandos!*"

Field Marshal von Staube half choked and half sobbed out the words. Freddy gave him a cold hard stare, then calmly walked around in back of Dave, so as not to block off his Yank pal, and went over to the German Captain and jerked his knife free.

"Yes, Commandos!" he barked at the Field Marshal. "With a job to do, one way *or* the other. Which way is up to you. Dave! There're two of these beggars we don't need. This Captain and the young pilot Lieutenant. Take care of them, will you, while I keep an eye on the others?"

Freddy didn't look at Dave as he quietly spoke the words in English. But he didn't have to. Dave knew exactly what was needed of him. And whether it made sense didn't matter. It was still Freddy Farmer's party, and he had gone through too many war experiences with his English pal to bother asking questions until afterward. And so, careful not to get into Freddy's line of fire, he quickly circled about the room to the German Captain. The Nazi's eyes were glazed with terror, and then they were closing shut as he folded silently to the floor. Dave's swift, neat clip behind the ear with the barrel of his gun would have brought words of praise from any Commando. But Dave wasn't expecting praise, or even thinking about it. He took another step and repeated the little maneuver on the Luftwaffe Lieutenant. As he pulled wire and gags from his pocket, and

started to bend down, Freddy stopped him.

"We might need that chap's tunic, Dave. Strip it off, first."

Dave did that little thing. And then, in less time than it takes to tell about it, he bound and gagged both unconscious Germans, and rolled them over against the wall.

"Who's next, Doctor?" he asked, straightening up and grinning at Freddy. "What next?"

The English youth didn't answer. His gaze was riveted on the two German high rankers, and the youthful Luftwaffe Captain. The latter seemed on the point of dropping into a dead faint. Freddy Farmer's little Commando knife trick had obviously drained every drop of courage from his body. It was not so, however, with von Staube and von Gault. True, they were not moving a single muscle, and there was a marked trace of fear in their eyes. Just the same they were trained and seasoned soldiers. They were not completely cowards in the face of death. As Dave snapped a glance their way, his heart turned over, and his mouth went a bit bone dry. The two high rankers seemed to be silently gauging their chances. They seemed to be deciding just what move to make first. Dave gripped his gun tighter, and beat back the revolting thoughts that tried to crowd into his brain. If it was to be cold-blooded murder, then so be it. He and Freddy were Commandos now. And Commandos give no quarter, and ask none. The job is the thing. The method of performing it is secondary!

"You will not leave here alive! You realize that, don't you, you swine Commandos?"

It was von Staube who spoke, but Dave instantly noticed that the Nazi high ranker was careful not to speak in his natural booming voice. He wanted to be brave, but he wanted *less*—to die.

"Of course we realize it!" Freddy Farmer told him quietly. "We realized that before we even started across tonight. But let me point out something, *Herr* Field Marshal, and *Herr* Luftwaffe Marshal. You are both seasoned soldiers, so you will understand about men obeying orders. We were ordered to capture you two, and deliver you to our commanding officer who waits not half a mile from this spot. We were ordered to capture and deliver you, or—or to deliver *evidence* that you would no longer be of any use to your *Fuehrer*!"

Silence settled over the room as Freddy finished. The muscles of each German's face twitched, but Dave was quick to see that they weren't quite completely impressed. He saw a part he could play, and he was quick to take advantage of it while the two Nazi Marshals were on the uneasy seat. He stepped forward quickly, and whipped down with his Commando knife. It twanged into the desk top between the third and fourth fingers of von Gault's left hand that happened to be resting motionless on the desk. The Luftwaffe Marshal gasped, but swallowed the cry of fright as Dave's gun came within ten inches of his thin, hawkish nose.

"Your left hand, and his, too!" Dave grated, and jerked his knife free. "You each wear a Nazi Staff ring. Your left hands, still wearing the ring, and the insignia from your tunics, will be evidence enough to convince our commanding officer that we have fulfilled our mission."

"Quite!" Freddy added in a brittle voice. "True, we may be killed as we race to reach our unit hiding in the woods. But that's the chance we take. *They* will reach our dead bodies, at least. And our commanding officer will see the severed hands, and the Staff rings, and the insignia from your tunics. He will know that we *have* performed our assignment."

"Why waste time?" Dave suddenly asked impatiently, and gestured with his Commando knife. "These two don't fear death that much. They'd never agree to the *other* way."

Dave was only making blind shots in the dark, but he prayed that Freddy wouldn't speak. And his prayer was answered. Freddy didn't say a word. He simply kept staring at the Germans and let the torment of silence do its stuff. And it did, right up to the hilt. Dave could almost look inside the skulls of the two Germans, and see the wheels spinning over. It was a case of the shoe being on the other foot, for those two. Hideous slaughter, and death, were part of their training. But it was something that *they* ordered, or performed. To torture and maim beyond the point of human endurance was fun for them. They loved it. It was a major part of their rotten lives; their vile existence on earth.

But the shoe was on the other foot *now*. They were to be on the receiving end of their own type of work. They weren't up against trained soldiers who killed, or captured, and sent their prisoners to a war camp. They were up against a new kind of enemy in this war. The Commando! The Commando trained to fight them at their own kind of battle, but with far, far more devastating effect. The Commando! The very name struck terror these days to any German's heart. Motionless shadows in the night who killed you before you could part your lips to cry out. Black phantoms who came and went like flashes of lightning. Tough men, hard as nails, who pressed triggers and *then* took a look to see what they'd bagged. And a good many times they didn't even bother to look. The Commando! The warrior who carried death in either hand, and could let it fly from any angle, and in any spot!

That's what Dave saw those two German high rankers thinking. He saw the fear mount in them. The first signs were a faint twitching of the lips, then throat muscles swallowing, and then fingers quivering slightly. And lastly, beads of sweat becoming too heavy, and trickling downward over the skin of their faces. Yes, the Germans were trained soldiers. They could not be classed as rank cowards. They did have a courage of their own. But this? The shoe was on the other foot, *this* time!

"What is the other way?" von Staube suddenly croaked at Dave.

The Yank let him stew a little longer, and then spoke to Freddy without turning his head.

"You tell him," he said. "You're in command here."

"Quite a simple way," Dave heard his English pal say. "You can come with us, if you don't wish us to *take* the evidence with us."

Both Germans smiled. They were suddenly very relieved and happy. Dave had a funny feeling in the middle of his stomach, but Freddy spoke again, and the funny feeling went away.

"Pleases you, eh?" the English youth murmured. "Sorry, but it won't work out quite that way. No one will see us leave. That is, I hope not, for your sakes. This rear door—we're leaving that way. If we meet anybody, you will be wise to do nothing. Not a sign or a look. We will be with you, very close. You see these Commando knives? We spent hours sharpening them. Quite a scientific process, you know. And so effective. The blade goes in and up at a slant, just missing the backbone. The needle tip punctures the heart. Not too much, of course. They trained us thoroughly, you know. And—But why should I explain to you two? You know all about that sort of thing, of course. Death comes so slowly—and so frightfully painfully. Worse than a bullet in the stomach, they say. Of course, if that *has* to happen, then my comrade and I will have to shoot whoever is in our way—collect our bits of evidence as quickly as we can—and run for it. I fancy we'll make it close enough to the woods to be reached by the others. I hope your other chaps will give us a decent funeral. We're Christians, you know. We're—"

"Enough, enough!" von Staube got out in a strangled voice. "You do not need to paint the picture, you swine. We will do as you say. We are your prisoners. *Ja! Ja!* Is not that plain enough?"

Freddy didn't answer. He gave them some more of the silence treatment. So Dave played another random shot.

"I don't know." He spoke in German out of the corner of his mouth at Freddy. "I don't trust *any* German. Why run the additional risks? Besides, taking them back to England simply means that our side will have to feed them. That's wasting good food. I'm all for—"

"No! Not that! We are your prisoners. We throw ourselves upon your mercy!"

The last tiny shred of courage in von Gault had been melted away. The Luftwaffe Marshal was half insane with terror. He was trembling like a leaf, and at the same time striving frantically to still his muscles for fear that he might be maimed and slain on the spot.

"Very well," Freddy Farmer spoke up. "You come with us, then. Watch them a minute, Dave. I have a small job to do. Hands behind your backs, you too. Quick about it!"

The high ranking Nazis instantly obeyed. Freddy Farmer slipped behind them, and as Dave stood guard the English youth bound their wrists with the wire he took from his own tunic pocket. He straightened up and moved close to the Luftwaffe Captain, who had been silent as a tomb and scared stiff as a post all the while. Freddy made a little motion with his gun and Commando knife.

"Come out into the hall with me," he told the quaking German. "In front of me. I'll be right behind. I say, Dave, just keep an eye on those two, will you? Be back in a minute, or less."

And with a quick look, and a wink for Dave, Freddy Farmer herded the Luftwaffe Captain through the door and out into the hallway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Gods Laugh

Although Dave kept his face grim, and his eyes fixed steadfastly upon von Staube and von Gault, that did not mean he was all calm and collected inside. Indeed, he was far from that. Out of a clear blue sky Freddy Farmer had popped up with something else that didn't make sense at first glance. What in thunder did Freddy want with that Luftwaffe pilot out in the hall? Matter of fact, why had Freddy spared the youth a crack behind the ear in the first place? Did Freddy—?

Dave caught his breath as a sudden thought came to him. Did this bit of crazy business have something to do with the Messerschmitts and the Dornier Seventeen over at the east end of the field? But just what, and how? True, Dave realized now that it was Freddy's plan to herd their two important prisoners out the back way, and make a dash for the Dornier. But why fool around with the Luftwaffe pilot? Why not just slug him and get going with the prisoners? Why wait? The dawn sky was getting brighter by the minute. Their only hope of making this crazy venture come out right was to do it while there was still some darkness of night on their side. Sure! The instant they got von Staube and von Gault out the back way, they would slug them into peaceful unconsciousness, and carry them like sacks of wheat over to the Dornier—hoping against hope that the bad light would shield them from the other Germans about the field.

But what a bold, brazen, and perfectly executed stunt Freddy Farmer had pulled off so far. Like

reaching into a hat and producing miracles. It had taken cold courage for Freddy to go through with his wildcat idea. But it had worked. The very fact that any sane brain would have considered it absolutely impossible had been the one great thing in Freddy's favor. A magnificent bluff so expertly acted out that it had been much too late to do anything by the time its victims had seen through it. If Freddy Farmer never did another single thing in this war, he would still have set an all time high for steel nerves and brazen bravery. That confounded Luftwaffe Captain, though! Where in thunder did he come into the picture? Why get two of them over here, and put only one of them out of the action? It didn't—

A muffled shouting and other sounds in the hall outside the door curled fingers of ice about Dave's heart. He started to turn, but checked himself in the same split second as he saw von Staube and von Gault stiffen.

"Relax!" he told them in their own tongue. "Just hold everything—or else!"

He bounced the Commando knife in the palm of his left hand, and that was all the two Germans needed to kill any sudden decision they might have made. It was more than enough. Dave's gun they didn't mind staring at. But his Commando knife seemed like a swaying cobra's head before their eyes. They couldn't take it, and didn't make another move.

One—two—three minutes dragged by, like a fly crawling through molasses. Dave's nerves strained and twanged inside of him. His heart came up into his throat and stayed there. He watched his two prisoners with one eye, and kept the other on the hallway door. What had happened? Did Freddy need help? Should he leave these two and race out to Freddy's assistance? After all, their luck must be at the snapping point. Everything had gone off too smoothly, too easily. That wasn't the usual way of things in war. Something was bound to crack, and always did. The gods had to have their little laugh. Should he go outside to give Freddy a hand?

Those and hundreds of other questions flew through Dave's brain. He hesitated in soul-searing indecision, and then suddenly the hall door opened and Freddy Farmer came leaping into the room. His face was just a little pale, but there was a brittle gleam in his eyes. He waved a sealed envelope at the two high ranking Germans.

"A dispatch just arrived," he said. "I took it from the chap for you. Sorry, but we've no time for this sort of thing."

And with that Freddy tore the sealed envelope in half, and tossed the two halves on the floor.

"Freddy, that pilot!" Dave asked. "What—"

"Sleeping," the English youth cut him off. "No use for him, now. The dispatch chap is keeping him company. Front door locked, so no one will come in that way."

"Then for the love of Mike let's get going!" Dave cried. "You're wonderful, pal, but don't force your luck. Boy! Will you be snowed under with medals!"

Freddy didn't say anything for a moment. It was as though he hadn't even heard Dave's words. He stood with feet planted apart, and his weight thrown forward on his toes, and his head cocked to one side. Anger blazed up in Dave. He was about to speak again when he thought he heard the sound of aircraft engines. He wasn't sure, and in the next instant he had forgotten all about it. Freddy Farmer had snapped out of his trance and was getting into motion.

"Right-o, Dave!" he said, and advanced on the two Germans. "Take von Gault, Dave. I'll handle the other. Up, you two! Time to move. And remember! A Commando means exactly what he says—or promises. It's a sort of an oath, you know!"

Freddy had slid around in back of von Staube and pricked the back of the Field Marshal's neck with the needle point of his Commando knife. The German felt the pain, and gasped.

"*Ja, ja!*" he babbled out. "I do as you say. We do as you order. We are your prisoners."

"Quite!" Freddy reminded him in a grating voice. "Now, come along. Through this rear door. If we meet anybody, tell him to return to his office. Only that, remember! He won't see my knife, but you'll feel it, my good man! Never fear! Let's go, Dave!"

Walking on the Field Marshal's right, and a respectful half step to the rear, so that he could keep the point of his knife pressed against the back of the Nazi's tunic, and not have it seen from in front, the English youth guided his prisoner over to the rear door of the room, and opened it. Dave took the same position with his prisoner and sent him forward at Freddy's heels. With nobody saying a word, the party passed through the door, across a room that had once been the kitchen of the house, and out through the outside rear door.

With every step Dave took he was filled with the nerve-tingling sensation that he was walking on TNT charges with the fuses already lighted. With every passing second he felt sure that he and Freddy were just acting out some dream, a crazy nightmare that would explode in a roar of sound at any moment. He told himself that he wasn't afraid to die. That wasn't why he was shivering inwardly, and beads of hot sweat were trickling down his ribs. No, it wasn't fear of death. It was a fear that this really was *only* a nightmare. That it was only a miracle that had never actually happened. You just didn't walk into a Nazi Headquarters and walk out with two of their biggest big shots. You simply didn't do that sort of thing! It just didn't ever happen, not even in those wild blood and thunder war magazines. In fact, you were a little nuts even to *dream* about such

things!

Yet, all that to the contrary, it was true! It was taking place. They were out in the dawn air now. There was a lot of light to the east. Some shadows of spent night still lingered, but not many. There were some trees in back, on the other side of a seventy foot open space. If they could cross to those trees! They'd be in the shadows, then. They could follow along under the trees and circle around to the east end of the small drome where the Dornier was. They could steal upon the guards, and—

It was then that Dave suddenly was conscious of the fact that there were sounds of revving aircraft engines. He could tell by the throbbing note that they were German engines. German airplanes on the ground. German airplanes at the *east end of the little flying field!*

He started slightly, and his knife accidentally went forward a fraction of an inch. It slid through the cloth of von Gault's tunic, and through the clothes he wore underneath. It went all the way through and into his flesh a little. He gasped out a stifled sob.

"*Please! No! I beg you!*" he moaned. "Please, I am your helpless prisoner! I make no move to escape!"

Dave hardly heard him. His ears were filled with the sound of the revving aircraft engines. There must be other Nazi pilots about! They were getting ready to take the craft up into the air. Perhaps this was a part of some schedule that Freddy and he knew nothing about. Was their only avenue of escape going to fly away? They couldn't hope to march these two Germans to the nearest bunch of Commandos. The nearest point where they would find Commandos was miles away, far over on the *other* side of the Seine River.

"Freddy!" he choked out on the spur of the moment.

But that's as far as he could get.

"Quite all right, Dave!" his pal cut him off quickly. "Our chaps warming up the engines as arranged. We'd better put on a bit of speed. Mustn't keep them waiting."

Dave knew that he was prodding his prisoner across the space of open ground at an increased rate. He knew that Freddy and von Staube were speeding up also. He knew that they reached the shelter of the trees without incident of any kind. But they were all bits of snap realization that flipped through his brain. What filled his brain most was a great dawning light which had burst on him at Freddy Farmer's words. Those engines revving up were the Dornier's, of course! And Freddy knew it! He expected it! And—and he had arranged it. But how? Holy smoke! That Luftwaffe pilot he had herded out into the hall? But Freddy certainly hadn't sent that Jerry pilot over to start up the Dornier's engines and get them warm. Freddy had said the Luftwaffe Captain was "sleeping" in the hallway. So—?

The thought was ended right then and there for Dave. At that exact instant there came a roar of anger and blazing rage from around in front of the H.Q. building they had just quit. The roar came a split second after a crashing sound, a crashing and splintering that made Dave's heart quiver and then freeze up solid. He didn't know the true facts, but his guess was good enough for him.

Some of the Germans, maybe an arriving high ranker, had tried the H.Q. front door and found it locked. So the door had been smashed in and Germans knew now that von Staube and von Gault had been swiped right from under their noses. And if they didn't know the exact details, they would as soon as they had ungagged and revived those inside the place. It was the way it always happened! The gods had to have their laugh. Freedom and success were almost within hands' reach, and now suddenly everything seemed about to be wiped clean from the slate.

"Get speed out of that slob, Freddy!" Dave barked, and gave his own prisoner a vicious jab. "Jig's up. Speed's the only thing. Get that slob going, or slice him up. No time to waste words, now!"

Freddy Farmer didn't reply. He simply went into action. His needle pointed knife drew blood from von Staube's back. Perhaps the German's courage returned for a moment. Perhaps he was actually going to turn and throw his wrist-bound body at Freddy, perhaps even cry out. But the knife digging into his back was the breaking of the last straw. The big fat hulk gurgled out a moan of pain, and then tripped and went sprawling to the ground in a dead faint. Unable to check himself or his own prisoner, Dave and von Gault plowed into the pair in front, and everybody went sprawling.

And behind them in the shadows German voices screamed out commands to each other, and the fading night was filled with the snarl and crackle of random gunfire!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Commandos Never Quit!

For a fleeting instant Dave's head was full of spinning colored lights, and his lungs were full of

searing white flame. But the lights and the fire were gone as quickly as they had come. He rolled off the heap made by von Staube and von Gault, and breathed a little crazy prayer of relief that in spilling down he hadn't driven home his Commando knife. Quite unconsciously he must have twisted his hand so that the point of the knife was no longer at the German's back. And in the next instant he realized that Freddy Farmer had likewise been fortunate. Von Staube was still in a faint, and von Gault was rigid with fear, and gasping for knocked out wind. But neither of them was dead.

"Blast!" Freddy almost sobbed. "It was so close, too! I—"

"Shut up!" Dave told him. "It's still close. Grab your guy by the collar, and drag him along. The deeper we get into these trees, the better. I got an idea."

"What...?"

"Save it!" Dave cut his pal off again. "Just grab hold and heave-ho! Those tramps are only shooting at shadows so far. They don't know which direction we took. We can make tracks while there's still time. Deeper into the woods, Freddy."

Though his prisoner was still gasping and choking, that didn't bother Dave in the least. He hooked the fingers of his right hand in von Gault's tunic collar and then hauled the German over the ground and deeper into the strip of woods. Freddy and he had traveled no more than fifty yards when suddenly the English youth lost his footing and went tumbling with his prisoner down into a partially grown over shell crater made in the first year of the war. Dave stopped just in time, and felt like letting out a shout of joy. The gods had laughed, but they were being a little kind to Freddy and him now. Dave slid down into the shell crater, hauling von Gault along with him. By the time he reached the bottom where Freddy was wiggling out from under the unconscious von Staube, von Gault was past the moaning complaint stage. He was having all he could do to get a little air into his lungs and get it out again.

"Nice going, Freddy!" Dave cried softly. "Just what the doctor ordered. Couldn't find a better hide-out than right down here. Now—"

"But, Dave, we've—"

"Pipe down!" Dawson whispered. "Listen! We haven't a chance to reach that Dornier with all these birds tearing about. We'd be bound to stumble into them. These two chumps, their condition, would be a dead give-away. And—and, Freddy, the killing stuff is out, until there isn't a *single* hope left."

"Quite, Dave!" Freddy whispered. "I was just talking for their benefit, inside there, you know. Not unless—"

"Okay, okay, we're decided on that point!" Dave cut in. "Now, look! The way to that Dornier has got to be made clear. That yelling pack of wolves has got to be drawn off in the other direction. They've got to be made to think they've got a small sized war on their hands. I think I can arrange that part. You stick here, and see that these two don't let out a peep. If they so much as take a loud breath, crown them. I won't be gone more than ten minutes at the most. Then we'll carry them piggy back the rest of the way to the Dornier. But, hey! The Dornier! You *did* fix it to be revved up?"

"No, my little Commando knife," Freddy replied. "I made that Jerry pilot stick his head out the door and yell to one of his mechanics out there to start up the Dornier's engines. He was too scared to do anything else. Then I pulled him inside, locked the door for good luck, and bashed him into sleep, along with the dispatch rider who had come popping through. But, Dave! You can't!—"

"I can, and will!" Dave snapped angrily. "Look! It's my turn to have a hand in this party. You've done plenty, pal. I've just been playing the outfield with a no hit pitcher in the box. Nix! My turn, now. You stay put with these two. I'll be back in ten minutes, or less."

Dave turned to streak off among the shadows, but turned back to Freddy Farmer once more.

"Give me ten minutes, Freddy," he whispered. "If I don't show up, I'll have at least dragged them off in the other direction. That'll be that much of a break for you. Then you'll have to lug these two one at a time over to the planes, and take care of the guards there. But you've got a gun, and know how to use it. One thing, though. I'd stuff these two in the rear pit of one of those Messerschmitt One-Tens, if I were you. You can kick those babies into life and get off quicker than you can in a Dornier. Quite an order to fill, pal. I hope you don't have to fill it, and that I'll be back. Luck, pal!"

Dave squeezed Freddy's shoulder hard, and without giving his pal so much as a chance to open his mouth, whirled away from the half grown over shell crater and went speeding silently back through the woods toward their starting point. But he didn't go all the way to the starting point. He didn't even leave the woods. He kept well under their shadows until he was almost abreast of the Headquarters building and not a dozen yards from German officers and soldiers milling about in the pale light.

He pulled up to a halt and froze against a tree trunk. It had been his original intention to make for the west end of the field. He had spotted some drums of oil and gasoline there when walking

by the spot with Freddy Farmer. But now sight of the Nazis dashing about like so many bewildered chickens was too much to resist. Here was the perfect chance for a trained Commando to do his stuff. Surprise attack, a lightning blow, and an even faster retreat!

He moved slowly away from the tree trunk and toward a slightly hunched over German soldier with a sub-machine gun in his hands who was examining some piled up rubbish in back of the Headquarters building. Dave moved slowly for a moment, and then sprang forward with the speed of a pouncing tiger. The Commando knife he carried in his left hand went home dead true. His other hand chopped down on the sub-machine gun and yanked it from the falling German's hands. So swift and so deadly accurate had the Yank's actions been that he was spraying machine gun bullets to right and left, and in front of him, before any of those Germans near by knew what had happened.

For many the truth came too late. They went over like ten pins and fell sprawling to the ground. The others just leaped forward regardless of what was in front of them. They crashed into each other, into the rear of the building, or just into thin air—and kept going at top speed. A wild blast of concentrated fire in three directions, and then Dave jerked his finger off the trigger and sprinted back under the trees.

"Follow me, men!" he roared out in English. "The west side! Gather there, and we'll mop up. Follow me, men!"

Dave fired a shot burst, and went crashing through some bushes, making as much noise as he could. Then he slowed up a little, swerved sharply to his right, and the sounds he made from then on were no louder than a summer night wind. His feet hardly touched the ground as he dodged tree trunks, twisted past thorny bushes, and went speeding in a half circle around to the west side of the field. There the trees ended and he burst out onto open ground. Two grey clad figures loomed up in front of him. He saw the flash of dawn light on gun barrels. He flung himself flat, squeezing his own trigger as he fell. Three soldiers hit the ground together, but Dave Dawson was the only one of the three who got instantly up onto his feet again.

Clutching the sub-machine gun, he ran body well bent forward and low to the ground. Fifty yards of sprinting took him to the oil and gasoline drums. He skidded to a halt and blazed away at one of the oil drums. The brownish stuff spurted out onto the ground. Dave dropped to his knees and jerked a snap lighter from his pocket. He struck it into flame, dropped it in a pool of oil and started running off to the right at top speed. He had hardly reached the shelter of some woods on that side when the blazing oil reached the gas drums, and started to touch them off. Though he was a good thirty yards away the force of the explosion knocked him flat and almost sent the sub-machine gun flying from his grasp.

He clung onto it, however. And well that he did, too! At that moment, a squad of German troops came tearing toward him. They didn't see him in the light of the raging flame, but they would have in the next split second. Dave, however, didn't wait that next split second. He had swung the sub-machine gun up and was making it spit nickel-jacketed lead. It will never be known, but it is quite possible that not one of those Nazi soldiers knew what hit him. At least, not until he woke up in that other world, and there was Satan inviting him in.

Almost before the last Nazi had dropped, Dave was up on his feet again, and in whirlwind motion. Behind him was a roaring and a shouting that sounded like the whole German Army on his neck. His lungs were aching, and there was pain in his body from head to toe, but that did not stop him from putting more driving power into his legs. He tore blindly forward, not caring so much about direction now as distance. And when presently the roaring and shouting behind him seemed less, he cut sharply to his right toward the west.

He headed west for perhaps two minutes, then veered right again toward the north. All the roaring and shouting was off to his right now, and he had only to jerk his head in that direction to see the reflection of the burning oil and gas through the trees. He sped on by that spot until he came out into the open again and saw the dim shapes of houses in front of him. He swerved to the right for the last time, and went tearing along to the protective strip of woods that ran in back of the Headquarters building.

He was once more almost abreast of it when a figure loomed up in front of him. But loomed is not the correct word. The figure seemed to pop up, as though right out of the ground. He saw the hated grey green uniform, but he had no time to fling up his gun and fire. He was carrying it in one hand with fingers hooked about the trigger guard, while he kept the other hand out in front of him. So there was no time to shift his hold on the gun and shoot. There was only the time to hurl the gun straight out from him with every ounce of his strength. It didn't have far to travel, and it flew true. The gun crashed into the German's face and knocked him over flat, and Dave was forced to leap into the air broad jump style to prevent from stumbling over the fallen figure writhing on the ground in pain and total blindness.

Maybe ten seconds, maybe a half minute ticked by before Dave reached the grown over shell crater, and dived into it headlong. Hands slapped down on him, and steel fingers dug deep. But the pressure was instantly relaxed, and Freddy Farmer's arms were about him and hoisting him up to a sitting position. He heard the mumble of Freddy's words, but there were too many colored lights in his brain, too much of a roar in his ears, and too much white fire in his bursting lungs for him to understand for a few seconds.

"As if half the blasted German Army went tearing past us," Freddy's words began to register on

his brain. "We would have plowed right into them, if it hadn't been for your stunt, though! All that noise took five years off my life! Thought sure you had copped a bullet and—"

"Kiss me later!" Dave panted. "Right now we've got to get moving. They're running circles around each other down there. But they may give a thought to the planes any second. Grab your guy, and—Hey! They aren't dead—Freddy?"

Dave gasped the last as he reached down and started to heave von Gault up onto his feet. The German was limp, like a sack of wet wheat.

"Of course not!" Freddy snapped angrily. "Think I'm a blasted Nazi? Just tapped them to make sure they'd kick up no fuss. Better to carry them, anyway. This fat slob, von Staube, wouldn't go half fast enough, anyway. Let's go!"

"Check!" Dave grunted, and heaved von Gault up over one shoulder. "The last lap. Keep your gun in your hand, Freddy. Maybe the mechanics and guards didn't join in the fun."

"We'll find that out!" Freddy panted, and started off with Adolf Hitler's military little Boy-Blue slung over his shoulder.

The quarter of a mile they were forced to travel before they reached the open east end of the small flying field didn't give forth a single Nazi. And fortunately, for them, the noise of the revving engines and the bedlam still in progress at the west end of the field blotted out any sounds they made as they stumbled forward with their heavy burdens. In fact, it was the protection they needed to get them to within twenty yards of the Dornier. When they got that close they saw the lone mechanic standing under the right wing. He stood as though in a trance, his popping eyes fixed on the mounting flames to the west. Dave took one look, then silently deposited von Gault on the ground. He glanced at Freddy, shook his head, and put a finger to his lips.

One shot would take care of that Nazi mechanic, and nobody would have heard it. But Dave couldn't bring himself to do that. The mechanic was unarmed. It would be cold murder, and unnecessary too. And so Dave simply braced himself and then streaked those twenty yards like a cat on velvet. He reached the mechanic, clapped a hand over his mouth, hooked the other arm about his neck, and heaved upward and to the side. The mechanic seemed to do a beautiful swan dive through the flame-tinted air for a moment. Then he fell down on his face, and lay there groaning, and clawing with both hands at his neck.

Dave didn't give him a second look. He knew, from Commando training that it would be minutes before that mechanic would have full use of his body muscles and brain—particularly his brain. He simply sprinted back and hoisted von Gault up again onto his shoulder, and started with him toward the belly door of the Nazi light bomber. In the matter of seconds, the two young Commandos had their prisoners inside the bomber and bound together for "comfort." Then they ran forward to the pilots' compartment. There Dave hesitated, but Freddy shoved him roughly into the pilot's seat.

"You fly, old chap!" Freddy shouted above the sound of the engines. "Never cared much for the heavy stuff, anyway. Get on with it! It's your honor, old thing!"

Dave didn't stop to argue. Besides, he saw grey green clad figures sweeping toward them from the west end of the field. He kicked off the Dornier's wheel brakes and shoved the handle of the double throttle forward. The Daimler-Benz engines roared out their combined song of power and the bomber started forward. It picked up speed at a rapid rate, but its wheels were still clinging to the ground when the on-rushing Nazis veered off to the side and opened up a withering blast of machine gun and rifle fire. A million tiny cracks appeared in the cockpit windshield. And as Dave and Freddy ducked down low they heard the metallic wasps come whining into the cockpit and tear into the partition in back of them. And then, suddenly, the gods of good fortune seem to release the Dornier's wheels. The plane zoomed upward under full throttle, and the flame-spitting machine guns and rifles fell away from the belly of the bomber as it mounted higher and higher into the dawn-filled sky.

"Don't worry, bums!" Dave shouted on impulse. "We're just leaving you for a little while. We'll be back soon. Right! Us, and the whole gang. But you'll like that less!"

"Quite!" Freddy Farmer echoed his words. "But keep us going up, Dave. England's thirty minutes away still. Just look at that! That flame and smoke over Le Havre way. I guess the other chaps fulfilled their mission, too. What a mess they made of the whole attack area!"

Dave squinted ahead at the ocean of flame and oily black smoke that towered up above the Le Havre area. It was a horrible sight to see, but just the same it filled him with pride and joy to be a member of a force that could slam into Adolf Hitler's boasted strongholds and make that kind of a mess of things. One look at that flaming, smoking chaos and he knew that the United Nations Commando attack had been a success, in spite of what it may have cost. First Dieppe, now Le Havre. Next time, with luck, it would be all of France! All of conquered Europe!

"Say, Freddy?" he suddenly spoke aloud. "One thing not quite clear. Just why did you have those two Luftwaffe pilots sent for, anyway?"

"Don't tell me you didn't get it!" Freddy echoed with a laugh. "I should think it would be obvious, now. I realize I took an awful chance, but that was the only way I could find out. And, of course, I

needed one of them to make the orders to start up the Dornier's engines authentic."

"Hold everything!" Dave cried. "I get that part, sure. But what was it you had to find out?"

"Why, how many pilots were about, of course!" Freddy said with a chuckle and a gesture. "Would have been silly, you know, for us to kidnap von Staube and von Gault, and then have some Jerry pilots fly off in the planes we were going to use. That's why I asked to speak to their *pilots*. Plural, see? And—well, thank goodness there were only two at that field. Everybody else was a ground soldier or officer. It would have been frightfully annoying if a dozen or so Jerry pilots had been there. My whole stunt would have gone up in smoke!"

"Jumping catfish!" Dave breathed in awe. "So that was the reason! Ye gods! Supposing there had been more than two? But I don't want even to think of it. And I think you'd better leave that part out of your report, pal. Nobody would believe we had *that* much luck. Hey! A mess of R.A.F. Spitfires! Holy smoke! They don't know who we are, and—!"

"So we'd better surrender," Freddy Farmer said quietly. "And about time we did, too, I'm thinking. Hold her level, Dave, while I give the chaps the surrender signal."

Freddy shoved open the greenhouse, stood up on the seat so that he was head and shoulders in the air, and waved both arms in the well known gesture of aerial surrender. The flock of R.A.F. Spitfires swooped down, looked them over cautiously, and then took up escorting positions as the Dornier drilled on out across the Channel toward England.

"That's what *I* like, pal!" Dave cried happily, and motioned toward the Spitfires. "To come home in style. Aerial escort, and everything."

"Frankly," Freddy said as a wistful expression spread over his tired face. "Frankly, I'd like a—"

"I know!" Dave shouted him down. "A nice pot of hot tea! With cream. Well, pal, you're going to get one. Get a thousand. For the first time Dave Dawson is going to buy all the tea he can get. But for you. *Strictly for you!* There's a limit to any friendship, my friend!"

THE END

[1] *Dave Dawson, Flight Lieutenant.*

[2] *Dave Dawson With The R.A.F.*

A Page from

DAVE DAWSON ON THE RUSSIAN FRONT

The moving dot silhouetted against the bleak, cheerless-looking sky grew bigger and bigger. Presently it ceased to be just a moving dot. It took on the definite shape and outline of a German Messerschmitt One-Ten. Dave watched it a moment longer, and then when the Nazi craft suddenly veered off to the west, and went streaking upward toward a brooding bank of clouds, he took a quick glance at Freddy Farmer flying just off his right wing, and started to snap out a short burst from his guns.

There was no need, however, to attract the English youth's attention. Freddy had already spotted the Nazi plane. In fact, he was pulling his own ship around and up in that direction. Dave grinned, tight-lipped, and hauled his own plane around in Freddy's wake.

"Leave it to you, Eagle Eyes, to spot things before I do," he murmured with a chuckle. "Okay, pal. That's our baby. This is our dish. He thinks he's learned things, and is hurrying home to tell Uncle Goering about it. Well, not today, hey, Freddy?"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE COMMANDOS ***

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