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Title: Barry Blake of the Flying Fortress

Author: Gaylord Du Bois

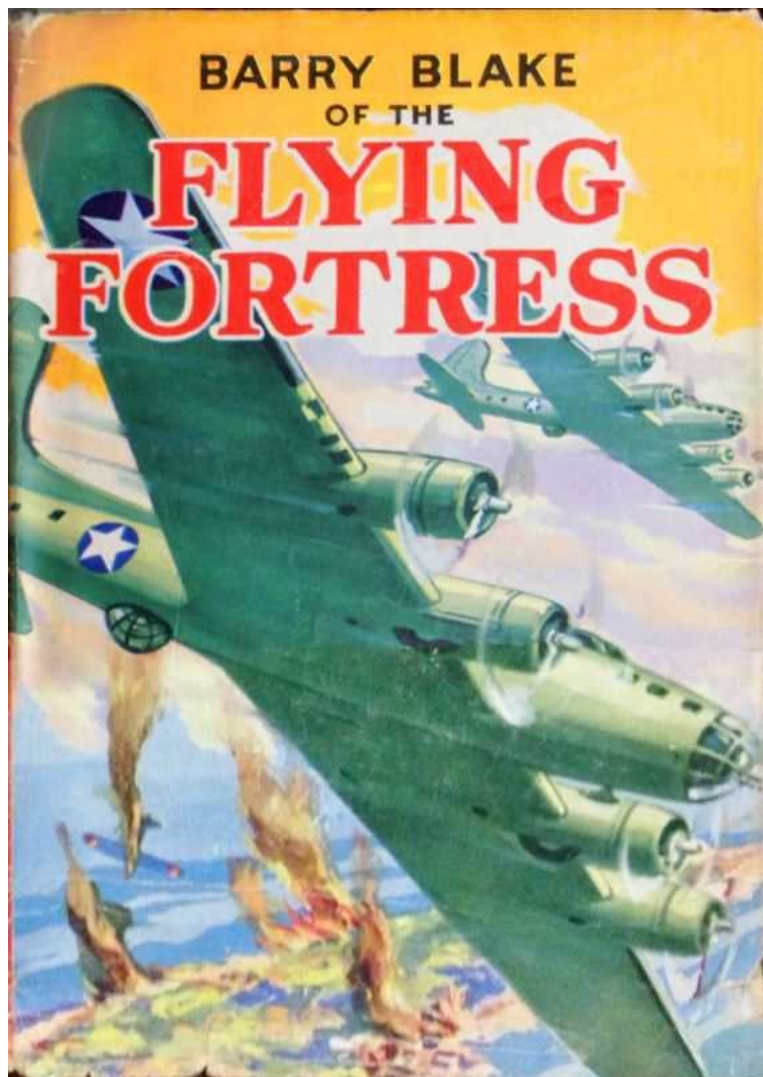
Illustrator: J. R. White

Release date: December 18, 2014 [EBook #47696]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BARRY BLAKE OF THE FLYING FORTRESS ***

E-text prepared by
Stephen Hutcheson, Rick Morris, Rod Crawford, Dave Morgan,
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BARRY BLAKE
OF THE
**FLYING
FORTRESS**

Barry Blake
of the
Flying Fortress

By GAYLORD DUBOIS

Illustrated by
J. R. WHITE



FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM *Series*

WHITMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
RACINE, WISCONSIN

BARRY BLAKE OF THE FLYING FORTRESS

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story are entirely fictitious.*

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Barry and Chick Were Among the First to Leave

of the

FLYING FORTRESS

CHAPTER ONE

RANDOLPH FIELD

The bus from San Antonio pulled in to the curb and stopped. The door snapped open. Half a dozen uniformed upperclassmen wearing grim expressions moved closer to the vehicle.

"Roll out of it, you Misters!" bawled their leader in a voice of authority. "Shake the lead out of your shoes! Pop to it!"

Barry Blake and Chick Enders were among the first out of the bus, but they were not quick enough to suit the reception committee.

"Are you all crippled?" rasped the spokesman of the upperclass "processors." "Come alive and fall in—*here*, on this line. Dress *right!* I said *dress*—don't stick your necks out. Atten-*shun!* Hope you haven't forgotten *all* the military drill you learned at primary. You, Mister! Rack it back. Eyes on a point. And out with your chest if you have any. Keep those thumbs at your trouser seams.... All right! Here's your baggage tag. Write your name on it. Tag your baggage—and make it snappy. Stand at attention when you've finished. *Hurry!* That's it.... Take baggage in left hand—left, not right. And wipe off your smile, Mister! 'Sbetter.... Mister Danvers, you will now take charge of these dum-dums."

Barry was sweating. The blazing Texas sun was in his eyes. His chest ached for a normal, relaxed breath; yet he dared not move. Mister Danvers' barking command came as a sharp relief.

"Right face.... Forward, *march!* Hup! Hup! Hup! Pull those chins back. Hup! Hup! Eyes on a point! And hold your right hands still—this isn't a goose-step. Hup! Hup! Shoulders back—grab a brace—you're in the Army now! Hup! Hup! Dee-tachment, *halt!*"

For more strained moments the new arrivals stood on the arched stoop of the Cadet Administration Building and listened to acid instructions. The talk dealt with the proper manner of reporting for duty. The tone of it, however, showed the processor's profound doubt of the "dum-dums" ability to do anything properly. It was deliberately maddening.

Barry Blake felt a wave of hot resentment sweep over him. A second later cool reason met it and drove it back.

"They're just trying to see if we underclassmen can take it," he told himself. "A cadet's got to learn how to be an officer and a gentleman, in *any* situation. They're teaching us the quick, hard way, that's all!"

Barry held his tough, well-proportioned muscles a little less stiffly. He wondered how Chick Enders was taking the processor's verbal jabs. From where he stood he could see Chick's short, bandy-legged figure quiver under the barrage of upperclass sarcasm. Chick's good-natured mouth was a hard line, and his eyes were pale blue slits above his pug nose. The homely cadet was having a hard job trying not to explode.

Suddenly he relaxed, and Barry, seeing it, chuckled inwardly. He had known Chick Enders since they were both in kindergarten. When he got angry, the kid's blond bristles would stick up like the fuzz of a newly hatched chick. That always meant a fight, unless Chick's sense of humor got the upper hand, as it had just now.

While the processor's stinging remarks continued, Barry's memory flashed back to the day that he and Chick had graduated from the Craryville High School. Barry had been valedictorian of the class, and Chick, he recalled, had been prouder of the fact than anyone.

There was an almost hound-like loyalty in the homely youth's soul, and his hero was Barry Blake. From their earliest snow-ball battles to high school and varsity games where Barry carried the ball and Chick ran interference, it had always been the same. Both had enlisted at the same time and later applied for flying cadet training.

"I'm glad we're still together," Barry thought, with another glance at his friend's freckled profile. "If he'd been sent to any other basic training school than Randolph Field, I'm afraid it would have broken Chick's heart. We'll be together here for nine weeks. After that—well, there's a war on. We'll train and fight wherever we're sent, with no complaints...."

"All right, you Misters!" the upperclassman's voice broke in on Barry's thoughts. "Right, face! Column right, march! You'll receive your company and room assignments upstairs. *Try* not to forget them!"

Still under a running fire of orders and caustic comments, the suffering "dum-dums" were taken to the supply room. Here each new cadet proceeded to draw a full outfit of bedding, clothing, and equipment.

"I feel like a walking department store!" Chick Enders muttered as he joined the line behind Barry. "They must have figured out scientifically just how much a guy can carry if he uses his ten fingers, his elbows and his teeth...."

"Roll up your flaps, Mister!" snapped a keen-eared processor, taking a step toward Chick. "You'll get your chance to sound off soon enough!"

Just in time Chick caught and straightened out an apologetic grin. He had a hunch that *any* smile just now would be asking for trouble. Pulling his freckled face even longer than usual, he stepped out at Barry's heels, and hoped that none of his assorted burdens would slip.

At the barracks, while changing into coveralls and new shoes, Barry and Chick were able to exchange a few hurried words.

"I'd heard that these upperclassmen were pretty unsympathetic," the homely cadet remarked, "but I never thought they'd lay it on quite so heavy. I guess they stay awake nights inventing ways to make a dum-dum sweat."

"Don't let it get under your skin, Chick," Barry laughed. "There's no meanness behind their processing. It's intended to make soldiers out of us. The first thing they do is to prick our balloons—take the conceit out of us, if we have any."

"And the next thing is to toughen us up," grinned Hap Newton, their roommate. "Don't worry—in five weeks *we'll* be processing a new bunch of dum-dums, and making 'em like it!"

Before they had finished changing clothes the processor in charge bellowed another order.

"Hit the ramp, you Misters!" he shouted. "On the double! Leave your powder and lipstick till tonight."

Barry Blake grabbed his cap. He headed for the doorway, tightening his belt as he went.

"Come on, Chick," he said. "I don't know what the ramp is yet, but I aim to hit it hard and quick."

"Me too," his friend grunted, "even if I lose a shoe.... Mine aren't laced up yet."

The ramp, they discovered, was the broad stretch of concrete just outside the cadet barracks. Pouring out of the door, the dum-dums were greeted by rapid-fire commands:

"Fall in! Dress, *right!* Straighten-that-line-d'you-think-this-is-a- ring-around-the-rosy? *Ten-shun!* Count off! Forwar-r-rd, march! Hup, hup, hup! Column right, march! Column left, march! By the right flank, march! To the re-ar-r-r, *march!* Squa-a-ad, *halt!* Left, face! About, face! Forward, march!"

To Barry and Chick, both assigned to Squad 17, these maneuvers were a welcome change. Having mastered close-order drill at primary school, they now went through it automatically. Their taut nerves relaxed. The stiff soles of their new issue shoes were just beginning to smart, when a hollow voice boomed through the air.

"Tenshun all squads now drilling!" whooped the invisible giant. "Squad 26! Take Squad 26 to the tailor shop.... Squad 17. Take Squad 17 to the barber shop. That is all."

It was the voice of the Field's public address system. Instantly the processors in charge of the two squads named marched them off the drilling area. As Squad 17 entered the shop, six barbers stood waiting by their chairs. Barry got a quick mental picture of sheep being driven to the shearing pen.

First in line was a sulky-looking youth, whose name-tag proclaimed him to be Glenn Cardiff Crayle. He had a sleek black pompadour, and a habit of passing his hand caressingly over it.

"Just trim the sides and neck, please," Barry heard him mutter to the wielder of the shears.

The barber exchanged winks with the upperclassman in charge. He slipped expert fingers under a long lock of Crayle's hirsute pride.

"Maybe you'd better have it regulation, sir," he suggested with heavy emphasis.

Snip-snip-snip went the shears. Cadet Crayle writhed as if they were a savage's scalping knife, but he knew he was helpless. Barry Blake chuckled inwardly. "Regulation length" would mean no loss to his own short, wavy hair, or to Chick's blond bristles.

Six barbers and ten minutes for a haircut! In little more than a quarter of an hour, Squad 17 was marching back to the drilling area. Another half hour of close-order drill—then dinner formation.

Scarcely were they seated in the big cadet mess hall, when the nervous dum-dums found their worst suspicions realized. Mealtime was just another opportunity for hazing by the upperclassmen. Placed at the foot of a table seating eleven men, Barry and Chick discovered that they were the "gunners" of the group. That is, they must pass—"gun" or "shoot"—food and drink up the table whenever asked.

Two minutes after the meal began, the "table commander" at the upper end sent down his coffee cup for re-filling.

"A cup of coffee for Mr. Danvers," murmured the lowerclassman nearest him.

"A cup of coffee for Mr. Danvers," repeated Hap Newton as he passed the cup.

"A cup of coffee for Mr. Danvers," Barry Blake solemnly announced, as he filled it and passed it back.

"You, Mister!" the table commander barked, looking straight at Chick Enders. "The potato dish is empty. You will signal the waiter by holding it up—like this."

With his upper arm horizontal and his forearm vertical, the upperclassman demonstrated the proper gesture. Hap Newton giggled.

"Silence!" snapped the processor. "What's your name? Newton? Sit forward on your chair, Mister—on the first four inches. Chin up, get some altitude. And take your left hand off the table. And *remember*—for a dum-dum to laugh, smile or chortle at mess is an inexcusable breach of manners."

"Yes, sir," mumbled Hap Newton, so meekly that Chick Enders nearly dropped the potato dish, trying not to laugh.

Dinner ended all too soon for most of the hungry new cadets. The food was ample, but so excellent that the time seemed too short to do it justice. At the close of the noon hour, Squad 17 was issued rifles, and plunged into the monotonous manual of arms. Not until evening did the weary dum-dums have time to relax.

Their first day at Randolph Field had been a full one—crammed with new impressions that would whirl through their dreams that night.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO KINDS OF RATS

The weeks that followed were more crowded than any Barry Blake had known. Drills, monotonous, tiring, but excellent for physical "tone," occupied the first few days. On Monday of the second week the regular training schedule began.

Mornings were devoted to Ground School. Barry and Chick put their best into it, knowing that study was vital to passing later tests. There were five subjects: Airplane and Engine Operation, Weather, Military Law, Navigation, and Radio Code. Of them all, Barry Blake preferred the first. His hobby had been flying model planes since he was in short pants.

The classroom in Hangar V with its blueprints, charts, takedown and working models made him feel at home. Here he "ate up" every lecture on Fuel Systems, Motors, Electric Systems, Engine Instruments, Wheels, and Brakes. The floor of the great hangar itself Barry found still more fascinating. Here were displayed the real planes and their parts, with cutaway and breakdown views. They gave him his first intimate contact with the powerful, fighting ships that he hoped soon to fly.

Flight instruction, in the BT-9 and BT-14 training planes, was always a mixture of anxieties and thrills. There was much to learn, and little time to learn it. In these ships, twice as big as the primary school "kites," the speeds were higher, the controls more quickly responsive. The gadgets on the instrument panels were just double in number. And the instructors—!

"Lieutenant Baird has it in for me, Barry," Chick Enders confided, as they headed down the concrete apron toward their ships. "No matter what I do, he just sits back and sulks. All the encouragement I've had from him is a grunt or a glare—ever since the day I taxied into the wrong stall with my flaps down."

A step or two behind him, Barry glanced down at Chick's short legs twinkling below the bobbing bustle of his 'chute. In spite of himself Barry chuckled. The idea that anybody could "have it in for" a fellow as homely and likeable as Chick was just too funny.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Baird has other troubles," he suggested. "Remember, when your flight period begins he has already spent an hour with a hot pilot by the name of Glenn Crayle. That lad is enough to curdle the milk of human kindness in any instructor. I wouldn't worry about it, Chick. You passed your twenty-hour test all right, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Chick admitted. "Maybe it is Crayle, more than I, who's responsible for the lieutenant's sour puss. Crayle's a born show-off and a sorehead as well. Even the processors couldn't prick his bubble, and they tried—oh-oh! G-gosh! I—er—hello, Crayle! I—uh—didn't see you coming."

Walking fast, Cadet Crayle passed the two friends with a glare. They turned and watched him disappear into the Operations Office. Chick Enders let out his breath in a long whistle.

"He must have heard all we said about him before he zoomed past us," Barry said, with a dry smile. "Oh, well! It's the truth, and it *may* do him good when he thinks it over."

Practicing his *chandelles* that afternoon, Chick gave less thought to his instructor's sour mood. As a result he did better than usual. Barry Blake, for his part, forgot the incident completely. It was not until special room inspection, the following Saturday morning, that he recalled Crayle's ugly look.

Barry Blake was room orderly that week. This meant that he alone was responsible for the general neatness of the quarters he shared with Chick and Hap Newton. For ordinary morning and evening inspection the preparations were simple. Beds must be made, the room must be swept and dusted, and everything had to be in its proper place.

On Saturday, however, all three roommates pitched into the work. Everything must be in perfect, regulation order—each blanket edge laid just so, each speck of dust wiped up. Shoes, clothing, equipment must be spotless, or demerits would fall like rain.

To make sure that Barry had overlooked nothing in his dusting, Chick and Hap went over the furniture with their fingers, searching for a smear of dust. They found none, until Hap tried the bottom of the waste basket.

"Two 'gigs' for you, Mister Blake—if the inspecting officer had found that," he remarked, with a wink at Chick.

"You're dead right, Hap," Chick spoke up, wiping his finger over the same spot. "The inspecting officer will do it with white gloves, you know. And if he gets a smear—"

"Aw, drive it in the hangar, fellows!" Barry protested with a grin. "Give me that waste basket and a rag. And then go wash your own hands."

"Okay—but not in the washbowl I've just finished cleaning!" retorted Hap. "It's too near inspection time. I'm going down the hall.... Coming, Chick?"

Barry polished the bottom of the waste basket as if it were brass. As he put the cleaning rag away, he glanced about him.

"If this room were to be any cleaner, it would have to be sterilized," he declared. "Bring on your white gloves, and let's see what they can find now. Guess I'll have just time to join Chick and Hap down the hall and get back before inspection."

The three roommates had figured almost too close. They were just starting back to their room when call to quarters sounded. As they hurried into the hall, a uniformed figure darted across the farther end.

"Say!" hissed Chick Enders. "Didn't that mister come from *our room*?"

"I thought so," muttered Barry. "He *looked* like Glenn Crayle! I wonder...."

There was no time for more speculation then. Official footsteps were approaching. The three cadets were just able to reach their room and stiffen at attention by their beds before the inspecting party came in view.

The officer in charge was Captain Branch, whose piercing black eyes had never been known to miss a spot of dirt. Square-jawed, quick-moving, he entered the room accompanied by a cadet officer with notebook and pencil. His thin, sensitive nostrils sniffed the air.

"Who," he asked sharply, "has been smoking here within the last few minutes? The room smells foul!"

A tense, five-second silence followed. Barry Blake broke it.

"I don't know, sir," he managed to say. "It was none of us three. We don't use tobacco."

The muscles of the captain's jaw bulged. The thin line of his lips hardened.

"What is your idea in leaving rolls of dust under your bed at inspection?" he demanded bitterly. "And dirty soap on your washbowl? And that can of foot powder on the desk? And that drawer—"

He broke off, to stride across the room. From the crack of a drawer in Barry's desk drifted a tiny feather of smoke. Captain Branch jerked it open. There, on a charred paper, lay a smouldering cigar.

With his face like a marble mask, the officer tossed the cigar into the washbowl.

"Gentlemen," he said heavily. "This is an idiotic defiance of authority. Unless you can clear yourselves immediately in a written report, appropriate punishment must follow. That is all."

Not until the captain was out of hearing did the roommates dare to look about. Then, with a sigh that told more than words, Barry stooped and picked up two big, fuzzy "rats" of dust. Wordless, Chick Enders took the can of foot powder from the desk and wiped up what had been spilled.

Hap Newton groaned.

"It was Crayle, all right," he declared. "I recognized him by the way he carries his head.... But *why*? Why should he want to sabotage *us*?"

"I think I know," said Barry. "Two days ago he overheard Chick and me talking about him. What we said was true enough, as this frame-up proves—that Crayle is a sorehead, with an inflated ego."

"Inflated and inflamed, both!" Chick Enders exclaimed. "He's always trying to tell what a hot pilot he is. He hates anybody who shows him up."

A hard grin stretched Hap's wide, good-natured mouth.



Smoke Drifted Through a Crack in the Drawer

"We'll show him up for a sneaking rat," he said. "Nose up to the desk, fellows, and we'll get busy on that written report...."

"Pull out of it, Hap!" Barry Blake interrupted. "We'll only do a ground loop that way. Our best maneuver is to say nothing about Crayle and take our medicine. We can't prove a thing against him, anyhow."

Hap Newton's jaw dropped. He sat down hard on his chair.

"You-you're crazy, Blake!" he gasped. "We're likely to be dismissed from Randolph for what's happened this morning. Why should we sacrifice our wings, our reputation—everything we value here—to protect a yellow snake-in-the-grass like Crayle? That's what it will mean!"

"We've circumstantial evidence that Crayle did it," Chick Enders put in. "He had no business in our quarters. And it *would* have been idiotic for us to stand inspection in a room as raunchy as this, if we could help it. That ought to be plain to anybody. Get your pen and paper out, Barry."

Seated at the desk, Barry Blake shook his head.

"We won't make anything plain by accusing Glenn Crayle, fellows," he stated. "That mister may be a fool in some ways, but he's covered his tracks. Remember, we only *thought* that he came from our room. And, from the captain's viewpoint, it would be natural for us to accuse someone else if we were guilty."

Barry let those points sink into his roommates' minds for a full minute.

"On the other hand," he went on, "suppose we face the music. That is what Captain Branch would expect us to do if we were innocent and had no proof. We'll pay a stiff penalty, of course, but I don't think we'll be dismissed from the Field."

Hap Newton rose and stared out of the window. Chick Enders passed nervous fingers through his short, tow-colored hair.

"You're right as always, Barry," the homely cadet said finally. "There's a paragraph in 'Compass Headings' that says: '*Flying Cadets do not make excuses.*' I have a hunch we'll be doing punishment tours for the rest of our course, but I'm ready to suffer in silence."

Hap Newton grumbled and fumed, but he, too, gave in.

"I'll get even with Crayle," he added vengefully. "I'll fix him—"

"No you won't, Hap," Barry cut in, "unless you're willing to fly at his level. The ceiling's zero down there. Come out of the clouds, fella! And help us clean this room for the second time today."

CHAPTER THREE

JEEP JITTERS

Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp! Up the long concrete ramp—halt—about face—and back again. One hundred and twenty steps to the minute, thirty inches to each step—a fast walk, in civilian life. But these three, covering a prescribed beat at widely spaced intervals, marching in silence and without pause, are not civilians. Not by a long shot!

They are Flying Cadets Blake, Enders, and Newton, wearing the uniform of the day, with field belt, bayonet scabbard and white gloves. Their penalty for a dirty room is posted on the company bulletin board: five tours and six “gigs,” or demerits, apiece. That’s a lot easier than they expected. Still, a “tour” lasts one hour and covers almost four miles. They have three hours still to go.

“*And Glenn Crayle’s enjoying ‘open post’!* Right now that mister is doubtless disporting himself with some sweet young thing at a tea dance in the San Antonio Flying Cadet Club.... Tramp, tramp, tramp.... Here’s where the ‘gig’ dodger ought to be! One of these days, he’ll slip up....”

Glenn Crayle never became a “touring cadet,” however. In small, clever ways he continued to work out his grudge against Chick and Barry. One of his bright tricks was to dust itching powder over the stick of the “Jeep,” or Link Trainer, knowing that Chick Enders would be the next to handle it.

The “Jeep” is a marvellous device to teach aviation cadets the art of flying by instruments—without ever leaving the ground. Entering it, the fledgling pilot finds himself in a cockpit like that of a real plane. Before him is an instrument panel. Above him an opaque canopy shuts off his view of everything else. In his closed cockpit are all the familiar controls. His situation is the same as if he were flying through clouds at night.

Poor Chick had a case of “Jeep jitters” from the moment he started his “flight” under the hood. The little moving ball and the two queer little needles simply *would* not stay in place. According to his instruments he dropped one wing and went into a “spit curl” or side slip that cost him precious altitude. Correcting it, he over-controlled. Dangerously close to Mother Earth, according to the Jeep’s altimeter, he zoomed, stalled, and theoretically crashed.

Climbing (in theory) to five thousand feet, Chick attempted once more to conquer the “jeepkrieg.” For some moments he succeeded. Then, without warning, his hand on the stick began to itch. He stood it as long as he dared, let go for one second of frantic scratching—and was lost.

Fifty feet from the theoretical ground he pulled out of his dive. He hedge-hopped over some imaginary trees, caught the stick between his knees, and tried to climb while scratching. Result—a third crash.

“I give up!” gurgled Chick, slamming back the canopy and bouncing out to the surprise of his instructor. “The thing has given me hives on my hands, sir. I’ve committed suicide three times by the altimeter, and I’m afraid I’ll do it in earnest!”

The instructor glanced at Chick’s reddened palm and snorted.

“Very well, Mister,” he snapped. “Spin off and get control of your nerves. You can try it again tomorrow when you’re out of the storm. But you’ll never learn instrument flying by mauling the stick the way you did just now.”

Within the week Chick had mastered the art of level “flight” in a “Jeep.” Yet he knew that his itch-inspired tantrum stood against his record as a prospective pilot of warplanes. The men who fly the Army’s fighting ships must have nerves of chilled steel. Those who might crack under the strain of air combat must be weeded out.

Second thought told Chick that Glenn Crayle must have doctored the “Jeep’s” stick. No hive ever itched as wickedly as his palm; *and Crayle was using the trainer just before him.*

“I’ll call that rat out for boxing practice, and work him over,” the angry cadet told Barry. “Crayle may outweigh me, but I’ll whittle him down to my size.”

“If you did,” Barry Blake pointed out, “he’d still win, according to his twisted way of thinking. Crayle knows that open grudges are frowned on here at the Field. If you let yourself get mad enough to beat him up, your supervising officer will put *that* down to poor control, too, Chick. Another show of nerves might wash you out as a pilot—for good. Stick it out, man! The sixty-hour test is only a week away.”

The sixty-hour progress test is a landmark, warning the Randolph Field Cadet that his basic training is nearly over. Sixty hours of flight training have been accomplished. All fundamental flying movements have been mastered, of course, at primary flying school. At Randolph Field they have become still more familiar. Climbing turns, steep turns, “lazy eights,” and forced landings have been learned and practiced thoroughly. Now the pilot’s ability to fly by instruments alone is to be judged.

Both Barry and Chick Enders had worked hard to perfect themselves in flying “under the hood.” The test should have held no terrors for either of them. Yet, as the hour approached, Chick grew nervous. He knew that his instructors were watching him for signs of another explosion.

“I’ll have to be extra good today,” he told his roommates, as the three donned their coveralls that afternoon. “Captain Branch just had me in the office for a little talk. I’m worried, fellows.”

“I noticed that you were sort of ‘riding the beam’ when you came into the locker room,” Hap

Newton said, picking up his parachute. "Eyes fixed on vacancy, expression of a calf in a butcher's cart, and all that. 'Smatter, Chick—did he bawl you out?"

"No, Hap, he was kind—too kind entirely. Reminded me of a sympathetic executioner. He's flying with me on this test—in his own washing machine. If he so much as coughs when we get 'upstairs' I'll probably reef back the stick and go into a stall.... Well, wish me happy landings. I'm taking off."

Barry Blake shook his head gloomily at Chick's departing figure.

"The kid's in a storm already," he muttered to Hap. "If Chick were the best gadgeteer on the Field he'd never pass a test under the hood with that case of jitters."

"Instrument flying will show jumpy nerves every time," Hap agreed. "It's tough, Barry. The whole thing started when Glenn Crayle doped the 'Jeep' stick with itching powder. Of all the lowdown, squirmy tricks, that was the worst! And he'll be tickled half to death if Chick is washed out."

Barry Blake was so upset about his friend that his own nerves were none too steady. When he stepped into the cockpit, however, he took a firm grip on himself. Glenn Crayle, he vowed, should not have the laugh on two of them.

Barry was a born flier. Once in the air, he lost every trace of jitters. His performance was better than ever. He passed the test with a high mark, and brought his instructor back smiling. Hap Newton, who landed soon after, also passed without difficulty.

"Where's Chick?" the latter asked, the moment they were alone.

"Still flying," Barry said shortly. "There comes his ship. Flight Commander Branch must have been giving him an extra-thorough test."

The two friends watched Chick's ship come in for the landing. With engine cut off, it glided down. The wheels bumped—bounced—came down again.

"He's heading for the hay," Hap Newton yelled, as Chick's plane slewed around. "Give her the gun, Chick!"

As if his frantic shout had actually been heard, Chick's engine roared into life. The ship leaped into the air, and climbed like a cat with a dog after her.

"That washing machine must have developed a wobbly tail wheel," Barry muttered; "or maybe it was a freak breeze that caught him."

"Shucks, Barry," Hap answered unhappily. "There's no use making excuses for him. Chick's still got the jeep jitters. He's as good as washed out now."

"Not if he lands okay this time," Barry said.

Chick's plane banked, turned, and came down the base leg with open throttle. The engine cut out. A wing dropped slightly, to counteract the drift of the light wind. So far, Chick was handling her nicely. At just the right second he lifted her nose a little to make a three-point landing. The tires touched....

And then it happened. The tail swung sharply. Chick, feeling it, cracked open his throttle, but he was a split second too late. The plane swapped ends, pivoting on a wing. Dust spurted from the runway. With a splintering, ripping crash the wing gave way. The plane nosed over, propeller biting the dirt.

Barry groaned, and started running before the dust began to settle. From West B. Street came the clanging of the ambulance and the crash truck. From the length of the West Flying Line men were running, each with an ugly picture in his mind's eye—*fire!*

But neither smoke nor flame appeared. Instead, two helmeted figures crawled out of the wreckage. For a moment they stared at each other. Then, shaking his head, the Flight Commander walked away.

Barry Blake caught Chick roughly by the arm.

"Snap out of it, man!" he whispered. "Crayle's here in the crowd, laughing himself sick. Reef back and gain some altitude! Chin up!"

Except for Crayle, few of the cadets about the plane were laughing. From the look that Captain Branch had given Enders, they sensed that this was no ordinary ground-loop that would qualify Chick for the Stupid Pilot's Trophy. It was the tragedy that all cadet pilots dread—the wash-out.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIEUTENANT RIP VAN WINKLE

Chick's actual elimination from basic training school did not occur for a few days. Captain Branch's recommendation had to be confirmed by the Stage Commander, who first flew with the unhappy cadet in a final test. His report, duly filed with those of Chick's instructors and his Flight Commander, must be reviewed at the next meeting of the elimination board. All this took time.

On the evening before Chick was to hear the verdict, Barry and Hap made a special effort to cheer him up.

"Being 'washed out' is no disgrace, fella," Barry told him. "It doesn't mean that you're kicked out of the Air Forces—only that you can't be a pilot. You'll get your officer's commission just the same, in some other classification. So why worry?"

Chick's homely face cracked in a wan smile. He had not regained his natural color since the ground-loop that wrecked his plane. The freckles stood out more plainly than usual on his snub nose.

"I hope you're right, Barry," he said huskily. "It's only 'under the hood' that I go to pieces. Ever since that time I got the itch in the Link Trainer, instrument flying gives me the jitters. If it doesn't carry over to advanced training school...."

"It won't, Chick," Hap Newton assured him stoutly. "What course have you picked for a first choice—Photography, Navigation, or Communications? You're better than most in 'buzzer' code. Why don't you ask for the advanced course in radio?"

"That would be my second choice, Hap," Enders replied. "Bombardment's my preference, though. Next to being a pilot, I'd like to dish it out to the enemy in big, explosive chunks. I've already told Captain Branch. He'll put in a good word for me. And, listen, you bums! Don't think I haven't appreciated the way you've helped. A man's got no right to be downhearted with a couple of friends like you."

The next day Chick came into the room with a broad grin.

"Bombardment school for me!" he announced. "I'm leaving tonight. The board didn't question Captain Branch's recommendation. Now it's all settled, I'm almost as happy as if I'd passed all my pilot tests. Only thing I hate is leaving you fellows, and—and the grand bunch of officers that we've had here at the Field. They tried to make me feel as if *they* didn't like to say good-by, either."

"They meant it, Chick!" Barry Blake exclaimed softly. "Student pilots aren't just so much grist through the mill—not as our teaching officers see us. They're real and personal friends of each cadet who'll meet them halfway. It's a big honor to know men like that!"

Parting with Chick Enders was a hard wrench for his roommates. As he boarded the bus for San Antonio that evening, they realized that they might be seeing him for the last time. In a world war of many fronts only a rare coincidence would bring them all together again.

"Happy landings, you goons!" Chick gulped as he gripped their hands.

"Pick your targets, fella—and remember us when you're dropping block-busters on Tokyo!" Barry replied.

"Yeh, we'll be right behind you with some more of 'em!" grinned Hap Newton, as the bus door slammed shut.

A few days after Chick's departure for bombardier school, graduation separated the two remaining roommates. Barry, whose cool, quick brain and steady nerves would have fitted him for either fighter or bombardment flying, was allowed to choose the latter. Hap Newton's one hundred and eighty-five pounds removed him automatically from the pursuit class. Recommended to twin engine school at Ellington Field, he said good-by to Barry in the Flying Cadets' Club in San Antonio.

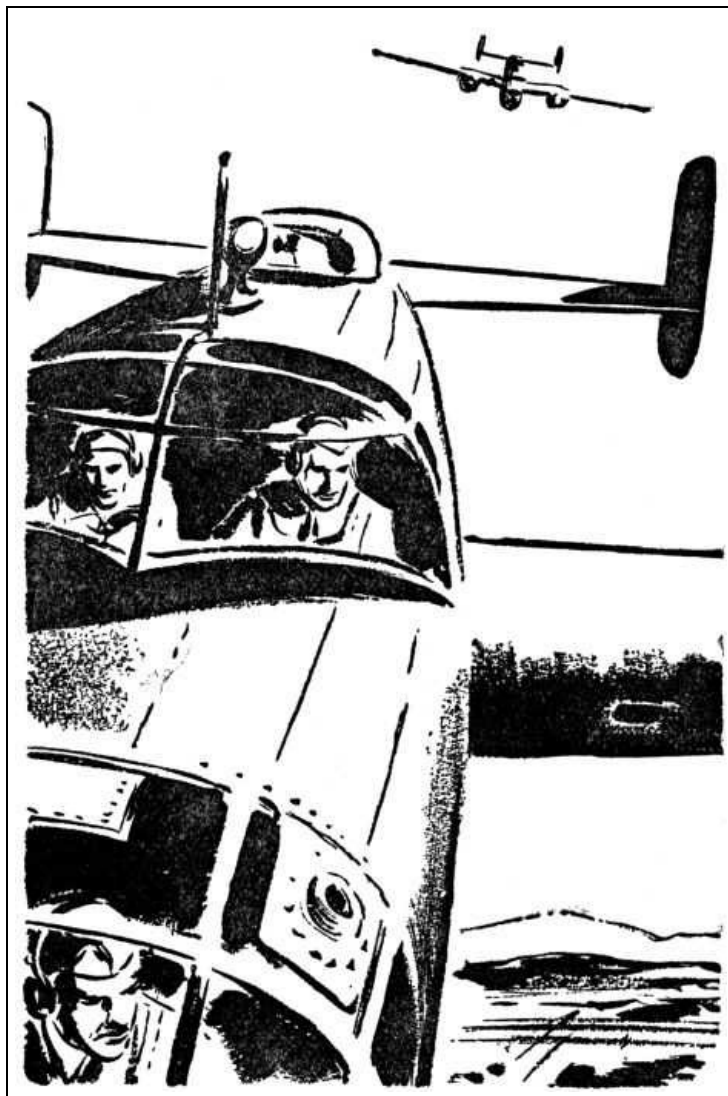
"We'll keep in touch, Hap," Barry promised. "And there's just a chance we'll meet up before this war is over. Keep eager, you stick-mauler! I'm taking off for Kelly Field now!"

"Set 'em down easy, you old sky-jazzer!" Hap smiled. "If you don't, I'll come along and lay an egg right on your tail assembly."

Barry Blake strode away with a lump in his throat. He'd have to get used to parting with good friends, he told himself. The Air Forces were like that. Sometimes a flier had to watch his squadron members torch down under enemy fire. That was a lot tougher than shaking hands for the last time, with a grin and a wisecrack. Time to lay a new course, now—for Kelly Field and a pair of silver wings!

For Barry, the nine weeks at Kelly Field passed even more swiftly than those at Randolph. His acquaintance among his fellow cadets widened considerably. Yet, perhaps unconsciously, he avoided making friends so intimate that good-bys would be painful.

From training planes he graduated to handling the steady, reliable B-25 bombers. Taking off, flying and landing these medium bombers presented problems quite different from those he had met at Randolph Field. Barry caught on quickly. Gathering every scrap of skill he had ever learned, his mind "sensed" the right maneuver, the correct touch on each control.



Barry Learned the Correct Touch on Each Control

“You’re cut out for a Fortress pilot, Blake,” his instructor told him. “You’re naturally methodical. At the same time you’re as quick to grasp a new emergency as any cadet I’ve ever seen. Tomorrow you’ll shift to the old B-17. She has no tail turret, but for training purposes she handles like the newer types.”

Barry was more thrilled than he cared to show. Since pre-flight school, he had envied the pilots who flew the big flying forts—the famous B-17F’s. When the hour came that he actually sat at the controls of his Fortress, he knew beyond all doubt that these were the ships for him. The quadruple thunder of the bomber’s 4,800 horses was sweeter in his ears than a pipe-organ fugue.

First, in the co-pilot’s seat, he learned the exact touch needed on the throttles, the turbos, the r.p.m. adjustment, to keep the winged giant’s airspeed constant. This, for accurate bombing, would be a most important factor. Next, he learned exactly how to follow the Boeing’s P. D. I., or pilot director indicator, which kept the ship straight on her course with not the slightest change of altitude, while the bombardier sighted his target.

His final lessons included setting down and taking off on small, rough fields. Under war conditions many a bomber pilot has escaped destruction by knowing just what his ship can do in a pinch. Barry Blake was now as ready as any training school could make him.

What he longed for now was actual combat—the take-off before dawn on a real bombing mission—the swift descent on the enemy city, camp, or convoy—the blasting of his bombs on the target—the sight of enemy fighter planes falling apart before his ship’s guns.

But where would it be? Europe, Africa, the South Pacific, or the Aleutian chain?

Barry had hoped for a few days’ furlough after receiving his commission. A week at home would be like a taste of paradise after these seven crowded months. Even five days with Dad and Mom and the kid sister would be worth the heartache of saying good-by again. Yet, at the last moment, he learned that this was not to be.

Like a flooding tide the mighty crest of America’s war effort was sweeping everything before it. More planes than ever were needed at the fighting front. More planes were going there—and that meant more pilots. Twenty-four hours was the limit of Barry Blake’s time at home.

It was all like a dream. Walking up Craryville’s old main street, Barry felt like a beardless Rip Van Winkle. He had left there a green kid of eighteen. Now, an inch taller and ten pounds heavier, he passed neighbors who didn’t know him—until he spoke. And, speaking to them, he hardly knew himself. Professor Blake’s gangling offspring, who’d been the high school valedictorian, who had jerked sodas on Saturdays in the corner drug store—what had that self-conscious kid in common with Lieutenant Barry Blake, pilot of multi-engined bombing planes?

There was Mom and Dad. He’d never be different to them, or they to him. To the kid sister, he

was a hero, of course, but Betty was only fourteen. She'd changed, too, in the past seven months. Barry wondered what in the world she'd be like when he came back again, after the war ... if he *did* come back. There wasn't time for such thoughts, though. Half of his twenty-four hour visit was gone already!

When the train pulled out of Craryville next morning, Barry the high school kid was only a dim memory in the mind of Lieutenant Blake. His orders were to report at Seattle, Washington, where he would join the crew of a new B-17F as co-pilot. It was better, far better, to keep his thoughts fixed on that. Otherwise, recalling the good-bys just ended would be a bit too much to bear.

CHAPTER FIVE

SWEET ROSY O'GRADY

His pulses pounding with excitement, Barry Blake gazed across the long runways of Boeing Field at his first fighting ship. The great Flying Fortress seemed to perch lightly on the ground, despite her twenty-odd tons. Her propellers were turning slowly, glinting in the sun like the blades of four gigantic sword dancers.

Despite her drab coat of Army paint Barry thought her beautiful. The slim, torpedo-like profile, the high, strong sweep of her tail assembly—even the fishy grin produced by her bombardier's window and forward gun ports—thrilled her young co-pilot to the core. This was the ship of his dreams. Her name, *Sweet Rosy O'Grady*, was painted just above her transparent nose.

Hurrying forward, he saluted the long-legged, lean-faced pilot who stood by the *Rosy's* armed tail. The lengthy captain looked up from the postcard he was scribbling. He lifted a nonchalant hand.

"You're Lieutenant Blake?" he said with a Texas drawl. "The rest of our crew are all here, getting acquainted with the ship. I was just dashing off a card to the real Rosy O'Grady—my wife. It's finished. Come in and meet the others. Then we'll be ready to take off."

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Inside the big bomber, Captain O'Grady introduced Barry to the six other members of the crew.

"Meet Lieutenant Aaron Levitt, better known as Curly," the skipper invited. "He's the smartest, and probably the handsomest, ex-lawyer in the Air Forces. Born in Manhattan."

"Lower East Side," Levitt added, giving Barry a cordial handclasp and a keen look. "Happy that you're going to be one of us, Lieutenant."

"... and this gent is our bombardier, Sergeant Daniel Hale. He's of the old time Texas breed, in spite of hailing from Arizona and looking more like a shorthorn bull. His great-granddad died fighting in the Alamo."

Barry pulled what was left of his hand from Sergeant Hale's bone-crushing grip and turned to "Sergeant Fred Marmon of Glens Falls, New York—the head nurse in charge of *Rosy's* roaring quadruplets." The red-haired engineer-gunner chuckled as he acknowledged Barry's greeting.

"Boy!" he exclaimed. "And do those 1200 horsepower babies keep a man busy! Some of 'em, that is. One engine will run like a dream for fifty or a hundred hours. Another will develop more ailments than a motherless child. I'm hoping these new engines will be the first kind, Lieutenant. If not—well, here are Sergeants Cracker Jackson and Soapy Babbitt to help me out. They're our top-turret and belly gunners, but they know a lot about aerial power plants, too."

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Last of all, Barry Blake met Tony Romani, the pint-sized tail gunner. The little corporal was as friendly as could be, but his sad, Latin eyes seemed to hold all the cares and worries which his crew mates laughingly discarded.

He was already hurrying back to his turret when Captain Tex O'Grady said, "Okay, boys! We'll take her upstairs! I'll mail this postcard to Mrs. O'Grady from Salt Lake City. If you have any letters to send you can drop them there. We're heading west to the Orient."

The *Rosy's* four big engines deepened their song of power as she rushed down the runway. She was a living, throbbing organism, but her personality was yet to be learned. Newly fledged from Boeing's great hatchery of warbirds, she had still to get acquainted with her crew, and they with her.

Barry Blake sat alert in his co-pilot's seat, checking the instruments, as the runway dropped away below him. At the skipper's nod, he touched the lever that retracted the landing gear. He heard the wheels wind up with a smooth mechanical whine, and noted the time it took in seconds. Again he moved the lever, letting the wheels down and raising them back in place. He tested the action of the flaps, the engines' response to their throttles, the revolutions-per-minute of the props. In everything the *Rosy O'Grady* behaved as sweetly as any lady with such a name should do.

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At Salt Lake City there was a short stop; then on they flew to San Antonio. Again Barry glimpsed the familiar countryside over which he and Chick Enders and Hap Newton had flown. The perfect green pattern of Randolph Field, with three or four flights of planes swinging over it, brought a homesick pang.

"We'll never forget that scene, Mister," the voice of Captain O'Grady broke into Barry's thoughts. "I graduated from Randolph ten years ago, but it's just like yesterday when I look back."

"Those were the happiest weeks of my life," Barry replied with a choke in his voice. "I know it now, though at the time it seemed a tough grind."

Captain O'Grady turned one of his warm Irish grins on the young co-pilot.

"The real, tough grind," he said, "will come when we reach our South Pacific base, I reckon. Barring accidents, the life of a fortress is about five or six months on the battlefield. Before it's over we'll all feel like graybeards, kid."

The *Rosy* made one more stop at Tampa, Florida, where her engines were thoroughly checked and her tanks filled. Ahead of her stretched the long hop to Trinidad, off the northern coast of South America. If anything should go wrong, there were island bases in the Caribbean Sea where an emergency landing might be made. But in aviation, an ounce of prevention is worth many pounds of cure.

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That evening in Tampa the crew had their last big restaurant meal for months to come. The following afternoon they took off despite storm warnings. There was no long last look at their native

land. A few moments after the *Rosy's* wheels had left the runway she was climbing through a heavy overcast of clouds.

As they roared over the southeastern tip of Cuba the weather cleared. Below them the Windward Passage lay, deep blue in the sunlight. Ahead rose the rugged mountain tops of Haiti.

Barry Blake felt a strange thrill as he gazed down into the jungle-clad valleys where not so many years ago United States Marines had hunted murderous voodoo worshippers. Somewhere in those dark gorges bloody voodoo rites were probably being performed at this very moment.

Invisible from the air the Haitian border was left behind. The dark green ranges of the Dominican Republic flowed past beneath the *Rosy's* wings. Again the blue Caribbean stretched ahead of her.

Crossing the long thousand miles between Haiti and Trinidad they struck the worst weather yet encountered. At ten thousand feet the Fortress slammed into a black storm front.

It was worse than anyone had expected. The tumbling masses of air were like giant fists pummeling the big ship. She bucked like a frightened horse, reared, stood on her nose, and shuddered.

Something struck the right wing from beneath, flipping the *Rosy* over on her side, and off course. It was only air, though it felt to Barry like a collision with an express train. Tex O'Grady fought the controls with every ounce of strength in his big body. Muscles stood out in bunches on his lean jaw. In a flash of lightning Barry saw sweat streaming down the pilot's face.

He glanced behind him. Lieutenant Levitt's teeth showed in a fixed smile below his little moustache. In the lightning flashes the whites of his eyes showed clearly. Sergeant Hale's big mouth was closed like a steel trap. Only Fred Marmon, the red-headed engineer, seemed to be enjoying himself. Meeting Barry's eyes he winked, and waggled his fingers in a mocking gesture.

At that moment lightning struck the ship. Every light went off. The fuselage might have been the belly of a blasted submarine, pitch dark and battered by ceaseless depth charges. A beam of light touched the instrument panel. Barry Blake felt the cool barrel of a flashlight pressed into his hand.

"That will help you keep a check on your instruments!" Fred Marmon's shout sounded in his ear.

Barry was grateful for his first chance to do something, however small, to help Tex. He watched the altimeter register a drop of five hundred feet, a steady climb of eight thousand, then another drop. In this fashion an hour passed.

All at once they were out of the storm. Clear moonlight shone through the plastic windows of the cockpit. The crew raised a hoarse cheer.

"Take over, Barry," drawled Tex O'Grady's voice. "I want to find out if I am still in one piece. When *Rosy* starts bucking like that she's tougher than any bronc I ever forked on my daddy's ranch in Texas!"

Unfastening his safety belt, Captain O'Grady heaved his lanky frame out of the seat and went back to talk with the navigator. Barry swept his glance over the instrument board. He tried the controls, to feel out any possible storm damage. Satisfied that there was none, he looked below.

A sea of rolling, silvery clouds lay in every direction. It was beautiful, but menacing. The ceiling below that overcast, Barry judged, would be zero. It might hide either land or sea, hills or marshes, for all that anyone knew. The storm had carried the *Rosy O'Grady* a number of miles off her course.

The four big engines' steady drone of power sounded reassuring, until Barry remembered the last reading of the gas gauge before the lightning had knocked it out. There wasn't enough left for fooling around, while the *Rosy* found out where she was.

After a few minutes, Captain Tex O'Grady loafed back to the cockpit.

"The radio's out," he told Barry. "That means we can't get cross bearings to find our position. Curly Levitt is getting a fix now on some stars. Trouble is, he's afraid his octant may have been knocked out of kilter when it fell off the navigation table, back there in the storm. Why don't you go back and cheer him up?"

Barry thanked the lanky pilot and unfastened his safety belt. He suspected that O'Grady was just giving him an opportunity to stretch his legs. If a fellow needed cheering up, nobody could do a better job of it than "Old Man" O'Grady himself.

Lieutenant Curly Levitt was up in the top turret sighting through his instrument when Barry stepped back.

"Three stars is enough for a fix," he shouted above the engines' thunder. "Just wait till I shoot Venus."

"Better not—it might really be Sirius!" punned Barry. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks," replied the navigator, as he prepared to step down, "Just open your mouth again and I'll put my foot in it."

Barry dodged, just in time to tumble over Fred Marmon who "accidentally" happened to be crouched just behind him. As he picked himself up, even sad-eyed Tony Romani laughed. The crew's tense nerves were relaxing. Whistling a few bars from *Pagliacci*, the mustachioed navigator went back to his desk.

Curly Levitt was still a bit worried, however. On the accuracy of his reckoning depended the life of every man on board. If he failed, the chances were excellent that *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* would plunge to a watery grave the moment her gas supply gave out. At best she would crash in the Venezuelan jungle—unless, of course, the clouds broke up farther on and showed her crew a landing field.

"Check this reckoning with me, will you, Blake?" Levitt invited. "Then if there should be an error we can blame it on the wallop my octant took in the storm."

"Okay!" Barry agreed. "If your octant is off, we'll probably find it out too late to help ourselves. So don't worry."

Reckoning the fix is really a simple matter. At a given time only one point on the earth's surface can be directly under any star. Using his octant, the navigator "shoots" or measures the elevation of two or more stars, and then figures out just where each "substellar" point is on the earth's surface.

His next step is still easier. With his substellar points located on the map, he draws circles around

them. One of the places where these circles intersect is the place where his plane was at the time the stars were “shot.” There is no real difficulty in guessing which intersection is the right one: the others are apt to be thousands of miles from his last known position.

Everything, of course, depends upon the accuracy of the star-shooting octant. This expensive and delicate instrument will not always stand abuse such as Curly Levitt’s had taken. There was reason for the young ex-lawyer to be worried. He slipped on his headset and switched on the interphone. The click in his ears told him that it still worked.

“Pilot from navigator,” he said. “If I’m right we’re fifty miles due north of Cayo Grande. Our present compass course would take us just past the southern tip of Trinidad. That checks pretty well with my dead reckoning. I haven’t had an accurate drift reading since we banged into that front.”

“Navigator from pilot,” came the drawling reply. “*Rosy* says she’ll take your word for it. She likes your style, *hombre*, even if you *are* a lily-fingered product of the effete East. A man who can keep *any* sort of dead reckoning in a storm like the one we just rode through will do to cross the river with.”

For the next hour Barry flew the big bomber, while her “Old Man” dozed in his seat. Below them the clouds continued unbroken. The moonlight on their gleaming crests and ridges gave the young co-pilot a queer sensation. It was hard not to believe that he was guiding a fantastic ship over the surface of a strange planet, thousands of light-years from Earth. In the lightless cockpit nothing seemed real.

“You fool—snap out of it!” Barry found himself muttering. “You’re heading into dreamland with your throttles wide. And that blur on the window isn’t imagination—*it’s oil!*”

CHAPTER SIX

SUBMARINES TO THE RIGHT

"A cracked cylinder!" was Fred Marmon's verdict, the minute he saw the oil spray on the window. "How near are we to landing, navigator?"

"Less than an hour," Lieutenant Levitt answered, "provided there's enough ceiling under those clouds."

"I think there will be," Captain O'Grady told them. "See! There's a break in the overcast, dead ahead. We'll go downstairs for a look."

Taking over the controls, he nosed the *Rosy* downward through the black hole in the clouds. A moment later Barry could see moonlight glinting on the wave crests.

At a thousand feet the Fortress leveled out. Above her the cloud scuff was breaking up rapidly.

"Got that radio damage located yet, Babbitt?" O'Grady asked through the interphone. "We really ought to let Trinidad know that we're on our way in, so they won't be throwing up a lot of flak at us."

"I'll have the trouble fixed in about five minutes, sir," Soapy replied. "Good thing we have plenty of spare parts. What that freak lightning bolt did to us was a caution!"

Just ahead a dark land mass rose out of the sea.

"That's the upper jaw of the 'Dragon's Mouth,'" O'Grady remarked. "Trinidad is just beyond. I'm going upstairs again, until Soapy gets our radio working."

The big bomber nosed sharply upward. For a few moments she clawed her way in almost pitch darkness through a cloud. Then the moonlight shone clear through the windows.

Suddenly a shaft of brilliant light burst through a rent in the scuff below them. Other searchlights stabbed upward. A sharp detonation jarred the Fortress.

"Antiaircraft shell!" grunted *Rosy's* Old Man. "Evidently they don't like unidentified planes cruising over the airfield. We'd better spin off."

WHAMM! BLAMM!

Two shells, still closer than the first, made the big plane rock. Tex O'Grady pulled the stick back between his knees and gave the engine full throttle.

"Guess those hombres mean business, Blake," he chuckled. "How do you like being under fire for the first time?"

"I don't know," replied Barry with a forced grin. "Somehow it doesn't seem quite real, being shot at by your own ground forces. The trouble is that those shells would hurt just as much as Jap flak."



"Radio's Okay, Sir!" Came Soapy Babbitt's Voice

"Radio's okay, sir!" came Soapy Babbitt's voice. "What'll I send?"

"Identification signals first," the Old Man replied. "Explain what happened to our radio and lights. Then tell 'em to switch on the floodlights, so we can land before the oil from that cracked engine cylinder drowns us."

Soapy was still talking into his radio when the searchlights behind them switched off. O'Grady nosed down. In a moment floodlights lighted up the field a few miles distant. The *Rosy* landed lightly for all her massiveness, and braked to a smooth stop.

"Yahoo! Me for some hot coffee!" whooped her Old Man, reaching for the entrance hatch. "Last man to the office buys for the whole bunch!"

Six days were spent in Trinidad, replacing the cracked cylinder and repairing the lightning's damage to the electrical system. On the seventh day *Rosy* hopped off on her long trip across the Atlantic to Freetown, Africa.

This time she carried a few bombs. It was Sergeant Hale's hope that they might sight a Nazi U-boat on the crossing. The chance, of course, was one in a million. However, watching for a target would help to dispel the monotony of the trip.

The weather was perfect—not a single bump in the air. With "George," the automatic gyro, taking care of their flying, the pilots had little to do. By turns, they napped, lunched, listened to the radio, played games with the others of the crew. Even Fred Marmon had a soft snap, for *Rosy's* hungry "quadruplets" were sucking their gas without a whimper.

Only Sergeant Hale, the bombardier, refused to join his crewmates in killing time. Stretched at full length in the plane's transparent nose, he stared fixedly at the sea.

"Danny is a born hunter," the Old Man observed. "Reckon he learned his patience from the Texas Apaches. They'll lie ten hours in one spot without moving, waiting for a deer to pass a runway."

They were just six hours out from Trinidad when Hale gave a bellow of discovery. Gazing down and ahead, Barry saw a convoy of twenty merchant ships, escorted by two destroyers and three corvettes. The intensified Nazi submarine attacks had made heavy protection necessary, he reasoned.

"We'll go down and say hello to them," said the captain, fastening his safety belt. "Maybe it will cheer them up to see *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* dropping them a curtsy, even if she can't stick around."

With engines throttled down, the bomber dropped toward the crawling convoy. Fascinated, Barry Blake watched the toy-like ships grow larger. Now he could make out the British flags and the tiny figures of the anti-aircraft gun crews in their tin nests on the superstructures.

"I hope no cockeyed gunner takes us for an enemy and cuts loose," he thought. "That wouldn't be any fun at all—"

"Submarines to the right!" yelled Sergeant Danny Hale. "I can see their shadows just under the surface, Captain. And look—they've just fired two torpedoes! Let's smash 'em!"

"You bet your sweet neck we will!" answered the Old Man. "Take over the throttles, Blake. Watch your r.p.m. We'll give Hale a target he can't miss.... Sergeant Babbitt, signal the convoy that we're not bombing *them!*"

The Fortress leveled out at 500 feet. Glancing down, Barry saw the deck of a freighter immediately beneath him. He could almost catch the expressions on the upturned faces of her crew. His eyes came back to his instruments and clung to them.

"Bombs away!" yelled Hale's voice in the interphone. "Give me a run at the other one, Captain."
WHOOM! BR-ROOM!

As the Fortress zoomed sharply, the two bomb explosions buffeted her. She staggered, gained altitude, banked, and turned.

WHAMM! A torpedo had struck. Flame blossomed from the sides of the freighter. Another ship was dodging the second "tin fish."

Searching the water for the submarines' shadows, Barry spotted one, but it looked misshapen, seen through the spreading ring of the bomb burst. Then he found the other. It was less distinct, evidently diving at top speed. That was the next target.

Between it and the convoy, a destroyer was circling like an excited hound. She was waiting, Barry realized, for *Rosy's* next run. The corvettes were threading their way through the mass of slower freighters, to be in at the kill.

"Steady, Blake—here we go again!" warned Captain O'Grady. "If that Hun is too deep for our bombs to hurt him, the explosion will spot his dive for the destroyer. Her depth charges will get him for sure."

WHR-R-ROOM! BOOM!

The *Rosy's* second run was still lower. The explosions made her aluminum skin crackle like an empty oil can. Suddenly Barry glimpsed the mast of a freighter spearing up at the bomber's nose. He gave her full throttle. The mast flashed beneath—seemingly with mere inches of clearance.

"Upstairs" again, the fortress's crew had a grandstand view of the submarine's finish. The destroyer raced toward the mark left by *Rosy's* last bombs. She dumped a depth charge off her stem. Her Y-guns pitched two more "ash cans," bracketing the spot. A fourth and last depth charge completed the square.

Behind her, the corvettes darted to the oil slick that now spread over Sergeant Hale's first target, and dropped two more charges for good measure.

"Pilot from radioman," Soapy Babbitt's voice crackled on the interphone. "The destroyer's commander sends us his congratulations and thanks. He thinks we bagged the second sub, too. Wishes we could stay with him for the rest of the voyage."

"I reckon he's telling the truth," chuckled *Rosy's* Old Man. "Those undersea wolves have been hanging right at the heels of every convoy lately. They hunt in packs. We'll just swing around the outskirts of this floating freight train and see if Danny Hale can spot any more suspicious shadows."

The Fortress banked slightly in a slow turn, describing a twenty-mile circle around the convoy. As she swung back again, Barry could see the result of one torpedo hit.

The freighter had been struck on the starboard side near the bow. She was slightly down by the head. Smoke was still rising from her forecastle, but she still kept her place in line. Her life-boats were in place, with nobody near them. Evidently her crew had no other thought than to take her to port.

"There's the second oil slick, Captain!" Hale called. "We got both those U-boats. Yip-yip-yippee!"

As the bombardier's coyote howl shrilled in his earphones, Barry Blake laughed outright. Like every man on board he felt pretty cocky. Already their ship had been under fire. Now she had drawn first blood, sinking at least one enemy submarine without help. The world was their oyster, waiting to be cracked wide open when they reached the battlefront.

With a final waggle of their broad wings, *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* turned her back on the convoy and headed eastward on her course. A chorus of grateful whistles followed her. Owing to the thunder of her own engines, her crew could not hear the freighter's salutes, but Tony Romani in the tail turret reported seeing the puffs of white steam.

The sinking of the subs provided conversation to last Barry and his companions for most of the trip. They were still comparing notes when the sun set. That put an end to Sergeant Hale's sea-gazing.

Supper was supplied from thermos jugs and a box of sandwiches. Afterwards, Curly Levitt took a fix from the stars, and made a slight correction in their compass course. The engines were behaving so beautifully that their red-headed nurse, Fred, began to be bored. He roamed from tail turret to cockpit playing small practical jokes on everyone, until the Old Man told him to spin off.

By midnight everyone but Captain O'Grady was dozing. His co-pilot was sound asleep in his seat. He was waked by the first red beams of the sun rising over Africa. That was another thrill for Barry Blake—watching the shoreline of a foreign continent loom up out of the horizon. He slapped on his earphones in time to hear Curly Levitt giving the Old Man another change of course—this time to the north.

A few minutes later the deep harbor of Freetown took shape beneath them. Soapy Babbitt, contacting the RAF field, received permission to come in and land. The first of their long, transoceanic hops was safely ended.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RAID ON RABAU

The stop at Freetown was brief—chiefly for gas and a bit of rest for *Rosy's* crew. Shortly after noon the big bomber took off again, headed for Accra, six hundred miles to the eastward. There the Pan American Lines had everything to do a complete servicing job. Captain O'Grady landed his ship just before the sudden equatorial night shut down.

A two-day rest put *Rosy* in first-class shape. Her engines were thoroughly broken in. Her mighty framework had been tested in action. Now it remained for her guns and gun turrets to be tried out under combat conditions.

And her crew! As Captain Tex O'Grady glanced at their keen, confident young faces, he knew he could depend on them. They'd meet danger with a grin of defiance and their cool efficiency would whittle down any odds they might meet.

Six thousand miles still remained between them and the Indian battlefront to which they had been ordered. The route would lie across Nigeria to Lake Tchad, then northwest to the Egyptian Sudan and down the Nile to Cairo. From there they would fly eastward in easy hops over Iran and India, till they reached their assigned base.

That was the plan; but in wartime the plans of mice and men are especially subject to change. A few hours before his take-off from Accra, radioed orders reached Captain O'Grady to head for Australia and the South Pacific. Heavy bombers were more urgently needed there, it appeared. And that meant *Sweet Rosy O'Grady!*

The new orders involved a greatly changed route. From now on Captain O'Grady and his crew would be flying below the equator. Heading southeast, they would have to cross the great Belgian Congo into East Africa before stopping to refuel. As soon as Fred Marmon learned that, he gave his "quadruplets" an extra careful inspection. A forced landing in those all but trackless jungles was something he hated to contemplate.

From Accra the Flying Fortress took off with all gas tanks full. Nine hundred miles across the Gulf of Guinea she roared to Libreville, where the Fighting French made up her depleted fuel. In the air again, she swept in a few hours over the vast territory that took H. M. Stanley years to explore. Twice she crossed the mighty Congo River. Then the five-hundred-mile expanse of Lake Tanganyika lay below.

"Watch out for elephants and giraffes, boys," came the Old Man's humorous drawl. "This is the country all the animal crackers come from. I'll take *Rosy* down low enough so that you can see them."

There was a general laugh, but as Captain O'Grady nosed his ship down to a thousand feet the crew really started to look. Perhaps the Old Man wasn't kidding after all.

The dense masses of green forest broke up into small patches. Lush grazing lands appeared, with here and there a clump of trees. Farther on stretched a dry plain, spotted with the green of an occasional water hole. As they neared one of these, Barry Blake gave a shout.

"There are your elephants, Captain!" he exclaimed. "We interrupted their drink. I see a bunch of ostriches on the run, too—"

"Ostriches—ha, ha!" Tex O'Grady chuckled. "We're not that near to Australia, Bub. Those long-necked critters you see are *giraffes*. Want me to prove it to you?"

He shoved the stick forward. As the giant plane dipped down to within two hundred feet of them, the frightened giraffes scattered like sheep. Barry could see their long, pathetic necks swaying like masts as they turned this way or that. Seconds later the herd was far behind.

"When we reach Australia, Lieutenant," Curly Levitt's voice murmured in the headphones, "I'll buy you a beautiful, big picture book, and you can learn that G stands for Giraffe, and E for Elephant and M for the little Monkey who didn't know which was which."

A howl of merriment from the others who were listening in made Barry's ears tingle.

"Okay, okay, I asked for it!" he admitted ruefully; and for the next hour he felt like a high school kid who has pulled the prize "boner" of the week in class.

The sensation wasn't comfortable. Yet it went farther than anything that had happened yet to make him feel at one with the other members of the crew. These men, he realized, weren't simply a detachment of non-coms and officers. They were a team, a family, an organism knit together by closer bonds than their assigned duties. Every last one of them was a brother to the rest, regardless of race or rank.

It was dark when the Flying Fortress reached Dar-es-Salam on the east coast. The next day, after servicing, the *Rosy O'Grady* hopped off across the Mozambique Channel. That same afternoon she landed at Tananarivo, Madagascar's mountain capital, where the Fighting French had recently improved the landing field to take care of heavy planes.

"This is the last land we'll see for three thousand-odd miles," O'Grady informed his crew. "Next stop will be Broome, Australia. Marmon and Jackson, you will make an especially close check on the engines. Take your time about it. Better to spend an extra day here than a month on rubber rafts somewhere in the Indian Ocean."

By noon of the third day, Fred and Cracker had checked and re-checked everything. Some of the care they took was really unnecessary. When they had finished, however, the bomber's power plant

was as perfect as human skill could make it. The fuel tanks were full. Food and water for a thirty-hour trip were aboard, but no bombs. To allow a safe margin in case of bad weather, the ship must fly as light as possible and save her gas.

They took off just at dawn. Soon they were out of sight of land, and from then on the trip became a long fight against boredom. Half of the way they flew on two engines, to economize on gas. The big bomber loafed along at five thousand feet, except on two occasions when she sighted squalls and had to dodge them. Before the trip was ended most of the *Rosy's* crew would have welcomed a storm to break the monotony.

They landed at Broome, on Australia's southwest tip, with plenty of gas to spare. The next day they headed northeastward, across the continent. Stopping at an American base in northern Queensland, they gassed up and hopped off on the last leg of their long flight to the battle zone.

Their base, when they found it, was still being carved out of the New Guinea jungle with the help of native labor. On the dirt runway Old Man O'Grady set his ship down like a cat on velvet. The moment she stopped he let out an old-time "rebel" yell.

When Barry and Fred Marmon climbed out last, after making their final checks, the *Rosy's* red-haired engineer looked scornfully around him. In mock disgust, he stared at a group of men filling in a big, raw hole with shovels.

"Look, Lieutenant!" he snorted. "This is what we came three quarters of the way around the globe to find—a potato patch in the back woods!"

"Yes?" retorted Barry with a grim smile. "Those boys aren't planting spuds, Fred; they're filling in a new shell hole. The Japs must have dropped a few of Tojo's calling cards just a little before we landed."

The Japs called again that night. This time the "cards" that they dropped were shells from a cruiser that had sneaked close to the shore, in the dark hours. Five miles away, she let loose with her heaviest guns. Her aim was surprisingly accurate. To the *Rosy O'Grady's* crew, the stuff seemed to be exploding all around their tent.

The screaming of shells, each followed instantly by an earth-shaking blast, produced a nightmare of horror for the unseasoned men. Not one of them gave way to fear, however. The most upset man in the tent was Tex O'Grady, who paced up and down between the cots, worrying about his ship and fighting mosquitoes. He couldn't get *Rosy* into the air, because the field had no lights as yet.

"If I knew this confounded field better," he fumed, "I'd take off and get her safe upstairs. But except for those shell flashes it's as dark as the inside of a cow. I'd only ground loop—"

WHANG!

A shell burst, nearer than any before it; tossed chunks of earth through the open flap. Some dirt must have struck O'Grady in the mouth, Barry guessed, from the way the Old Man sputtered and spat.

"Better get your head down, Captain," Curly Levitt spoke up. "You're not as big a target as *Rosy*, but you'll be safer on your cot."

The shelling stopped as suddenly as it had started. Later Barry learned that a pair of motor torpedo boats had routed the Jap cruiser, with two gaping holes below her waterline.

The damage to ships on the flying field was comparatively light. One bomber had received a direct hit. Three more were damaged by shell fragments. *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* had escaped without a scratch. The worst tragedy was the killing of a twin-engined bomber's crew when a shell exploded in their tent. Seven men had been sleeping there. All that was found of them was buried the next day in a single grave.

The attack was the last thing needed to make Barry and his friends ready for a raid of their own. Every man in the field was fighting mad. When O'Grady brought them the news that they were scheduled for a bombing mission that day, the *Rosy's* crew cheered like maniacs.

"We're going with the squadron to lay eggs on Rabaul," the Old Man told them. "High-altitude stuff. You gunners will probably get your chance at a few Zero fighters, so make sure you load up with ammunition before we leave. Here come the carts to bomb us up now."

Before *Rosy* had taken her last five-hundred pound egg on board the squadron commander was racing his Fortress down the runway. The other ten followed. Last of all, Old Man O'Grady took his ship up to her assigned position at the end of the right wing.

Looking ahead, Barry Blake thrilled at the sight of the other mighty Fortresses flying in a perfect V of V's. To his mind they spelled irresistible, smashing power—force which must, in the long run, blast all the little yellow invaders out of the Pacific.

As the 600-mile distance to Rabaul narrowed, a tense expectancy gripped pilots and gunners. The squadron was flying at high bombing altitude, 25,000 feet. Every man was in his place, for at any time now a swarm of enemy planes might appear.

The Japs were struggling grimly to keep their grip on New Britain, Barry knew. Many of their best fighter squadrons had been shifted there from other fronts, in the past few weeks.

"Sixty miles still to go!" Curly Levitt's warning came over the interphone.

O'Grady turned his head to glance at his co-pilot.

"The Nips' aircraft detectors have heard us by now," he drawled. "They're manning their guns, and sweating some, too, I reckon. A bunch of Zero fighters will be taking off to bother us on the way in.... How do you feel about it, Blake?"

"As if I'd like a gun in my hands—or the lever that releases the bombs," Barry laughed. "I feel just a little useless."

Tex O'Grady's smile faded out. He gazed straight ahead.

"You won't be useless if anything happens to me, son," he replied, gravely. "Keep your eyes peeled on every side now.... Those Zeros *may* not show up until after we've made our run, but you never can tell."

Sergeant Hale in the bomber's nose began counting aloud through the interphone.

"—thirteen—fourteen—fifteen Zeros dead ahead, and a flight of three more just above them. Here

they come!"

"Flights two, three and four, pull in closer!" barked the command radio. "Wing men will step up—the others down—ready to repel attacking planes."

Glancing up and to the right, Barry caught sight of still another enemy flight arrowing down at the Fortresses. He nudged O'Grady and pointed with his finger. The Old Man merely nodded. Keeping *Rosy* in her place in the tight protective formation was his only task for the moment.



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Sergeant Hale Counted Aloud Through the Interphone

BR-R-R-R-R-R-R-R!

With a chattering roar that cut through the engines' thunder, *Rosy's* nose, top turret, and side guns went into action. From the squadron's .50-caliber machine guns burst a storm of white tracer bullets. These mingled briefly with the fire of the diving enemy. Then most of the Zeros were below the flying forts.

Rosy O'Grady's belly turret opened up, followed by Tony Romani's fire from the "stinger" turret in the tail. As it ceased, the thought came to Barry Blake: "We've knocked them out of the sky! I thought those Japs were tough fighters, but this was like shooting clay pigeons. There's nothing in sight but three Zeros torching down below—"

A slamming explosion jarred the fuselage. Then the side gun manned by Curly Levitt chattered harshly. Out of the corner of his eye, Barry saw the nearest Fortress stagger out of place in the V.

"Pilot from top gunner!" Soapy Babbitt's report came through the phones. "Turret damaged by enemy shells. Machine guns still fire, but can't aim."

"Are you hurt, Soapy?" the Old Man asked.

"My left shoulder won't work right," came Babbitt's reply. "Nothing to worry about. I'll keep watch for more diving Zeros."

"Ready, Blake!" O'Grady spoke sharply. "Watch your throttles—we're nearing our targets now."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

FLYING WRECKAGE

Barry glued his eyes to the r.p.m. indicator. He forced his nerves to ignore the antiaircraft shells that burst closer and closer. This was the big moment of the whole raid—when the bombs were about to plummet down.

Cold air from the open bomb-bay doors rushed into the big ship's belly. There came the welcome whistle of a falling bomb; then another, and another. A moment afterward the harbor of Rabaul swept beneath. It was out of sight before Barry could spot the bomb hits.

KRANG!

An antiaircraft burst rocked the big bomber like a cradle. Her right inboard engine sputtered and quit. Looking out at the wing, Barry glimpsed a jagged shrapnel hole in the cowling. He glanced to the left. Another Fortress had been hit. She was falling out of formation.

"Never mind, boys, *Rosy O'Grady* can toddle home all right on three engines," the Old Man declared. "All you've got to do is to smack down every Zero you see...."

"Here come three of 'em, straight down at us!" yelled Soapy Babbitt from the jammed top turret. "If only I could aim these guns!"

"Maybe a Jap will cross your sights, Soapy!" the Old Man grunted, as he reefed back on the wheel. "I'll try to give Hale a shot."

Rosy's nose came up. Her forward guns cut loose at the trio of diving planes. One spun away, smoking; another changed direction. The third kept coming, with his tracer bullets feeling for the Flying Fortress. When they touched her the Jap pilot pulled the trigger of his cannon.

A stunning blast threw Barry hard against his safety belt. Something—it felt like a hard-thrown baseball—struck his head. He felt himself falling into a black void.

Someone was shaking him, none too gently. A voice, Curly Levitt's, pierced through his dulled consciousness.

"Wake up, Barry! Wake up and take over these controls before I have to," the navigator was repeating in his ear. "The Old Man is out cold—ripped by that shell."

Barry made a desperate effort. It was like struggling against gravity, but he won. His eyes cleared. The plane was flying on a fairly level keel, thanks to Curly's hand on the wheel, but something was very wrong. The Old Man....

One look at *O'Grady's* crumpled form drove the last of the fog out of Barry's head. The captain's left arm was missing below the elbow. A handkerchief tourniquet had stopped the worst bleeding, but there were other wounds on his left side and leg. He was mercifully unconscious.

The bomber's machine guns were still firing, by fits and starts, but only two engines were still functioning. The other Fortresses were nowhere in sight. Two Zero fighters were coming head-on into Sergeant Hale's fire....

These impressions took barely three seconds for Barry to absorb. He gripped the wheel hard, setting his teeth against the pain in his head.

"Thanks, Curly," he gritted. "You tend to the Old Man.... With two good engines even a dumb co-pilot ought to get *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* home okay."

"Good man!" Curly exclaimed, as he turned to the captain. "I'll fix up your scalp wound later. Just fly southwest until I get a chance to figure our exact position."

One of the Zeros that had been heading for *Rosy's* nose was now falling, with a trail of black smoke. The other had swooped past. Barry heard one of the side guns firing, then a burst from the belly turret.

"Got him!" came Cracker Jackson's grunt in the radiophones.

Barry eased back on the wheel and found that his crippled Fortress could still gain a little altitude. Cold air still poured in from the open bomb doors; a chunk of flak must have damaged the jacks that raised them. Barry began calling the turrets one by one to learn of any further damage.

Aside from a shell hole through the rudder and countless bullet holes, there was none worth mentioning. Best of all, the sky seemed to be clear of enemy fighters.

The pain in Barry's head was easier. His brain functioned more clearly with each minute that passed. From the crew's reports he made a rough calculation of the Jap planes shot down.

About thirty fighters had attacked the bomber formation as they approached Rabaul. Thirteen Zeros had been shot down at the cost of one Fortress. The eleven remaining bombers had laid their eggs with perfect accuracy on the docks and ships, and flown on. The Zeros, already decimated, had hung around just out of range. When *Rosy* fell behind, with one engine damaged by antiaircraft fire, the Japs had jumped on her like wolves.

Seventeen Zero fighters against one crippled Boeing—and the Fortress had won out! Nine of the Japs had torched down. The others had turned back to their home base.

Barry's heart swelled with pride in the great ship and the fighting crew of which he was a member. Except for that last shell hit....

A glance at the slumped figure of *Tex O'Grady* sobered him. Curly Levitt had finished bandaging the captain, and Fred Marmon was helping to lift him out of his seat. The two men lugged their wounded pilot back toward the tail and laid him down, wrapped in their coats.

"What are the Old Man's chances?" the young co-pilot asked, as the navigator returned.

"It's hard to tell how deep those shell fragments in his side have gone," Curly answered. "He's lost a lot of blood, too. All we can do now is hope.... Hold steady, now, while I swab out that cut in your scalp—oh-oh! I can feel something there."

"So can I!" grunted Barry. "Take it easy, fella!"

Curly's fingers touched the cut again, cautiously. Barry felt a stabbing twinge.

"There it is, Mister!" the navigator shouted. "A bit of shrapnel as big as my thumbnail. If your head weren't solid bone, as I've always suspected, we'd be minus a co-pilot."

He held the scrap of jagged metal in front of Barry's nose for a second, then stuck it in his pocket.

"When you tie it up, be sure to leave the bone in," Barry answered with a grin. "When this war is over you can get yourself a nice job in a butcher shop. It would just suit your rough-and-ready style."

"That's base ingratitude!" Curly retorted, applying the bandage. "I hope Soapy Babbitt is more appreciative when I fix him up. He got a smashed shoulder when the top turret was wrecked."

As Curly left him, the full weight of his responsibility settled upon Barry's mind. Had the Old Man been at the controls, *Rosy O'Grady's* crippled condition would not have worried him particularly. If it were possible to bring a ship home on only one engine, Barry would have trusted his captain to do it.

Now, however, both the wounded plane and her wounded crew depended on him. With little more than training school experience, could he land them safely? As he struggled against such fears, Fred Marmon's voice sounded in his ears.

"I've got bad news for you, Lieutenant," the engineer announced. "The same burst of flak that jammed the bomb doors washed out the electrical system. Your landing flaps won't work and your wheels won't come down. Looks like we'll all have to bail out and let *Rosy* crash."

Barry's first feeling was one of relief. Now, at least, he wouldn't have to risk the lives of everybody aboard, landing a shot-up plane on a jungle field. But, wait! How about Old Man O'Grady? Even if somebody pulled the chute's cord for him and dumped him out, the landing would kill him. A parachute lets you down with about the same shock you'd feel if you jumped out of a second story window. A half-dead man could never survive it, even if he didn't land in the jungle and break his back.

"You men will bail out," Barry said into the intercom mike. "When we get near the field, strap Captain O'Grady into his own seat, and pad him with your coats against the shock of a crackup. I'll try to land *Rosy* on her belly without too much of a flop. It's the Old Man's only chance."

The crew got that reasoning without any trouble.

"It makes me feel like a doggone coyote!" big Danny Hale muttered, turning to look at Barry. "My great gran'daddy didn't leave the old Alamo, when it was *sure* death to stay. I reckon if he was in my place—"

"He'd obey orders, just as you're going to do, Danny," Barry Blake shot back at him. "I'm in command of this plane, while the Old Man is out. You and every other member of the crew will bail out when we reach the field. That's final!"

"I agree absolutely, except on one point," Curly's voice chimed in. "You're wounded, Lieutenant. It's a miracle that you can fly a ship at all, with the beating you've had. It's no reflection on your skill—or your grit—to say that you might go dizzy at the last minute of landing, and crack up. Now, I've had some flight training, enough to land belly-floppers on a soft field. Therefore it's *my* place and not yours—"

"Spoken like a lawyer, Curly!" laughed the young co-pilot. "You're a swell guy to offer, but it's no go. So don't argue. Just tell me when we're nearing our base, and then help Fred bring the Old Man back to the cockpit."

There was a little more discussion of the landing Barry would have to attempt, but nobody else protested. As soon as Soapy Babbitt was made as comfortable as he could be, the thermos jug of coffee was passed around. Barry forced himself to eat a little.

After a seemingly endless time Curly Levitt reported that he had warned the base by radio. The field would soon be in sight.

In the distance Barry recognized the New Guinea coastline. Now he picked out certain mountain landmarks that gave him the exact direction of the base.

"Bring the Old Man up front, fellows," he said. "And then hook on your parachutes. We have about five minutes to go."

The men worked fast. Captain O'Grady was still unconscious under the double effect of shock and the morphine that Curly had administered. The navigator and Fred Marmon handled him as tenderly as they could. The strapping was finished, and the men were back at the open bomb bay when Barry spotted the field. Big Danny Hale was gripping the zippered case that held his precious bomb-sight.

Barry tried to judge the proper moment for the first parachute jump. Twisting in the seat, he raised his hand.

Fred Marmon saluted, grinned, and dived headfirst into space. The others followed in quick succession. The bomber roared on, slowly circling the field. Far below, Barry counted six white 'chutes drifting toward the raw, brown slash in the jungle.

"They're safe!" he murmured. "Wish I had a parachute for *Sweet Rosy O'Grady*, too!"

When the last 'chutist had landed, the young pilot nosed down and came in up-wind for his risky attempt. He cut the gun, fishtailed to kill speed. A Fortress's wheels should touch the ground at ninety miles an hour, for a smooth landing; but *Rosy* couldn't let down her wheels. A belly landing at ninety would be an ugly mess.

At a shaky sixty m.p.h. Barry brought her in. At the last moment he let her drop. The bomb-bay doors dug into the runway, before they ripped loose. The ship bounced on her belly turret, tore an engine clean out of its mounting, and came to rest.

When the crash squad entered the cockpit, *Rosy's* young co-pilot was "out cold." Fortunately

neither he nor the Old Man had received any further hurts. A hospital-corps man jabbed a hypodermic into Barry's arm. Sixty seconds later, both he and Captain O'Grady were being rushed on stretchers to the field's temporary dressing station.

The next afternoon, Barry Blake woke up, feeling almost himself again. The marvelous new Army drugs had given him twenty-four hours of refreshing sleep. His head wound had been expertly cleansed, sewed and bandaged. His greatest discomfort was a gnawing appetite. He swung his legs over the edge of his cot and looked around for his clothes.

"Hold it down, Lieutenant!" the medical-corps man in charge warned him. "You're scheduled to stay right in this hangar till tomorrow."

"Quit woofing me, Corporal," Barry growled. "I feel fine. And I'm so hungry my belt buckle is bumping my backbone. Did the major order you to starve me, too?"

"No, sir," chuckled the medical man. "I'll bring you some chow right away. It's almost time for mess call so the cook will have it ready."

"Wait a second!" Barry exclaimed, as the other turned to go. "Where's Captain O'Grady, and Sergeant Babbitt? They ought to be here—"

The corporal paused in the doorway, shaking his head.

"Not here, Lieutenant," he replied. "This place is only equipped as a field dressing station as yet. Captain O'Grady and Sergeant Babbitt were flown to Australia last night. The Captain will have a fighting chance in a real hospital, and they'll probably save Babbitt's arm, too."

Barry lifted his legs back onto his bunk and relaxed. So the field doctor had given Tex O'Grady a fighting chance! That was better news than any of *Rosy's* crew had expected.

The medical-corps man returned with hot chow and five grinning Fortress crewmen. Fred Marmon was the first to grip Barry's hand. Curly Levitt crowded him aside, as Danny Hale and Tony Romani and Cracker Jackson surrounded the cot. Everybody was talking at once. Out of the barrage of wisecracks, congratulations and laughter, Barry Blake got one definite impression: his crew was immensely proud of him, for making that landing and saving the life of their Old Man.

The medical corporal found difficulty in drawing Barry's attention back to his hot chow. He succeeded at last, but *Rosy's* young co-pilot was still too busy talking to know what he was eating. The six friends would have discussed the raid, the fight, and the return trip for hours, if mess call had not interrupted.

After supper, Curly Levitt returned to the dressing station. The others, he said, were needed to help set up the new equipment which had arrived during the past two days. There were electrical generators, searchlights, floodlights, antiaircraft guns, and the first units of a big repair shop. This last would take care of damaged planes landing on the field. It would have crews to bring in ships that had crashed.

"When the repair plant is running, it will probably be able to rebuild *Sweet Rosy O'Grady*," her navigator stated.

"I wish we could hope as much for her Old Man," Barry sighed. "But there's no repair shop in the world that can put a missing arm back on a pilot."

"It will just about break his heart," Curly agreed, rising to his feet. "I imagine that Mrs. O'Grady won't feel too badly about having her husband back, however.... Well, here's the doctor, come to have a look at you. That's my signal to take off."

CHAPTER NINE

NIGHT ATTACK

When Barry next saw Curly Levitt, the dapper navigator was firing a sub-machine gun at the searchlighted sky. Black parachutes were dropping toward the field, with Jap soldiers dangling beneath them. Every man on the field who could find a gun of any kind was shooting at the rain of enemies. And the Japs were firing back.

The party started with a terrific bomb barrage about midnight. The Japs evidently believed that neither aircraft detectors nor antiaircraft equipment were as yet set up. They were wrong about both. Another thing they didn't know was that most of the living quarters, supplies, and even planes, had been moved into the jungle that fringed the field.

A few moments after the bombs started falling, the new antiaircraft batteries went into action. They caught three of the Jap bombers with their shells. In return, bombs wiped out two guns, three searchlights, and their crews. Then came the parachute troops.

There weren't many of them—not more than fifty in all. Apparently the fire was too intense for the Jap transport planes to risk. Why these few suicide squads were dropped remained a mystery until morning.

Barry reached the field as the first 'chutists landed. He saw a Garand rifle in the hand of a soldier who had been killed by shrapnel. The weapon, he found, was fully loaded—and unharmed. As he turned to pick a target, the field's floodlights went on.

A dozen of the Japs lay motionless, tangled in their parachutes. The others were squirming free, or firing from bombholes with their small caliber sub-machine guns. Barry felt a bullet tug at his trouser leg; another burned the skin of his shoulder. He threw himself prone.

A Jap had just wriggled free of his chute and was diving toward a bomb crater. Barry took a snap shot at the man, and saw him collapse. He switched his aim to a hole from which the pale flames of Jap machine guns were licking like serpents' tongues. They were firing at the floodlights, which were rapidly going out.

The shadows deepened across the bomb-torn field. Barry was sure that some of them were Japs crawling toward the jungle. He fired at the nearest. Suddenly he realized that he was trying to shoot an empty gun.

Bullets were kicking up dirt too close for comfort. Barry glanced about and spotted a convenient bomb crater. It was strange that he hadn't noticed it before. Clutching his empty gun, he rolled into the hole.

As he reached the bottom a steely hand seized him by the throat. Instinctively his hand shot up, grasped a muscular wrist. Moonlight glinted faintly on the long knife in the hand that he had blocked.

While he struggled with both hands to wrest the weapon away, a rocket streaked up the sky. Directly overhead the flare burst, flooding everything with white light. Barry's enemy gasped and dropped his butcher knife. He was Fred Marmon.

"Lieutenant Blake!" the redhead yelped. "Thank Heaven for that flare—I might have carved you for a Jap."

"You mean I might have broken your arm!" retorted Barry. "Listen, Fred—if you've got an extra gun or a clip of ammo, let's have it. I think those yellow snakes are heading this way."

"I have something better," Marmon replied. "A sack of hand grenades. I got 'em when the Japs started landing. Help yourself—"

He broke off as Barry made a lightning lunge past him with his empty rifle. A high-pitched scream rang briefly. Barry had rammed his gun-muzzle like a bayonet into the face of a crawling Jap who had reached the edge of the hole.

Another queer-shaped helmet appeared, and beside it a machine-gun's muzzle. Barry swung his gun-butt at the weapon, knocking it aside. A split instant later Fred struck with his knife. The second Jap kicked convulsively.

"I fixed him!" the redhead muttered. "See any more, Lieutenant?"



Barry's Enemy Gaspd and Dropped His Knife

Other flares were lighting the field. Barry spotted a furtive movement in a crater thirty yards from the jungle's edge.

"There's a bunch that's getting ready to break for the bush, I think," he said. "Give me a few of your grenades."

"Swell! We'll both rush 'em," Fred Marmon responded. "Here's the bag of pineapples.... Help yourself, sir."

Barry stuffed his pockets hastily. He kept one grenade in his hand, with his finger through the ring.

"I'll go first," he said shortly.

Crouching low, he sprinted toward the Japs' bomb hole. Before he had quite reached throwing distance, the raiders saw him and opened fire. A slug glanced off his helmet. He took three more strides and flung himself flat. Behind a ten-inch-high ridge of earth he pulled the pin of his first grenade. Then, rising on one elbow, he flung it.

Five yards away he glimpsed Fred hurling another. As the second grenade landed six Japs boiled up out of the bomb crater. Two were still on the edge when the grenades went off—Barry's in the hole; Fred's just ahead of them.

A cheer went up from the American riflemen and machine gunners. A new storm of gunfire broke out, aimed at three or four other bomb craters.

"Come on, Fred!" Barry yelled. "We'll clean out the rest of the snakeholes. The boys are shooting to keep the Japs' heads down for us."

"Right with you, sir!" came the sergeant's shout.

So furious was their friends' fire that few Jap bullets came near Barry and Fred. Crouched within easy throw of the occupied craters, they flung their deadly little missiles. Some of the enemy attempted a dash for the bush, only to be cut down. Once a grenade was tossed back. It exploded in the air dangerously close to Barry. Later he found that a flying fragment had cut his cheek.

With their "pineapples" gone, the two Fortress men trotted back to the trees.

"Why didn't I bring another bag of 'em?" the red-headed engineer wailed. "I just know there's a few more Japs playing possum out there on the field. Only way to get 'em is to toss a grenade into every hole you can find—"

Just in front of them an antiaircraft battery went into action. The white fingers of the searchlights began combing the sky again. Between the gun reports, Barry caught the scream of a falling bomb.

"Down!" he yelled, pulling Fred to the ground beside him.

The ground erupted near them. Half dazed by the shock, the two friends started crawling. Dirt rained down on their helmets. From farther up the field came more bomb concussions.

This time the bombardment was less intense, but it lasted for half an hour. One Jap bomber followed another at irregular intervals, flying at a very high altitude. The light of a blasted and blazing gasoline truck furnished a plain target, not to mention the anti-aircraft gun flames and the searchlights. Yet the Japs were so high that more bombs fell in the jungle than struck the field.

When the raid was over, Barry Blake headed for the dressing station. His injured head was pounding like a bass drum. He longed to lie down and close his eyes.

There was no place for him in the hospital tent, however. The medical officer was operating on men wounded by bomb fragments—tying off severed arteries, sewing up torn flesh, probing for shrapnel. He was stripped to the waist, covered with sweat and blood. The medical-corps men were equally busy.

Barry had no intention of getting in their way. He found some aspirin for himself, swallowed two of the pills, swabbed iodine on his cut cheek, and left. In his crew's shelter tent he found Curly and Fred arguing about the raid. He sank down on a cot beside them.

"There's something queer about those parachute troops," Curly declared. "The Japs didn't drop them just by accident. They had some very important job which only suicide squads could do. If only we knew what it was...."

"Don't worry, sir," said the red-haired sergeant. "They didn't accomplish it. We've just searched the field and found only four live Japs. They were all wounded. Two of 'em opened fire on us and were blotted out. Number Three played dead until one of our boys tried to turn him over. Then he set off a grenade that blew both of 'em to pieces. Number Four struck with his teeth—just like a rattlesnake—and bit a medical-corps man's cheek. He's the only one that's still alive."

"I wouldn't be too sure that they didn't accomplish anything important," said Curly Levitt. "A few of them may still be loose in the jungle. I have a hunch that we'll hear from them yet."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Curly," Barry Blake put in. "I'm not so much worried about the few Jap parachutists that may have escaped to the bush. To be sure, they could do plenty of damage. But if immediate damage had been their purpose, we'd have had two or three times as many to fight. I have a hunch that this bombing and skirmishing on the field was just a trick to cover up some other maneuver."

"You mean a Jap landing on the beach, sir?" asked Fred Marmon. "That thought hopped into my head, too—but it's no good. Our boys have that coastline guarded so well that wild pigs couldn't get through without raising an alarm. Their scouts would have brought us warning."

"Let's try to get a little shuteye, then," Curly Levitt yawned. "We won't help matters by worrying or arguing all night. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

At dawn the field was roused by a third bombardment. This time it was a shelling from medium-heavy field guns. It plowed the already bombed runways until the field looked like a map of the moon's craters. Two swift fighter planes tried to take off before the last smooth strip of ground was blown up. One of them ground-looped.

The second, by clever dodging of bomb holes, managed to take the air. Fifteen minutes later it returned, riddled with bullet holes. The pilot nosed over trying to land on the field's least plowed end. When they pulled him out of his wrecked fighter he said that he had flown over the enemy positions at less than five hundred feet and had a pretty good look at them.

The Japs were entrenched on a grassy ridge, about 1500 feet above the field and within easy range. There were two or three hundred of them, with at least twenty pieces of artillery camouflaged in clumps of trees. Evidently they had been landed by parachute from a swarm of huge transport planes, under cover of the night attack on the air field.

"You were right about the purpose of that raid, Lieutenant Blake," Fred Marmon admitted, as the *Rosy O'Grady's* crew moved their tent farther into the jungle. "The Japs will make our field useless as long as they hold that ridge. The problem is how to clean them out."

"Better heads than ours are working on that right now," Barry told him. "We could bomb the Jap positions with planes based at Port Moresby, for instance. Or we could bring up troops and take the ridge by assault. But neither job would be as easy as it sounds. We'll just have to wait for the brass-hats to decide."

The American plan did not develop for forty-eight hours. During that time a transport vessel arrived with more anti-aircraft and two companies of soldiers. They were welcome additions to the field's strength, but they did not solve the problem of the Japs' shellfire.

On the third day after the Japs' first raid, the field's commandant called all his officers together. These included the air as well as the ground forces. Between the regular *whoomp* of bursting shells, the colonel outlined his plan of attack.

"Tomorrow," he stated bluntly, "we shall attack the enemy position on Grassy Ridge. I should like to have had artillery here to soften up our objective, but we cannot wait for it to arrive. A surprise attack must take its place. After dark the infantry will move forward as far as possible. They will carry iron rations, and ammunition for their weapons. The attack will be at dawn."

"How about supplies, in case the Japs aren't routed by the first assault?" an infantry captain asked.

"In that case, our engineers will open a jeep road through the bush with bulldozers," the commandant replied. "They'll start in the morning, and push ahead to the steep hillside a mile and a half from Grassy Ridge. From there on we'll have to carry all supplies by manpower, including mortars for close-in bombardment."

"How about us fliers, Colonel?" the commanding officer of the Fortress squadron spoke up. "Do we have to loaf while even the native blacks are doing their bit? Can't we fix up one runway while the Japs are busy ducking our shells? My boys would love a chance to smash those egg-heads with a few five-hundred-pounders."

"You'll probably have your chance, Captain," the commandant smiled. "Building a road to the Ridge is the engineers' first job; after that they'll tackle the field. Don't let your crews get mixed up in the ground fighting, or some ships may be short-handed when you're ready to take off.... I think

that is all for the time being, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER TEN

HAND TO HAND

Curly Levitt linked an arm through Barry's as they left the commandant's tent.

"That warning about crews joining the scrap doesn't apply to us, does it?" he asked. "We're short-handed already—with the Old Man and Babbitt in the hospital. Anyhow, the *Rosy O'Grady* won't fly for a long time after this battle is over. We're free to do just about what we please, aren't we?"

"I get your point," Barry answered with a grim smile. "You're suggesting that the six of us form a sort of guerrilla squad and bag a few Japs on our own. Not a bad idea at all—if our squadron commander agrees. Let's get him alone now and see what he thinks about it."

Captain Loomis was not yet thirty years old, and next to flying a fighting ship he loved best a fight on the ground. His sympathy was easy to enlist.

"I can't give you boys official permission to join the ground attack," he told Barry and Curly, "but I won't confine you to the post. If you pick up some rifles and grenades and wander off into the woods, that's your affair. And I certainly wish you good hunting!"

"Thanks, Captain," Barry replied as the two turned to leave. "If we find a Samurai sword in the bush, we'll bring it back to you for a souvenir." 94

The two young lieutenants found the rest of the *Rosy's* crew at mess, and passed them the word to rendezvous in their tent. When the six were all together, Barry broached the plan.

"It's better than sitting around and swatting mosquitoes," he concluded. "And we know that the fight for Grassy Ridge will be tough. Six extra men might be quite a help."

"You don't have to sell us the idea, Lieutenant," Fred Marmon spoke up. "After two days of taking Jap shellfire we're all spoiling for a chance to dish it out. I know where we can get some hand grenades and side-arms tonight."

"I know where there's a case of tommy-guns," said Tony Romani. "We can 'requisition' them, so to speak, this afternoon. And plenty of ammo, of course."

"I'll collect a few tin hats," added Cracker Jackson, "and some iron rations and water canteens. Reckon you-all didn't think of them."

Danny Hale rose to his feet and spread his big fingers.

"If I get near enough to one of those yellow snakes," he said slowly, "I'd like to match his jiu-jitsu tricks with an Apache wrestling hold. Anyhow, the six of us ought to have a pretty good time before the party's over." 95

Before supper the *Rosy O'Grady's* crew had collected a young arsenal in their sleeping tent. It included bayonets and three sheath knives. Fred Marmon had brought six suits of green coveralls to replace their flying togs, and even some burnt cork to blacken their faces.

"We'll have to fit a tin hat over that nice, clean bandage of yours, Lieutenant Blake," he said. "Anything white would draw Jap bullets like a doggone magnet.... Look. If I set it on sidewise, like this, it doesn't hurt your wound."

"That's fine, Fred," Barry agreed. "I'd be cooler without the thing, but it *will* turn bullets. We're all going to have a lot more sympathy for the infantry after this masquerade."

The attacking troops set out as soon as the tropic night had shut down. Barry Blake and his friends joined a platoon that was pushing and slashing its way through the pitch-black jungle, with the help of a few dimmed flashlights. The vine-laced growth was so dense that at high noon only a green twilight would have penetrated it. Bayonets and machetes made openings through the worst tangles. Thorn bushes fought back, raking arms and legs mercilessly. Some of the advancing units used compasses to keep them headed toward Grassy Ridge. A few of them had the help of native guides. Most, however, followed the trails opened by the advance guard.

The *Rosy's* crew took their turns with the machetes, cutting a path. The work, in that hot-house temperature, was exhausting. At any rate, the advancing troops had plenty of time. They reached the hill's steep, rocky base at about midnight. 96

Here the word was passed to rest for an hour. Mosquito headnets were donned; emergency rations were opened. Weary, and sweating at every pore, the men stretched themselves out in such level spaces as they could find by groping on the damp ground.

Fred Marmon complained that the mosquitoes liked his blood better than that of any man in the Army. He declared that more of them were gathering from all over New Guinea, as the news spread.

"If they suck me to death," he groaned, "dig a hole and bury my carcass quick so it won't draw any more of them. Enough of these flying siphons could wipe out the whole company."

Big Danny Hale also suffered aloud. He declared that the only difference between New Guinea mosquitoes and Zero fighting planes was that the bugs didn't need an airfield. In size and poison, he insisted, they were about equal.

At the end of the hour, word was passed to start climbing the lower, wooded sides of the hill. This was to be a far slower and more cautious task than the first few hours of the advance. The Japs were less than a mile above them now. Not even dimmed flashlights would be permitted, except in the hands of platoon leaders. All movements would be as slow as a snail's and, if possible, as silent. 97

By touch, and by occasional low whispers, the men kept in contact. There were frequent halts, to let those behind catch up. Only the knowledge that they were nearing the enemy, and would soon

be charging his positions, kept the soldiers' nerves from exploding.

The last and hardest wait came at the edge of the bush, where the coarse, four-foot-high grass began. Scouts had been sent out to locate the Jap positions, so the soldiers' "grapevine" reported. When they returned, the troops were to move forward. If all went well they would pounce upon their enemies in the first gray light of dawn. The Japs, notoriously late sleepers when they did not expect an attack, would be caught literally napping.

"It sounds fine," Curly Levitt muttered in Barry's ear. "But one little mistake of ours could give those people warning. Wouldn't it have been safer to surround the Nips' positions and rush them from all sides?"

"Possibly—in full daylight," Barry whispered back. "But at dawn there's danger of shooting down our own troops by mistake. Our jungle uniforms are enough like the Japs' to fool you where the visibility is low. You've given me an idea, though, Curly. If the rest of our crew agree, we six might circle around to the enemy's rear. We're not under orders, and we'd be taking our own risk."

"Wait a minute while I crawl around and ask them," the *Rosy's* navigator replied eagerly. "I think they'll eat it up!"

Curly was right in his guess. The extra risks involved meant little to the four Air Force sergeants. They would go where Barry Blake led, even if it meant charging the whole Jap force with hand grenades.

Fortunately for their plan, the six "guerillas" were on the far right wing of the attacking line. In the darkness their silent departure would not be noticed. Keeping contact by touch alone, they crawled away along the edge of the jungle.

The moon was now well up in the sky, silvering the long grass of the hill-crest. Thus Barry could watch the lay of the land, while keeping in the black shadow of the bush. On reaching the height of land, he stopped.

"There's a rocky outcropping twenty yards from here," he whispered to Curly Levitt. "I'm going to crawl out to it and try to spot the Jap gun positions.... They might give us a clue to the trenches our scout plane reported the first day."

Without waiting for Curly's answer, Barry Blake wormed his way toward the exposed outcrop. Reaching it, he inched his way to the highest part. Now he had no protection except the dirty color of his jungle suit. If a Jap sentry should catch his least movement, it would be just too bad.

From the rocks he looked down on a sea of grass, broken by little islands of brush and trees. No trenches appeared. They were either cleverly camouflaged with grass, or else there were none near by. One of the tree clumps, however, drew Barry's especial interest. From where he lay, a vaguely pagoda-like shape could be glimpsed protruding from the shadows.

A Jap tent, draped with camouflage netting? It would be worth a risk to discover the truth, Barry believed. Cautiously he crawled back to his friends.

"We'll proceed in single file, on hands and knees," he told them. "Stick a lot of grass in your helmet nets before you start. It's nearly dawn now, so we won't have long to wait for the big fight to open. Better take a good drink from your water canteens while you have a chance."

A foot at a time they advanced, with little pauses. A sentry, had he glimpsed the movement of their grass trimmed hats, might have taken it for a passing breeze.

The light grew stronger. The clump of trees took more definite shape. Now the guerillas could see clearly the angle of a large tent with its protective netting. From within came snores in three or four different keys.

"Officers' tent!" Curly whispered. "Sentry must be asleep, too—if there is one. What'll we do now?"

"Get a little nearer; wait for the first shot of the main attack, and then toss a couple of grenades apiece. That ought to put us into the scrap with a bang."

"Twelve bangs!" chuckled Curly. "Even one small bomb would do a better job, though."

Barry moved off in a different direction, to bring the open door of the tent into full view. Five yards further on he stopped with a gasp. His hand had slipped into a hole, beneath the grass roots.

Laying down his tommy-gun, Barry grasped the edge of the hole and lifted. A whole section of the "ground" tilted up. Beneath it yawned black emptiness.

"Here's a trench!" he whispered over his shoulder to Curly. "It's covered with grass sods, laid on matting. Tell the boys to come on in."

Feet first, he let himself down into the hole. It was only four feet deep and very narrow. Evidently the Japs had dug it as a protection against air attacks, but it could also be used for ground fighting. For the guerillas' purpose it was ideal.

At Barry's orders, only three mats were removed—no more than could be quickly replaced. In the opening all six men stood, waiting for daylight and the first gun. Each held a grenade, as he faced the door of the Jap Officers' tent.



"Here's a Trench!" He Whispered Over His Shoulder

Their wait was not long, though to their tensed nerves it seemed hours. From behind them a Jap sentry's rifle shot was blanketed by the heavier voices of American sub-machine guns. Shrill yells arose. The sharper clatter of Jap .25-caliber machine guns joined the din.

Barry's party needed no command to toss their deadly little "pineapples." Two apiece, they lobbed them right into the tent. Then they ducked, pulling the grass mats over them.

The explosions came almost together—like a string of giant firecrackers. A patter of debris sounded on the grass matting just over their heads. Jap voices broke out, shrill with excitement, drawing rapidly nearer.

Suddenly light showed, farther down the trench.

"They're coming in!" Barry snapped. "Wait till they fill the trench, and then rake 'em with the tommy-guns. Curly and I will lie down; the rest of you kneel or stand and fire over us. Toss off the end mat at the last minute."

"Okay, Lieutenant—we'll sure clean them out that way!" muttered Fred Marmon. "That is, if nobody lobs a hand grenade into *this* end of the ditch!"

Evidently the Japs had no idea that the grenades that had wrecked the tent might have come from the trench. They proceeded to take the camouflage mats off methodically, moving up from the other end.

Barry lay on the very bottom, with Curly's elbow digging him in the ribs as he aimed his weapon. It was lighter now in their end of the trench.

Taking a long breath, Barry pressed the trigger. The trench erupted with fire and sound. He saw the Japs nearest him crumple like rag dolls, one after another, down the trench. They never knew what hit them.

At the further end, however, the doomed men saw the licking gun-flames. Some of them tried to return the fire—only to be riddled in the act. The remainder started scrambling out of the death trap. Cracker Jackson and big Danny Hale caught most of these, but not before one Jap had lobbed a hand grenade.

The missile, hastily thrown, landed outside the trench, six feet from Hale and Jackson. Without a split second's hesitation, big Danny flung himself upon the thing. In one motion he grabbed and flung it. The grenade burst harmlessly, fifty feet away.

Now, however, bullets were humming over the slit trench. The Japs were all outside.

"Down, men!" Barry Blake shouted at Danny and Cracker Jackson. "We've got to hold this trench if we want to live."

All of the shooting now came from the direction of the American advance. The Japs between the attacking force and Barry's trench were keeping their heads down and their gun barrels hot. Their

camouflaged helmets offered difficult targets.

"Hold your fire until our boys blast them out of those trenches," Barry told his friends. "It won't be long now. Then we can see what we're shooting at. Curly, suppose you face the other way and see that nobody snipes—"

PING!

Barry broke off as a .25-caliber slug glanced off his helmet. The shock of it hurt his old head-wound like a knife stab.

"I see the beggar!" yelled Curly. "He's in that tree above the wrecked tent...."

The raving of his tommy-gun drowned out Levitt's words. Tony Romani's weapon joined it, firing short bursts. Suddenly the shooting stopped.

"One more honorable sniper bites honorable dust," chanted *Rosy O'Grady's* navigator. "So solly!"

From concealment in patches of brush and trees the Jap field guns started to fire. They were lobbing shells just over their trenches, feeling for the Americans down the slope. Apparently some of the shells landed close. Their result was simply to speed up the attack.

In a series of short rushes the two companies closed in on the entrenched Japs. While some of them advanced the rest poured a hot fire into the Jap positions. Then the foremost Americans started hurling grenades. In a few minutes much of the fighting was hand to hand. Howling like wolves, the boys from Montana, Ohio, and New York leaped into the Jap front-line defenses and cleaned them out.

Fred Marmon and Cracker Jackson wanted to charge down the slope and join that fight, but Barry forbade it.

"You'd probably be shot for Japs," he told them. "And, anyhow, you'll be more useful here when the enemy starts to scatter.... Look there! Isn't that a bunch of 'em crawling out of a communication trench? Once they reach the bush they'll all turn into snipers. We'll have to head them off."

The Fortress crew needed no urging. A fight in the open was more to their taste than crouching in a trench, any day. This time, with big Danny Hale in the lead, they ran, stooping, through the grass toward the outcropping of rock.

They were within twenty feet of the enemy when the Japs realized that they were Americans. The little men tried to shoot, but the Yanks were too close. Swinging his tommy-gun like a war-club, big Danny Hale closed the distance. He took a bullet through his thigh without feeling it, and mowed down two Japs with one blow. His gun came to pieces, so he dropped it and fought bare-handed.

Cracker Jackson was using his bayonet like a short sword—inside his opponent's guard. Fred Marmon was swaying in a knife duel with a third enemy. Tony Romani, his sub-machine gun empty, was coolly picking his shots with an automatic pistol.

Barry had shot two Japs and knocked out a third with his gun butt. Without stopping to make sure of the last man, he turned to help Fred Marmon. That was a mistake. A half-dead Jap is more dangerous than a coiled cobra.

As Barry turned his back the dizzy son of Nippon clawed out a pistol and fired. Fortunately for Barry the Jap's aim was bad. The bullet drilled through the calf of his right leg.

Tony Romani's quick eyes caught the play. His pistol blazed twice. The Jap stiffened out, his weapon sliding from his hand.

The nearest enemies were all accounted for, but a movement to the right caught Barry's eye.

"Down, boys!" he said sharply. "There's another bunch coming out of the communication trench. I'll keep 'em busy while you reload your tommy-guns."

Throwing himself down behind a small rock, Barry opened fire in two-second bursts. He must halt the Jap retreat, and still conserve his ammunition until the others had replaced their empty cartridge drums.

His strategy worked almost too well. The Jap officer leading the retreat took Barry for a lone gunner, and decided to wipe him out at once. Firing in short spurts, he led his thirty-odd men straight at the outcropping of rocks.

Bullets pounded the stone behind which Barry lay. They glanced off with wicked little screams. Once rock-dust got in Barry's eye, half-blinding him.

"Make it snappy, fellows!" he warned through clenched teeth. "Our game will be up in half a minute."

"I beg to differ with you, Lieutenant," Curly Levitt's voice sounded at his shoulder. "Just watch this!"

His tommy-gun spoke, just as the thirty Japs started their rush. Barry's weapon chimed in briefly, slamming its last bullet into the officer's midriff. The charging Japs flung themselves flat.

Barry rolled aside to make room behind his rock for Fred Marmon. Sergeants Jackson and Romani had now finished reloading. They were firing from the highest point of the rocks, raking the enemy mercilessly. Quickly the Japs realized that to stay where they were meant sure death. Behind them the Americans were mopping up the last trenches.

Barry had just joined Danny Hale in the shelter of a half-sunken boulder. The big sergeant was trying to puzzle out the workings of a captured Jap rifle. Suddenly he glanced up.

"Here they come, Lieutenant!" Danny Hale whooped. "No time to reload now."

Dropping his tommy-gun, Barry whipped out his bayonet. At Danny's heels he vaulted the boulder. The Japs who dived through the hail of sub-machine gun bullets must be met with cold steel.

The shooting fizzled out. Now all the fighting was hand-to-hand. Barry bayoneted a monkey-like figure who had leaped upon Fred Marmon's back. Turning, he glimpsed Danny Hale wielding his Jap rifle like a pitchfork. Just in time, he leaped aside to dodge an enemy bayonet thrust and grapple with the man.

He blocked a vicious kick with his knee, but his wounded leg gave way. The next instant he was rolling on the ground, with the Jap's buck teeth snapping at his throat, and the Jap's knife slashing his ribs.

Desperately he twisted aside and jabbed with his bayonet. His enemy screeched and went limp.

Another mob of helmeted figures came bounding through the tall grass. Barry heaved the dead Jap aside, and came up on one knee. Sweat stung his eyes, blurring them. He gripped his bayonet for a last thrust.

"Hold it, man!" yelled a Yankee voice. "Don't you know your friends?"

The newcomers were infantrymen, arriving just too late for the finish. They had popped out of the communication trench and were looking for more Japs. With them was a medical-corps man—the same one who had attended Barry in the field dressing station. Seeing Barry's new wounds, he whipped out a hypodermic needle, and drove it home before the young flier knew what was happening.

"You bonehead!" Barry cried. "I'm only scratched. Now you've fixed me so I can't carry on. There's a lot of mopping up to do. Those Jap field guns—"

"We've plenty of men to take care of them, sir," the corporal interrupted. "If the Lieutenant will permit me to contradict him, wounds two and three inches deep are hardly scratches. They need to be stuffed with sulfa powder—not dirt. And besides that, sir, you've lost a lot of blood."

"Oh, have it your own way," sighed Barry, as the swift-acting drug began to take effect. "Got a drink of water handy? I'm thirsty as a fried fish."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIEUTENANT IN WHITE

Barry's next impression was as startling as a vision of something unearthly. A girl with big, blue eyes and a crisp white uniform, was pushing something into his mouth. The thing was a thermometer.

"Who—where—whap happumed...?" Barry mumbled in bewilderment.

The blue-eyed vision touched her lips. A red-gold curl that had escaped from her cap dangled as she shook her head. She took Barry's wrist in a light, expert grasp and compared his pulse-beats with her watch. The seconds, it seemed to him, passed with agonizing slowness.

A glance about him showed a regular hospital ward. The beds were occupied by young fellows dozing, reading, listening to the tuned-down radio. This couldn't be New Guinea! But where was it? And *how long* was it since the Battle of Grassy Ridge, when that Jap had tried to bite his throat, and...

"You're in a base hospital in Queensland, Australia," the nurse murmured, just as if she had been reading his thoughts. "You have been here for a week. As long as your fever continued you were kept under the new sleeping drugs. I don't think you're very bright, Lieutenant—getting into a second fight before your head wound had started to heal. But your blood seems to fight germs as hard as you fought the Japs. You're disgustingly healthy."

"And you're distractingly beautiful, Lieutenant!" Barry retorted. "Nevertheless, feasting my eyes on you doesn't fill my empty stomach. How about bringing me a T-bone steak—rare?"

The blue-eyed nurse made a face at him.

"All you deserve is a can of bully-beef," she declared. "But I'll see what I can do."

Barry's steak turned out to be bacon and toast. At his groan of disappointment, Nurse Stevens threatened to take it away. In fact, Barry had to apologize and promise to make no more complaints before she would let him eat anything.

Not many days passed, however, before Barry Blake was actually eating steaks and calling Lieutenant Moira Stevens by her first name. He started that on the first evening that she helped him to walk from the ward to the canopied ramp that surrounded the hospital.

"Why won't you tell me anything about Captain O'Grady?" he asked as she took the deck chair beside him. "You admitted he was sent here from the New Guinea airfield. If he's dead, I'm well enough to stand the news without bursting a blood vessel."

Lieutenant Stevens turned her clear, steady gaze on Barry's face.

"You think the world of Captain O'Grady, don't you?" she murmured. "How long did you know him before he was wounded?"

"Less than two weeks," Barry Blake responded. "Somehow time doesn't count much with wartime friendships. It seems as if I'd known you for months—Moira."

A low laugh bubbled in the girl's throat. It wasn't a giggle—just a good-humored, friendly chuckle. Lieutenant Moira Stevens rose several points in Barry's estimation because of it.

"I guess I can safely tell you the latest news about Captain O'Grady now," she said, changing the subject. "I heard the doctor say this morning that he is out of danger. When you first came to your senses the captain was just hanging between life and death. If I'd told you the truth then, you might have worried yourself back into a fever."

Barry did not speak. He gazed across the clearing at a row of tall cocoanut palms. All at once the tropical night seemed very beautiful.

"So the Old Man is here—in this hospital," he said at last. "When do you think I might see him? I—I'd like to talk with him about *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* ... tell him she's not beyond repair."

"I'll ask the medical officer in charge, Barry," the girl promised, as she rose to her feet. "Come, now! It's time you were getting to bed. Take my arm—that's it—and we'll go back to the ward."

The following day Moira took Barry to see his Old Man for a three-minute period. Captain O'Grady looked shockingly thin. His wide, humorous mouth was drawn with lines of pain, but his blue eyes had the same smile that Barry remembered.

"What brought you here, Barry?" he asked as he released his co-pilot's hand. "Another raid on Rabaul?"

"Nothing so pleasant," Barry grinned. "The Japs raided our airport the next night after you came to this hospital. The raid was a cover-up for a landing of paratroops and field guns on a ridge above the field. I got cut up a few days later helping to clean them out with tommy-guns and grenades. All of *Rosy's* crew went along and had a great time."

Captain O'Grady's face sobered.

"I see," he murmured. "The Jap guns had shot up the field so you couldn't get any planes off to bomb them. You boys were wrong, though. You had no right to risk half a dozen highly trained Fortress men in a land skirmish. Why did you do it?"

"That's hardly a fair question, Captain!" Moira Stevens broke in. "You'd have wanted to go yourself if you'd been there. Would you be happy, sir, sitting in the shade of your plane while your friends were fighting to save it for you?"

"Nurse Stevens," the Old Man replied with a wry smile, "you've knocked out all my guns. I'm completely at your mercy, and you know it."

"In that case, sir," Moira said, "Lieutenant Blake and I will leave you to make the best landing you can.... Come along, Barry! Time is up."

As she pulled the young co-pilot toward the door he turned for a last word.

"I'll be back to see you again as soon as the nurse will let me, Captain," he said. "And, by the way sir, *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* is only grounded until she can get repairs. I—er—thought you'd like to know."

In his later conversations with the Old Man, nothing was ever said about the Captain's missing arm. They talked as though one of these days would see him again at the wheel of a flying fort. But both men knew that it was all talk. Before long Tex O'Grady would be back at home in the States with the only person in the world that he loved better than his warplane—sweet Mrs. O'Grady herself.

Six weeks from the day he came to the Queensland hospital, Barry Blake received his new orders. He was to report at the new airplane repair base immediately upon being discharged.

Barry was exultant. He demanded that Moira bring the medical officer in charge to examine him at once. For the past week, he told her, he had been feeling more like a prisoner than a patient—without even a prisoner's excuse for sticking around. Furthermore, he declared, a certain blonde, blue-eyed lieutenant had been neglecting him shamefully.



"I'll Be Back as Soon as the Nurse Will Let Me."

Moira Stevens wrinkled her pretty nose at him.

"As a nurse I have no interest in perfect physical specimens," she replied. "Sick men are my job. But if you haven't forgotten me when this war is over, it might be fun to get together and compare notes."

She flashed him a smile that took the chill out of her words.

"Hmmm!" murmured Barry as she swept out of the ward with a rustle of starched uniform. "They don't make 'em any finer than Lieutenant Moira Stevens. And I mean, *definitely!*"

The colonel in charge gave Barry an examination that overlooked nothing.

"You're fit for service, Lieutenant," he said. "If you were my age, you'd be in bed for another six weeks. Be thankful that nineteen years heals just twice as fast as forty-five! Er—by the way—at eleven thirty you will report to Captain O'Grady on the west ramp outside the hospital. That is all."

Barry had intended to see the Old Man before leaving, but being *ordered* to do so puzzled him. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was already ten-thirty. He would have just comfortable time to shave, dress, and check over his few personal effects that had been sent from the New Guinea airport.

As he stepped out onto the west ramp, the sight of several “brass hats” halted him in his tracks. A mere second lieutenant had no place in such company! Then he glimpsed Captain O’Grady in a wheelchair, chatting with the highest-ranking officer.

Barry glanced at the time—eleven-thirty. Recalling that he was there by order of the colonel gave him courage. He waited until O’Grady recognized him, then stepped forward and saluted.

“General Morse,” the captain said with grave formality, “this is Lieutenant Barry Blake, who brought our crippled Fortress home after the raid on Rabaul. Although wounded, he landed the plane under almost impossible conditions, risking his own life to save mine!”

As in a dream, Barry found himself taking the general’s outstretched hand. He tried to make some appropriate answer, but no words would come. All at once he found himself the center of everyone’s attention. General Morse was pinning something on his breast. In the background the colonel and the brass hats were standing at attention—to honor *him*.

Barry caught his Old Man’s eye, and it steadied him. He saluted, met the general’s handclasp, and stepped back. The tableau of high-ranking officers broke up and passed on into the hospital.

“Sit down with me, son,” O’Grady invited him. “Moirra Stevens will join us in a few minutes for lunch. There’ll be just the three of us. You don’t know how pleased I am, Barry, that I could be present to see you decorated with the Purple Heart.”

Barry touched the bright medal wonderingly.

“I feel, somehow, as if it ought to belong to you, sir,” he answered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NEW GUINEA GARDENS

Reporting for duty at the Queensland repair base, Barry ran into surprises still more bewildering. The first was the news that he was promoted to first lieutenant; the second, that he would be given command immediately of a Flying Fortress. The ship and crew, he was told, were now waiting for him on the runway.

Wondering if it were all some crazy delusion, Barry hurried to the airport. For a moment it seemed that he must be back in Seattle, looking at *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* for the first time. For there she sat, with her inboard props turning slowly in the sun, and her name painted clear on the fuselage.

There was even a tall, wide-shouldered figure in flying togs, leaning against the plane's tail. He looked like Captain O'Grady from a distance. But he couldn't be!

Barry wiped his hand across his eyes, and walked toward the ship. The tall fellow looked up. He wasn't the Old Man—he was *Hap Newton*!

Hap let out a whoop like a locomotive and charged down upon Barry Blake. The two friends proceeded to do a war-dance, bombarding each other with questions. The surprise was entirely mutual. Hap had been based in another part of the South Pacific until recently. His B-26 Marauder had run out of gas near the northern tip of Queensland one night, and its crew had bailed out. Only Hap and the bombardier-gunner had made shore. Just this morning Hap had been assigned to the *Rosy O'Grady* as co-pilot.

"And now *you* are my skipper!" he exclaimed. "It's such a wild coincidence that I can't believe it yet.... But just wait, Barry—the shocks aren't over. Step inside and meet the rest of us."

Barry turned to the open hatch, but he had no chance to enter. Men were boiling out of it as if the ship were too hot for them. In five seconds they were all around him. Fred Marmon, Cracker Jackson, Tony Romani, Curly Levitt, and Soapy Babbitt, with his broken shoulder still a little stiff, but useable.

"Where's Danny Hale?" Barry asked, the moment they gave him a chance to speak.

Silence, as stunning as a blow, answered him. Barry's face went white.

"Tell me, boys," he muttered through stiff lips. "You—you mean that Danny—that he...."

"He got transferred, Barry," Curly Levitt said quietly. "It was just after the medical-corps men carried you back to the dressing station on Grassy Ridge. A bunch of us were trying to capture a Jap field gun. We ducked into a slit trench and started tossing hand grenades, but the Japs chucked them right back at us before they could explode. One landed in our trench. Danny covered it to protect the rest of us—and just then it went off."

"Thanks, Curly," Barry said in a choked voice. "Sorry my question brought it all back to you. It—it is easier, somehow, to think of Danny as simply transferred.... Have they sent us a bombardier yet?"

"They sent him—such as he is!" replied a strangely familiar voice.

Barry jumped as if he had been shot. Through the hatchway dropped a small, bandy-legged man whose short blonde hair bristled like the fuzz of a newly hatched duckling.

"Chick Enders!" Barry cried, making a grab for his old friend. "How did you get *here*?"

"The same way Hap Newton did," answered Chick, grinning from ear to ear. "I was the bombardier who bailed out with him from the B-26."

"Boys," said Barry Blake, turning to face his crew, "I know that in a few seconds I'm going to wake up and find myself back in my little hospital bed. The sawbones will be looking solemn and saying: 'That chunk of shrapnel went deeper than we thought. It's affected his brain!'"

He cuffed back his hat and laughed.

"It's too good to be true, finding you all here—and *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* too! I'm going to say hello to her before she vanishes in a pink fog, or something!"

Understanding chuckles followed him as he dived into *Rosy's* open hatchway.

"We'll leave him alone with her for a few minutes," Curly Levitt suggested. "Mess call is about due. Lieutenant Enders can wait here to show the Old Man to his quarters."

It was past midnight before *Rosy's* crew talked themselves out and fell asleep. In the morning, Barry reported for orders. He learned that his new battlefront base was to be another jungle airport, farther west along the New Guinea coast. They would fly the shortest route across the island's central mountain range, and carry a full load of bombs.

"Not much excitement on the way," Fred Marmon commented; as the crew headed toward their waiting ship. "There's nothing in the interior but mountains and jungles and wild men. Even the Japs steer clear of it, they tell me!"

"You'll have plenty of excitement once we reach the northern coast, Fred," Barry told him. "The Japs have been punching back hard at our new airports. They realize that, given enough bases for a big air offensive, we can push them right out of the East Indies. They can't keep backing up forever, and keep any 'face' with their people at home."

Sweet Rosy O'Grady took off as smoothly as she had on her maiden flight. Except for the patched places in her aluminum skin, there was little to show that she was not a new ship.

"As a matter of fact, she's better than new, Lieutenant," Fred Marmon declared. "She's been battle-tested. Every part of her, except these new engines, has stood up under the worst strains."

She won't fail us, no matter what we ask of her."

"They patched her up in New Guinea—enough to fly her back to this Queensland repair base," Curly Levitt explained. "Here they gave her a complete overhauling. Most of her replaced parts came from other wrecked ships—"

"Like Hap and me!" spoke up Chick Enders.

"Yes, you're battle-tested, too," Barry laughed. "By the way, did either of you hear or see anything of our old messmate, Glenn Crayle? After all the surprises of the past twenty-four hours, I wouldn't be surprised to see him waiting for us at the new airport. Would you, Hap?"

"Aw, don't talk about it, Barry," his big co-pilot replied. "I wouldn't be surprised, either, but I'd be pretty doggoned sore. The sight of that mister would sour my stomach for the duration."

"Mine, too—unless he's toned down a lot," agreed Chick. "This war does queer things to people. It may have let the wind out of Crayle and showed him that he wasn't such a hot pilot as he thought. I hope so, anyway."

"I believe you've got hopes for Hirohito, too," Hap Newton scoffed. "Let's forget Crayle until he does show up—and I hope that event will be a long, long time away!"

The blue expanse of Torres Strait now showed beyond the green of Cape York. For an hour the Fortress hung above it at six thousand feet. Then, almost before her crew realized the change, the high grasslands of New Guinea were sweeping beneath her belly. Far to the east lay the Gulf of Papua, with a mass of cumulus clouds tumbling above it. Ahead rose the island's mountainous backbone.

"Let's fly a little lower, Barry," Chick Enders said. "You won't have to start climbing over the central range for half an hour. I'd like to get a look at one of these native villages, and give the local hillbillies a thrill at the same time."

"All right, Chick," Barry replied. "But we won't do any hedgehopping with a quarter of a million dollars worth of Fortress. If the air isn't bumpy I might take *Rosy* down to five hundred feet—when and if you spot a thatch-roofed metropolis."

"Don't try to thrill 'em by dropping an egg on the town pump," said Hap Newton. "General MacArthur has caused the word to be spread among the tribesmen that United Nations airmen are their friends. We wouldn't want to give them the wrong impression."

"I wonder how many New Guinea wild men could tell the Jap 'rising sun' from our insignia," Chick remarked, "even if they were near enough to—oh-oh! Look, Barry! Straight ahead on that little grassy plateau ... don't those patches look like native gardens to you?"

By way of answer, Barry eased the wheel forward. In a long, flat dive *Rosy O'Grady* roared down toward the plateau. Moment by moment the tiny squares and oblongs of different colors took the shape of cultivated gardens. Near by appeared a few loaf-shaped native houses.

"There's your village!" Barry exclaimed. "Looks like a busy place, too. They're clearing more grassland for garden space, if I'm not mistaken."

Looking down through the plastiglass of the big bomber's nose, her crew could distinguish twenty or thirty human figures at one end of the cultivated section. Suddenly the natives stopped gaping at the diving plane. They ran for cover.

"We're wowing 'em, all right," whooped Hap Newton. "Just see those grass skirts scatter! You ought to be ashamed of scaring the ladies this way, Barry!"

"They'll have something to talk about for a month at least," laughed the *Rosy's* skipper, as he pulled back on the wheel. "Are you satisfied with this glimpse you've had of native culture, Chick?"

"Not by a long shot!" the homely bombardier replied. "I wish you'd turn back for another look, Barry. There's something blamed queer about that village. Several things, to be truthful."

There was a grim note in Chick's voice that Barry recognized. His bombardier was in deadly earnest.

"Okay," he said shortly. "Slap on the coal, Hap. We're going back for another look-see. What was it that struck you as queer, Chick?"

"Since when do *men* wear grass skirts, or New Guinea women wear their hair clipped short?" Chick responded. "I had a better view here in the nose than the rest of you did. I'll swear to what I saw. And, while we're asking questions, will somebody tell me when the natives of this country became *market gardeners*? There's enough cultivated land around those dozen thatched huts to supply food for ten villages.... Look down now and tell me what you think of it!"

For wordless moments every man in the cockpit gazed at the orderly patchwork of little fields below. Suddenly Barry grasped the truth.

"Look at the pattern down there, Hap!" he exclaimed. "They've broken it up pretty cleverly with camouflage, but the cleared place is L-shaped. If that isn't an airport I'm cockeyed."

"Then those birds in grass skirts—" Curly Levitt's voice gasped through the interphone.

"—were *Japs*!" Chick Enders finished the sentence. "Go as low as you dare, Barry, and see what else we can spot."

"Man all the guns!" Barry's order crackled in the headsets. "Cracker, be ready to strafe any anti-aircraft before they can pot us...."

He broke off as the white lines of tracer bullets streaked upward from a patch of bushes at one side of the field. Other guns opened fire.

Small bullet holes appeared suddenly in the bomber's fuselage and wings. But four of *Rosy's* .50-caliber machine guns were talking back—the twin weapons of her bottom and tail turrets. Seconds later she had swept out of range.

"Well, whaddyuh know about that?" Hap Newton blurted. "New Guinea Gardens Grow Grass-skirted Gunners. Who'd ever believe that headline?"

"Why didn't they throw any flak at us?" Curly Levitt asked. "A field as big as that ought to be protected by more than machine gun fire."

"The airport isn't completed yet," Barry pointed out. "The Japs probably haven't had a chance to bring in heavier installations. There wasn't even a camouflaged plane in sight—nothing but those

steel-mat runways dressed up to look like vegetable gardens. Of course it's possible that there were some bigger guns but no time to man them, before we were past."

"It's worth risking them to give the field a thorough pasting," Chick Enders said. "Let's go back at about five thousand and give it every bomb in our racks."

No shellfire greeted them as they made their run over the Jap airfield. Even the machine guns were silent. The grass-skirted gun-crews were fleeing through the surrounding grass and scrub like scared rabbits when the first stick of bombs whistled down.

They left the runways looking like a raw, black wound in the earth, with a thick cloud of dust hanging over it. All their bombs had struck with the accuracy of rifle bullets, five-hundred-pounders that flung the twisted steel matting high in the air.

"Get the exact position of this spot, Curly," Barry Blake said, as he climbed into the hot blue sky. "The sons of Nippon won't be using their little mountain playground as long as our fliers can keep an eye on it."

"That's right," agreed the *Rosy's* navigator. "We've wiped out an air base from which the Nips could have raided Queensland, Port Moresby, and any of our northeast airports with equal ease. And we've discovered some of their latest tricks of camouflage, thanks to Chick Enders. Headquarters will be glad to know about it."

For the rest of the trip *Rosy O'Grady's* pilots and bombardier kept their eyes peeled for suspicious looking "market gardens," but none appeared. An hour after they crossed the height of land the ocean was again in sight. Soapy Babbitt contacted their new airport on the Mau River and received the answer to come in.

As the field came in sight, Barry noted that it was scooped out of the tropical forest, not far from the sea. A United Nations transport vessel lay just beyond the beach. It was unloading by means of lighters. In this manner the new airdromes all up and down the coast would be quickly furnished with equipment and defenses. The danger, of course, was that the Japs might send warships to shell the fields at night. They might even land troops a short march from the field itself.

All this passed through Barry's mind as he circled for a landing. He had experienced one shelling from warships, and a worse one from air-borne artillery. No base, he decided, was safe from a sneak attack. In any war the main strategy must be to "dish it out" to the enemy in heavier quantities than he could return.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

No familiar faces greeted *Rosy O'Grady's* crew at the Mau River airport. A new bomber command was based there. Three more forts, Barry learned, were due to join it within the week. Until they arrived there would be no mass raids on enemy targets.

Rosy's first job was a reconnaissance flight to the northwest. There had been signs of enemy concentration among the islands west of Point D'Urville. Headquarters wanted to learn what it meant.

Rosy O'Grady took off with the first faint dawn light. Her bomb racks were full. In addition, she carried a few score of four-pound incendiary bombs. She was "loaded for bear," and eager for a fight.

At 10,000 feet, Barry Blake turned westward. As they flew along the coast, the gunners in the top and tail turrets watched the sky for Jap planes. The pilots and the bombardier scanned air and sea ahead. Suddenly Chick Enders leaned forward on his perch in the nose, with a shout of discovery.

"What do you see now, bombardier?" Barry asked. "Some more grass skirts?"

Chick Enders ignored the gibe.

"Look at that little island, just offshore," he said sharply. "There's a white streak stretching north from it, like the wake of a ship."

"It is, at that!" cried Hap Newton. "A boat of some kind must have put into a hidden cove there."

"That island isn't big enough to shelter any vessel that could make such a wide wake," Barry Blake declared. "Could the island itself be moving, Chick?"

"It is!" the *Rosy's* bombardier yelled. "The thing is a Jap vessel camouflaged with palm fronds. Give me a run on it, Skipper ... *now!*"

Barry's touch on the controls did not shift. Without altering its course by a single point the flying fort kept straight on up the coast.

Chick groaned.

"Why did you pass up such a chance, Barry?" he asked. "We could have laid an egg right in the middle of that floating brush heap."

"Two reasons," the young skipper replied. "First, there are four ships at least in that floating island, and two or more may be cruisers. Splitting their formation would only prolong the job.... Second, I want a better look at their scheme of camouflage before we blow it to pieces.... Sergeant Babbitt, you will radio the airport what we have seen, and say that we are about to attack."

He swung the Fortress a few points to the left and nosed down.

"Tail gunner from pilot:" he said through the interphone. "Let me know as soon as that fake island is out of sight."

A few minutes later Tony Romani's voice came through.

"Pilot from tail gunner: Floating island has dropped below the bulge of the coastline.... Are we going back, sir?"

"Right now, Tony!" the skipper told him.

Keeping the land mass of New Guinea between him and the Jap vessels, Barry turned his plane around. Lower and lower he took her, until *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* was skimming only a few hundred feet above the sea. Tree tops nearly grazed her belly turret as she swept over a blunt headland, into sight of the camouflaged ships.

"We're going over 'em at two thousand feet, Chick," Barry warned. "Be ready to drop a whole stick of bombs on the target."

"Look!" yelled Hap Newton. "There's a swarm of landing barges between the fake island and the shore. They're crammed with Jap troops."

"We'll take care of them later," Barry said grimly. "Here we go, bombardier."

"Roger!" Chick's answer came back ... and an instant later: "Bombs away!"

Hard upon his words came the blast—a multiple explosion so terrific that it tossed the great Fortress like a feather. Later her crew found that it had torn all the fabric off her ailerons and elevators.

Barry climbed his ship, and came back. There was no more "floating island"—only three burning Jap transports and the two broken halves of a fourth, just settling into the waves.

A puff of smoke blossomed just beyond *Rosy O'Grady's* right wing-tip; another, to the left and rear. The gun crews of the stricken transports were only now reaching their weapons. *Rosy's* sudden re-appearance, close at hand, had taken them entirely by surprise.

Barry Blake swung his ship shoreward and nosed down.

"We'll risk the shell-fire," he said briefly. "Our first job is to destroy those Japs landing on the beach. Be ready to fire all guns."

At a thousand feet the big bomber roared between the burning ships and the shore. Her nose and tail and belly turrets spat .50-caliber death. Beneath her the Jap soldiers in thirty landing barges fired their rifles upward in frantic reply. Through the side gun-port Fred Marmon hosed lead at the deck of the nearest transport.

Twice more the flying fort swept back over the same course. Shells from the Jap ships missed her narrowly. Some of the bursting antiaircraft fragments struck her fuselage and rudder. But the Jap

landing force was practically wiped out.

Sinking barges drifted aimlessly, filled with dead men. Some of the soldiers jumped overboard, only to die in the water. Curly Levitt with his side-gun mowed down the one bargeful that made the beach. 133

After that run, Barry did not turn his ship until well beyond the range of Jap shell fire. At ten thousand feet he swung back. The three Jap transports were much farther apart. The nearest one was drifting and burning more fiercely than ever. The others were zig-zagging.

A sudden sheet of flame shot up from the drifting vessel. In a space of seconds her superstructure went to pieces.

"She's done for," Chick Enders said. "Give me a run on the farthest one, Skipper. I'll try to drop an egg right down her stack."

"Hap and I will do what we can to help you," Barry answered, "at ten thousand feet. We have those last two ships in the bag. There's no need to risk *Rosy O'Grady* at point-blank range."

Chick's first attempt was a near miss—the Jap helmsman was too good at dodging. On his run over the second transport he scored a hit. The five-hundred-pound bomb struck her stern, crippling her steering gear.

"Nice work, bombardier!" Barry applauded. "Now we can concentrate on the last target."

A shell burst from the stricken craft slammed chunks of jagged metal through *Rosy's* tail assembly. The big bomber lurched.

"Tail gunner from pilot:" Barry spoke into the phone. "Are you all right?"

"That flak missed the turret, sir," Tony Romani answered. "But I can see daylight through the fuselage just behind me." 134

"The rudder and elevators still work," Barry told his crew. "That's as near a hit as I want, though. Let's get this job done."

On his next run Chick Enders accomplished the nearly-impossible. His bomb plunged down the transport's stack and exploded in her bowels. The Jap ship simply crumpled up and sank, like an old tin can.

The one ship left afloat was burning fiercely from stem to stern. No boats or barges had been lowered. Those Japs who had survived the flames were now swimming in the shark-infested water.

"Here come three of our forts from Mau River!" Hap Newton cried, pointing to the east. "Boy! Will they be sore when they see what we've left!"

"Just a few bones on a broken platter!" Barry exulted. "We had all the cold turkey and cranberry sauce. Switch over to the radio and let's hear what they're saying, Soapy!"

Few of the other crew's comments were cheerful, but Barry soothed their disappointment.

"You might possibly find a force of Jap warships farther up the coast, sir," he told the commanding officer, Major Browne. "My guess is that they were landing troops for a night attack on our airport. In that case they'd be expecting some naval units to come after dark and 'soften up' the field for them with shell fire." 135

"That's good reasoning, Lieutenant Blake," the major agreed. "We'll search the coast toward Point D'Urville. *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* looks to me as if she needs a little patching before she goes hunting more trouble."

"*Rosy* needs bombs, too," Chick Enders remarked, as they headed for home. "She's had a pretty good day's hunting, even if she didn't finish her patrol. By the way—how do you think those Japs rigged their camouflage, Skipper?"

"With rope nets, I'd say," Barry replied. "I noticed some of the stuff drifting alongside the ships, after the first bombs struck them. I think they strung their nets over the masts and superstructures and fastened the tops of jungle trees to them. They used bushes to cover the sides. The one thing they couldn't hide was the ship's wake."

"They'd planned to have all their troops ashore a little after sunrise," Curly Levitt put in. "If we hadn't come along, they would have left a force here strong enough to take over our airfield and perhaps two or three more."

Five minutes after landing, Barry Blake and his crew were making their report to the officer in command of the airport, Colonel Bullock.

"You men have written a great page in Fortress history today," the officer declared when they had finished. "Four transports and thousands of enemy troops sent to the bottom within a few minutes! That would have been a nice bag of game for a whole squadron. I have an idea that decorations will be coming to all of you for this feat. You've earned a few days' rest, too, but I'm afraid you won't get it." 136

"We shan't mind that, sir," Barry said with a smile. "We like action better than sitting around and fighting mosquitoes. Is there some special mission for us?"

Colonel Bullock's gaze shifted to the slice of blue sky framed in the tent door.

"No, not yet," he replied, frowning. "But the enemy is massing his strength for another big land, sea, and air attack. Our steady gains in the South Pacific have cost him too much. He is due to strike back, hard."

There was a brief silence. Glancing at his crew, Barry saw their faces tighten with eagerness.

"The sooner they come the better, sir—so far as we're concerned," he said.

The colonel rose to his feet, smiling.

"That spirit will win this war for us, son," he said. "It's won every war we Americans have fought. But here at Mau River we're still short of planes and men. I shall see to it personally that *Sweet Rosy O'Grady's* repairs are rushed through. In a day or two we may need her—badly!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DOGFIGHTING FORTRESS

Three days passed without news of any Jap naval maneuvers. That was not surprising, for the weather was frightful. The regular bombing runs from Henderson Field to Rabaul and Gasmata had been called off because of it. Two reconnaissance planes were missing—probably wrecked by those unspeakably fierce South Pacific squalls. It seemed unlikely that enemy warships would be out.

Nevertheless, Colonel Bullock was nervous.

"The Japs have used bad weather as a screen for their movements before now," he pointed out to Barry Blake. "If they wanted to risk getting off course and piling up on a reef, they could sneak up within striking distance of this coast, and land their troops when the fog lifts."

"*Sweet Rosy O'Grady* is ready to take off the minute you give permission, sir," Barry responded. "We'll gladly take the chance of running into a squall. All of us would rather be upstairs fighting the weather than stewing in our own juice down here."

The colonel met Barry's eyes, and grinned.

"You mean you'd risk anything for a chance to bomb the Japs," he chuckled. "All right, Blake! You can take off at dawn tomorrow, wind or no wind. Head eastward toward Rabaul, then swing around by the Admiralty Islands. The Japs might even send a convoy from Truk, their big base to the north."

Rosy O'Grady's crew was jubilant when they heard the order. The fog, the bugs, the everlasting sticky heat of Mau River made idleness a torture. That night they crawled under their mosquito bars and fell sound asleep without the usual "bull session" of complaints.

The fog had lifted a little when they finished their pre-dawn breakfast and headed for the runway. *Rosy's* four engines were whooping it up as the greaseballs warmed them.

"That's real music!" Fred Marmon shouted to Barry. "If they run as sweetly as that today, no storm's going to worry us."

"She's bombed up. I saw to that last night," said Chick Enders at Barry's elbow. "They're all half-ton babies. If we should spot a Jap convoy, we'll be set to slam it."

"If!" repeated Curly Levitt, the navigator. "It's a pretty big 'if,' even granting that there is a convoy at sea. There won't be many holes in this cloud ceiling, I'm afraid...."

His voice faded out beneath the thunder of five thousand horses, as *Rosy O'Grady* strained at her braked wheels. The engine roar died down suddenly, a moment later, and the mechanics slid out of the hatch. The sergeant in charge made a circle with his thumb and finger, indicating "Okay!" Barry Blake nodded, and plunged into *Rosy's* dim interior.

The runway was a vaguely lighter strip down the center of the field as they took off. It dropped away, as lightly as a streak of fog. Hap Newton touched the lever that raised the wheels. Suddenly the blanketing mist closed them in completely.

For the first hour Barry flew by instruments. Then, just off the western tip of New Britain, the air about them cleared. No loom of Arabia ever wove such gorgeous colors as the rising sun now spread over the cloud rug below *Rosy's* broad wings. Among deep blue shadows the rolling vapors gleamed with gold and pink.

In the bomber's transparent nose, Chick Enders gazed at the scene, open-mouthed.

"Fellows," he said in a voice of wonder. "That's a sight worth any flier's life. It's Heaven's art work, fresh from the hand of God!"

Nobody else spoke. Chick Enders had expressed the feeling of every man in the plane who had a view of the colors below. Soon, however, the cloud painting changed, the gold growing whiter and more brilliant, the blue and pink fading out.

Fifty miles farther on a gap appeared, and through it the white-capped ocean. For nearly an hour the water remained in sight. A hundred miles from Rabaul the ceiling closed again, and Barry turned his Fortress back on the second leg of a big triangle.

No more breaks appeared until they were halfway to the Admiralty Islands. Here the clouds were higher, with small gaps in them that opened and closed as the winds whipped the masses of vapor along. Below them the ceiling seemed to be several hundred feet above the sea.

"I'm going down, Hap," Barry Blake announced. "We won't be able to see as far as we'd like to, but we're doing no good up here above the ceiling. Besides, I have a hunch...."

"Play it, then," Hap Newton advised. "In this game a bit of a hunch is sometimes worth a barrel of reasoning. Chick, be ready with that bombsight! We might come out right over a Jap battlegroup!"

The bomber sank through the fluffy cloud mass like a swooping eagle. For a moment her pilots could see nothing outside. Barry kept his eyes glued to the altimeter: a thousand feet, nine hundred, eight hundred—Suddenly they were through, with the rolling ocean so near that its white-topped waves seemed to reach up for them.

Hastily Barry pulled out of his shallow dive, and climbed for the clouds. His hunch had been right, as the shouts of Hap Newton and Chick attested. Spread out over a twenty mile area were a dozen large vessels.

"The Jap convoy!" Hap cried. "No doubt about it—they're heading southwest toward New Guinea. Let's give 'em all we've got—"

CRANG!

The blast of a small-caliber shell inside *Rosy's* fuselage shocked her crew into grim alertness. Two seconds later her top turret guns chattered. Empty shell cases tumbled smoking to the floor behind Barry, as he zoomed the Fortress into the nearest mass of clouds.

"Where is he, Soapy?" the young pilot asked through clenched teeth.

"Right on the other side of this cloud, last I saw of him," replied the radioman-gunner. "He's a big Jap twin-float bomber ... looks like an *Aichi* T98."

"Two 20-mm. cannon and four fixed wing guns," stated Barry, recalling what he had learned of the T98's armament. "Unless he gets in some lucky shots our .50-calibers ought to be a match for him. We're going after that baby, and blast him out of the air!"

The broken clouds opened out suddenly, revealing the two planes flying almost abreast, and barely a stone's throw apart. They opened fire together. Now it was *Rosy O'Grady's* full broadside that came into play—nose, tail and side guns, spitting bullets that could chew chunks out of railroad tracks.

Rows of holes like stitching appeared here and there in the *Aichi's* fuselage, but the "greenhouse" of the Jap plane appeared bulletproof. *Rosy's* slugs struck it and bounced away at right angles. Inside could be seen the Jap gunners, hunched over their weapons, their faces drawn and tense. Smoke drifted from the hot muzzles of their cannon.

Rosy O'Grady was taking punishment. Her fin and rudder looked like a slice of Swiss cheese. Shell holes gaped in her fuselage. Shell fragments were whizzing about her interior—thin, jagged bits of steel with cutting edges. Every gunner was nicked and bleeding, yet all stuck by their guns.

The Jap was catching plenty of trouble, too. His left hand engine was smoking, and his forward cannon appeared to be damaged or jammed. He made a swift, left hand turn, trying to escape *Rosy's* broadside.

Barry saw the *Aichi's* play, and countered it. The huge Fortress seemed to pivot inside the Jap's half circle. The strain of that sudden turn would have broken anything but a fighter or a Fortress in two, but *Rosy* took it. Her deadly broadside kept hammering the now-frightened Jap.

The *Aichi* nosed up, disappearing behind a long streak of cloud. The shuddering racket of *Rosy's* .50-calibers stopped. Barry Blake wiped the blood off his forehead, where a ricocheting shell fragment had cut him. He winked at Hap Newton, who smiled back despite a sliced cheek.

"Ball turret from pilot," he said into the interphone. "Watch out for a trick. That Jap might try to dive below us and rip at our belly.... *There he goes now!*"



Shell Fragments Whizzed About the Plane's Interior

"I see him, sir!" said Cracker Jackson, as his bottom guns opened up.

Barry shoved the wheel forward sharply, diving after the Jap. Smoke from the *Aichi's* left engine was drifting back to blend with the powder smoke of her rear cannon. A shell slammed into Chick Enders' left gun with a crack that resounded through the plane.

Chick lost balance as Barry pulled out of the dive, barely two hundred feet above the water. The little bombardier shook his numbed fingers, grabbed the right-hand machine gun and swung it broadside. Again the two planes were flying side by side, but the Jap was licked.

Flame burst from his crippled engine. A front panel of his "greenhouse" collapsed. He swerved wildly, nosed downward, and struck the water with a terrific splash.

Barry zoomed his ship as steeply as he dared. In that last minute of dogfighting he had flown within two thousand yards of a Jap cruiser. Tracer shells from the warship were streaking the air about him.

In a tight climbing turn the big Fortress dodged, heading for the protecting overcast of clouds. If one of those five-inch naval shells hit her, she would be a dead duck, and every man aboard her knew it.

Chick Enders was not satisfied with mere escape. He turned to his pilot with a pleading expression.

"Give me one crack at that warship, Barry," he begged. "What's the use of coming out with a full bomb load if we've got to take it all back?"

Barry banked his plane, and climbed again. The clouds enfolded the battle-torn Fortress like soft fleece.

"All right, Chick," he consented. "I'll give you a crack at something, but not when they've got us pinned to the wall. It's more important to get the report of this convoy back to headquarters than to sink a ship. Soapy, get on the air and let me talk to the base."

Circling at reduced speed within the sheltering cloud blanket, Barry radioed a brief report of the convoy's location, direction, and probable size.

"Shot down twin-float *Aichi* T98 that attacked us," he concluded. "We're going back to leave a few calling cards on the Jap's decks."

Roaring down through the ceiling, Barry spotted the circle of flame that still marked the grave of the *Aichi*. Two vessels of the convoy were steaming past it on either side. The nearer was a big, troop-carrying destroyer. The farther was a cargo vessel of six thousand tons.

"We'll take the destroyer first," yelled Chick Enders, cuddling his bombsight.

They were so near that the Jap gunners had no time to swing their heavier guns. The shots that they aimed flew wild. Already the destroyer's deck was almost beneath. From stern to bow *Rosy O'Grady's* shadow swept over the doomed warship.

The thousand-pound bomb went through her deck as through paper, and exploded in her bowels. The destroyer broke in two, spewing into the waves shapeless things that had been men and machinery.

"Now for that cargo tub!" cried Chick, his voice high pitched with excitement.

Barry banked around and came at the Jap freighter head-on. It was a dangerous maneuver, for a cruiser scarcely a mile away had opened fire. Flak was coming near enough to make the air bumpy, and there was no chance to dodge while making a bombing run. Barry hugged tight to the ceiling at a scant thousand feet.

"I'll go over at eight hundred, Chick," he said quickly. "They're shooting too close."

Before he had finished speaking, Chick's fingers were busy at the bombsight's knobs, compensating for the intended drop. The Fortress dipped abruptly. The freighter's deck flashed beneath. Two hundred feet above, the cruiser's shells burst—where *Rosy* would have been, had not Barry changed his altitude at the right instant.

The shock of them was almost simultaneous with the wallop of the bomb blast. Chick had laid his half-ton "egg" on the freighter's stern, blowing it clean off. As the vessel settled in the water a column of smoke and flame poured upward from the torn deck.

"Good boy, Chick!" said Barry quietly. "And now we'll take that somewhat despised but highly appropriate action known as *scramming*. The whole task force will be gunning for us now—not to mention whatever planes the Jap cruiser may try to launch."

Hap Newton turned and waved mockingly astern.

"Don't worry, Tojo—we'll be back, with plenty of company," he said. "You're going to be honorable shark-meat about twenty-four hours from now!"

Sweet Rosy O'Grady plunged into the clouds and leveled off for Mau River, three hundred miles away. The wet mist whipped through her gaping wounds. The torn edges of her metal skin hummed and shrieked in the wind, but her four mighty engines thundered in unbroken harmony. She was still fit to fight.

"Speaking of shark-meat," Fred Marmon's voice came over the interphone, "would somebody be kind enough to slap a bandage on my back? It feels like a cubed steak."

"I'll do it, Fred, if you'll tie up my right shoulder," Curly Levitt responded. "I've got the first-aid kit here.... Anybody else need patching up?"

"My ear feels like something the cat brought in," came Tony Romani's voice from the tail turret. "I think there's some shrapnel sticking in my ribs, too, but that can wait. You fellows fix yourselves up first."

All of the crew had some wounds, but none of them were dangerous. *Rosy's* pilots had escaped with scratches. Chick Enders had a bruised hand and a cut on his leg. Their hurts were just enough to get them "warmed up for a real fight," as Hap Newton put it.

"When we land, we'll stick with *Rosy* until she's bombed and serviced for another run," Chick suggested. "Only the pilots need to report to Colonel Bullock, and he won't ground them for a couple of scratched faces. That way, we can take off with the other planes for the all-out attack."

The plan was unanimously approved, but it was doomed to failure. *Rosy O'Grady* made a three-point landing, like the perfect lady she was, but as she rolled to a stop, Chick Enders groaned.

“There’s Colonel Bullock coming out to us in the jeep!” he exclaimed. “He’ll never let us take off without a real inspection. And that means we’ll miss the big fight!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SLAUGHTER FROM THE AIR

Chick Enders' prediction was only partly right. Colonel Bullock did order *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* and her fighting crew grounded for temporary repairs. But it was only for the rest of that day and night. To smash the Jap task force utterly, every bomber that could fly would be needed.

"Get those wounds dressed at once," he ordered the eight bloodstained ragamuffins who faced him near *Rosy's* shell-torn fuselage. "Then report to the mess shack. Fill your stomachs and hit the hay. If you're all fit for duty tomorrow morning I'll let you fly. And—er—congratulations on spotting that Jap task force, Blake! You've probably saved us a lot of ships and fighting men."

Barry took the officer's proffered hand, with an embarrassed smile.

"I was just playing a hunch, sir," he murmured. "Chick—I mean, Lieutenant Enders—did the real job. He sank a big destroyer and blew the stern off a cargo vessel before we had to clear out. And the other boys knocked that *Aichi* T98 out of the sky—simply chewed her to junk!"

"My congratulations were meant for all of you, Lieutenant," the colonel replied with a twinkle in his eye. "And so are the orders I just gave. *Dismissed!*"

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As Barry and his friends moved wearily toward the hospital tent, a squadron of Mitchell bombers passed over, heading out to sea. The ceiling had lifted to three thousand feet. If it stayed there, Barry thought, the planes would have little trouble in spotting the Jap convoy.

The field, he noted, was almost empty of planes. Evidently they had taken off right after his radioed report. The Japs would catch plenty of grief before darkness shut down, but the real pay-off would be tomorrow. By that time Allied airfields from all over eastern New Guinea as well as Australia and the Solomons would be sending planes to the attack. The Japs would meet them with swarms of their own land-based fighters. A gigantic air-and-sea battle would be on, with the outcome impossible to guess.

Much the same thing was passing through the minds of all the crew, but they were suddenly too tired to talk about it. The tension of battle had broken. Now they were conscious chiefly of stiffening wounds and the deep, physical craving for food and sleep.

The night passed in dreamless oblivion. It seemed to Barry that he had just closed his eyes when the bugle routed him out of bed. He glanced unbelievably at his watch. Yes, the hands stood at five-fifteen—half an hour before dawn!

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"Roll out of it, Chick, Hap, Curly!" he called. "This is our big day. If we're not out there in time, I bet you *Rosy O'Grady* will take off without us!"

Groans and yelps answered him, as the tent mates moved their sore bodies and found them more painful than the night before.

"Come on!" urged their young pilot. "Snap out of it or I'll report the whole crew on the sick list. We'll miss our crack at the Japs, but—"

He saw a boot come sailing from Hap's side of the tent, and ducked just in time.

"All right, all right!" he laughed. "I'll see you lazy birds on the runway, if you're too late for mess call. So long!"

Hap Newton's other boot caught him as he hurried out of the tent. He picked it up, but paused in the act of throwing it back.

"Setting up drill at this time of the morning, Lieutenant?" said Colonel Bullock's voice behind him.

"No, sir—*getting-up* drill is more like it," Barry replied. "My crew slept too hard last night, and they're still in a fog."

"Harrumph! I envy them!" grunted the colonel. "Couldn't sleep at all myself, last night.... But I have good news for you, Blake. Your ship has passed every quick test for serious damage, and except for the holes that there wasn't time to patch, she's fit to fly. That damaged machine gun in the nose has been replaced. She's been bombed up and serviced. I'm counting on her—and you men—to give the Japs a very special pasting today."

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"We'll do that, sir, and—er—thank you for giving us so much of your time and thought," Barry responded. "Are we taking off with the squadron this time?"

"Yes. Extreme right wing position," Colonel Bullock told him. "The take-off is in thirty minutes."

Barry saluted and watched the officer's tall, still youthful figure stride away in the twilight. Behind him the crew were piling out of the tent.

"Just time to eat and run, fellows," he said, turning toward the mess shack. "The squadron takes off at six."

Clear sunlight gleamed through the bottle-green crests of the big combers that tossed and battered the Jap task force. Gone was the protecting blanket of clouds. Gone, too, was any hope in the mind of the Jap admiral that he could sneak up on the Allied bases without a costly attack from the air. Yet his words were confident as he issued his orders to the flotilla.

A second convoy of fourteen vessels had joined his ten during the night. With their added strength he felt certain of success.

"Inform the honorable captains that they will close the intervals between their ships to five hundred yards," he told his chief executive officer. "Our massed antiaircraft, plus the umbrella of our land-based fighter planes, will beat off any air attack our enemies may make. In fact, we shall

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utterly destroy them."

The executive bowed and hissed politely.

"We shall destroy them utterly," he repeated. "Banzai!"

Green water crashed on the forecastle as the flagship buried her bow under a giant comber. The cruiser shuddered, heaved, and shook herself free. The bow rose higher, higher, until the steel warship seemed to those on deck as if she were going to stand upright on her propellers.

Again her foredeck dipped, rolled, plunged into the trough of a mighty sea. The anti-aircraft crews balanced themselves calmly on sea-trained legs. Their eyes never left the reeling sky above them. They breathed deeply, fingering the cold steel of their weapons, waiting for the targets they knew would soon appear.

It was a different story below the wave-washed decks of the troop transport ships. There, packed in the stifling holds like sardines, eighteen thousand Jap infantrymen gagged and groaned. The throes of seasickness gripped officers and men alike. It was not deadly, they had been told, but it made them long for death. Only their inbred habit of obedience had kept them from shooting themselves or committing *hara kiri* through the past week of inglorious suffering.

Suddenly the flotilla's anti-aircraft opened fire with a concerted roar. The transports' long range guns joined it. Their barking reports made the thin steel hulls quiver. Then came the bombs.

One struck an 8,000-ton troopship aft of the bridge. A thousand Jap soldiers died in the flaming inferno it made. Live steam from the wrecked engine room cooked fifty other men alive.

A second bomb blasted the stricken vessel. Its superstructure leaped into the air and fell overside in twisted pieces. The ship itself rolled, broke apart, and sank.

That second bomb was a credit to Chick Enders' marksmanship. From a three-mile height he had hit the wave-tossed Jap ship with the accuracy of a sharpshooter. He had done it, flying through air that was bumpy with anti-aircraft bursts, ignoring the darting Zero fighters that stabbed at his ship from above.

Soapy Babbitt in the top turret and Tony Romani in the tail were not ignoring the hornet-like Jap Zeros. While Barry, Hap and Chick were concentrating on their first bombing run, they knocked down a plane apiece.

The Flying Fortress squadron had dispersed, and its members were making individual runs over the flotilla. Now, however, the Jap flak was forcing them to fly higher. One bomber already was down in the sea. Several others had been nicked by shrapnel. *Rosy O'Grady's* stabilizer showed ragged holes, and Cracker Jackson had been stunned by a direct hit on the ball turret.

"We're going upstairs, too," Barry Blake decided. "We won't make so many hits, but we'll make the Japs disperse, so their flak won't be so concentrated."

"That suits us gunners, Lieutenant," Fred Marmon spoke up. "We'll pick off a few more Zeros up there where our Lockheed Lightnings are dogfighting."

The Jap "cover" of fighting planes certainly looked as if a tornado had struck it. The deadly but unarmored little fighters were torching down all over the sky. Others were fleeing back toward their New Guinea bases, glad of an excuse to return for gas. The reason was simple: plane for plane and pilot for pilot, our forces were better. When the Fortresses got "upstairs" there was not much opposition to deal with.

Rosy O'Grady made three more runs before the first wave of Australian *Havoc* bombers arrived beneath her. Skimming the sea at mast-height, the twin-engined attack bombers strafed the Jap decks with a terrible hail of bullets. They passed over, from stern to stem, and dropped their bombs at point-blank range—sometimes down the enemy's smokestacks.

On their heels came the North American B-26 Mitchells, repeating the same tactics, with even greater effect. Back and forth like a great broom of destruction they swept across the Jap flotilla. Enemy gunners withered and died under blast after blast of hot lead. Those who survived tried desperately to swing their heavier guns into action, but that was like trying to shoot mosquitoes with a pistol.

Now, all over a forty-mile area, Jap ships were blazing. Barry saw three of them sink before Chick emptied the bomb racks with near misses on a dodging destroyer.

"We'll go back for another load," he said, turning the Fortress's nose homeward. "How's Cracker Jackson?"

"Coming out of it," was Curly Levitt's reply. "His right arm's broken above the elbow, and his nose is banged up. The ball turret took an awful wallop from that ack-ack shell."

"Better our ball turret than our bomb bay!" Hap Newton remarked grimly. "We could have gone out in a blaze of glory if that shell had hit a few feet forward."

Much to Cracker Jackson's distress, his friends took him to the hospital tent the moment they landed at Mau River.

"Have a heart, Lieutenant!" he begged Barry. "This bum wing feels fine in a sling, and I could shoot my left gun with my left hand. Please let me go along this trip."

Barry shook his head.

"That's a compound fracture, man!" he replied. "If you don't get proper treatment now, it may gangrene. Besides, your nose is swollen so big that you couldn't see around it to shoot. Lieutenant Levitt will man your turret if necessary."

They left him, still protesting, in care of the field doctor.

"As a matter of fact," Curly Levitt said when they were out of hearing, "Jackson's turret is so banged up that it's useless. It won't turn, and only one gun will fire. I didn't tell him, because he would worry about our going back without belly protection."

No more than six Jap vessels were still in the fight when *Rosy O'Grady* returned with a fresh bomb load. One cruiser, four destroyers and a small cargo ship made up the half dozen. They were scattered many miles apart, each trying to make good its own escape. Between them the sea was covered with rafts, landing barges, lifeboats and wreckage of every description, but they made no attempt to take aboard survivors.

For the moment, the sky was fairly clear of planes. Two other Flying Fortresses, a PBM flying boat, a few Grumman Wildcats and Lockheed Lightnings on the hunt for Zero fighters—these were all that Barry Blake could see. The enemy had been definitely shot out of the air.

"We'll go after that cruiser," the young pilot told his bombardier. "Before she gets our range, I'll dive to three thousand, level off there for a quick run, and then climb for a cloud. Ready, Chick?"

"Roger!" answered the little man in *Rosy's* nose. "It's risky but it will give me a swell target. You never learned this stunt out of a rule book, Barry!"

In the co-pilot's seat, Hap Newton sat nursing the throttles, changing the bomber's air speed from moment to moment. Barry worked the wheel to keep her constantly shifting altitude—foiling the ack-ack gunners on the Jap warship. Abruptly he shoved the wheel far forward.

The Fortress headed down as if out of control. Then, at three thousand feet she pulled out of it. For a matter of seconds her run at the Jap cruiser held true and level.

"Bombs away!" cried Chick Enders. "Let's get out of here in a hurry!"

Barry put his Fortress into a steep, climbing turn that strained her to the limit. Zigzagging, banking, spiralling, he made the big bomber climb like a cat in a fit.

Far beneath, a sheet of flame was rising from the enemy cruiser. Chick Enders' bomb had opened her oil tanks. Some of her antiaircraft were still firing, but *Rosy's* unorthodox actions fooled them completely.

"Great stuff, Barry!" yelled the little bombardier. "We'll pull the same stunt on that destroyer to the east of us. Let's go!"

"We will not!" Barry Blake retorted. "I felt *Rosy* groan too many times in that last crazy climb. If I did it again she might really come apart. From now on we'll confine our bombing attacks to a reasonable altitude. It's better to waste a bomb than a bomber, even if you don't believe it."

As they headed for their new target at ten thousand feet, more bomb bursts tossed up white fountains of sea water around the farther warships. Seven or eight Fortresses were now on the scene. The flotilla's fleeing remnants were doomed.

It had been a ghastly slaughter, Barry reflected. Nearly twenty thousand enemy troops, not to mention the crews of the Jap vessels, were either dead or floating among the wreckage. An army and a task force blotted out in two days!

Mechanically he guided *Rosy O'Grady* on her run. He was sick of killing. Even Chick's jubilant, "Bombs away!" failed to thrill him as it had before.

Another hit! The thousand-pound bomb burst the thin-hulled destroyer apart like a paper bag. Swiftly she settled, stood up on her nose, and slipped out of sight. There was no time to launch a boat.

Five miles beyond, a number of tiny waterbugs were leaving zigzag wakes in the water. They were probably Jap landing barges, Barry thought, crammed with armed soldiers from one of the troop transports that had gone down. Now he saw the cause of their erratic dodging—a flight of Mitchell B-25's diving at them, with tracer bullets streaking from their guns.

"Those Nips haven't a chance, even if they're lucky enough to shoot down a plane or two," Hap Newton observed. "Their barges must look like sieves already. More meat for the sharks!"

"More butchery!" muttered Barry Blake. "It's necessary, of course. If those armed Japs ever made land, they'd soon be killing our own men. That's what they were sent here for. But I've seen enough slaughter today to make me feel rather sick."

Chick Enders didn't say so, but he may have felt the same way, after thinking it over. At any rate, he seemed to have lost his uncanny marksmanship for the rest of that day. His remaining bombs scored nothing better than near misses on a desperately zig-zagging destroyer. Another Fortress sank that vessel as Barry turned his plane homeward.

"Looks like some sort of a weather front, over toward the coast," Hap Newton remarked. "I hope our base isn't shut in by it. We'd have to find another field or bail out...."

"Tony can't bail out, Lieutenant," Fred Marmon's voice interrupted. "He's bleeding to death fast, from a leg wound. I've just found him unconscious in the tail turret, and put on a tourniquet."

A moment of shocked silence followed Fred's statement. Each man of the crew felt as if he himself had received a deadly hurt. The fortress crew was like a single body, its members knit inseparably together by weeks of common danger, duty, thought and feeling.

"Tie that tourniquet tight, Fred," Barry Blake said huskily. "Keep Tony alive, and I'll manage to set *Rosy O'Grady* down somewhere, ceiling or no ceiling.... Soapy! Contact Mau River, will you, and ask what the weather is there."

Leaving his position in the top turret, Sergeant Babbitt sat down at his radio. In a few minutes he had the field's weather report.

"Closed in," it said briefly, "and so are all near-by airfields. Better try Buna—or Port Moresby if you have enough gas."

"That's the tough part of it," said Hap bitterly. "We used up our gas hunting down the Jap Navy. Buna and Port Moresby are out! Our only hope is to hit the silk."

Groans sounded over the interphone. Not their own danger but that of Tony Romani, brought unanimous protest from the others.

"There's *got* to be some place for us to set her down, Skipper," Fred Marmon declared. "You've always been able to figure a way out. We can't let Tony down."

"Curly!" exclaimed Barry Blake. "Get out your charts and see if there aren't some atolls or small islands somewhere this side of that weather front. If one of them had a beach long enough and smooth enough—"

"I see what you mean," Curly spoke excitedly. "I'll tell you in two shakes, Barry. There's a sprinkling of little islands between us and the western tip of New Britain.... Here they are! Two or three of them ought to be clear of fog right now. I'll give you the compass course...."

A new spirit pervaded the bomber's crew. Despite battle weariness, their still painful hurts and their worry over Tony, they crowded around Curly's map like a bunch of eager kids.

"Don't get your hopes too high," their levelheaded navigator warned them. "None of these islands may have a beach big enough to land a fighter plane. If that's so, we'll lose *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* anyway."

"And if we can land," Barry added, "the place may be swarming with Japs. Personally I'm for taking the risk, but if there's one man who doesn't like the idea, we'll turn back and bail out over Mau River. Tony would have a bare chance to live if we pulled his ripcord and chucked him out."

Silence answered him. It was broken finally by Curly Levitt's voice giving Barry the compass course for an unnamed islet that they might hope to reach ahead of the fog.

"Okay, Crusoes, you asked for it!" *Rosy's* Old Man said cheerfully. "We'll be in sight of Island number one in about twenty minutes."

In twenty minutes to the dot they sighted the first white-and-green bump on the ocean's surface. The islet rose to a central peak about three hundred feet high, covered completely with jungle. As the Fortress swept over it at two thousand feet, her crew voiced their disappointment. Such beaches as the place possessed were narrow and rocky. A helicopter might have found a landing place, but not a bomber with a 90-mile-per-hour landing speed.

Almost before the little peak had passed beneath, Curly was laying the course for Island number two. It lay a little farther to the north, and away from the weather front. Its length, however, suggested better landing possibilities, and it was barely fifty miles away.

Ten minutes later Chick Enders pointed it out. As its low-lying shape became more distinct, the crew's hopes rose. The south beach, they saw, was wide and free from stones, and the tide at this hour was out. The only fault of this natural runway was its slight curve, and the tiny brook that broke its length.

"I'll chance it," the young skipper decided. "As a matter of fact, it's going to be a lot easier to set down on that beach than to take off—even supposing we can get more gas."

Climbing to a safe height, he turned and came in for his landing. In order to make the most of the beach's length, he brought *Rosy's* wheels down just at the farther edge of the brook. The Fortress bucked a trifle in the wave-packed sand, and rolled to a smooth stop. Within her, six men cheered like maniacs.

"Hold it down, men," Barry advised. "We don't know what we're up against yet. Our first job is to dress Tony's wound. Then we'll explore the island, if there's time to do that before dark.... Curly, pass me the first-aid kit and a bottle of water, will you, please?"

Tony was still unconscious when they carried him to the plane's cockpit. His wound had evidently been made by a piece of flak that had ripped through his thigh like a dull knife. The arteries were bleeding slowly despite the tourniquet.

With small silver clips from the first-aid kit, Barry managed to close the severed blood vessels. He dusted a handful of sulfanilamide powder into the wound, removed the tourniquet, and used most of the kit's gauze in a snug bandage.

Straightening up, he pointed to the windows in the nose and overhead.

"Open up and give him some fresh air," he directed. "The minute Tony comes to, we'll make him swallow some salt tablets and sulfadiazine, with all the water he can drink. That's all we can do.... Chick, you and Soapy will stay with him now, while the rest of us look over the island. We'll be back before dark if we don't run into any Japs."

"Okay, Skipper—we'll hold the fort," Chick answered. "If you should meet trouble near by we can cover your retreat with *Rosy's* machine guns. Maybe you'd better demount one of them and take it along for an emergency."

"Our pistols and the tommy-gun will be enough," Barry said, as he left the cockpit. "Those fifty-caliber babies are too heavy to carry far, or to use without a tripod. See you soon, fellows."

A five hour search of the island revealed no human inhabitant. On the farther side from their plane the Fortress men found the burned remnants of a native village and a few unburied corpses. The Jap butchers had evidently come and gone a few weeks before.

Barry and Hap downed a half-wild pig with their pistols. On their return to the Fortress, they frightened a number of scrawny island chickens that flew squawking into the jungle. It was plain that they need not starve, Fred Marmon remarked, even if escape from the island should be delayed for a month.

"I've no idea of waiting that long, Fred," Barry laughed. "As soon as it's dark, we'll radio the base to send a supply ship here. With a runway of steel mats on the beach we should have no trouble in taking off. That is, if the Nips don't spot us!"

Reaching the plane they found Tony Romani conscious again. He had been swallowing salt and water in quantity to make up for his loss of blood. Despite the pain of his wound he greeted his friends with a plucky grin.

"All I want is a juicy beefsteak," he told them. "And mashed spuds and apple pie and—"

"You'll have to be satisfied with pork chops," Barry interrupted. "Beef won't be on the menu until we're back at Mau River. The same goes for potatoes. Dinner tonight will be roast wild pig, palm cabbage, and cocoanut milk—with a vitamin pill for dessert."

Ravenous appetites made the jungle dinner a success, even though Tony dropped off to sleep in the middle of it. The others literally cleaned the bones of their little roast porker. There was no campfire to enjoy, however: the light would have betrayed them to any scouting Jap plane within twenty miles. The moment the sun set, they kicked sand over the coals and finished their meal in the dark.

Contact with Mau River was made quickly by radio. A brief message, not likely to mean much to listening Japs, gave their location. Barry added a request for supplies, and arranged radio and ground signals to guide the approaching planes to a moonlight landing.

"The next thing," Barry announced, "is to camouflage *Rosy* so that she'll be invisible from the air. As soon as the moon rises, we'll begin cutting vines and leafy bushes. With only four pocket knives, it may take us most of the night, but that just can't be helped."



Ravenous Appetites Made the Dinner a Success

"There's the moon coming up now!" Hap Newton exclaimed, pointing to a glow on the eastern horizon. "Out with those toadstabbers, gentlemen! We'll cut out a new green dress for *Sweet Rosy O'Grady*—or fall asleep trying!"

The camouflage was only half completed when the first supply plane arrived. It was a big *Coronado* flying boat, altered for extra cargo space. It brought enough gasoline in cans to feed *Rosy's* big engines on the trip home, and it took Tony Romani back to the field hospital. The next two planes brought bundles of steel mats for the beginning of a long, straight runway.

Three days later *Rosy O'Grady's* sunburned crew had lost ten or fifteen pounds apiece, but the roadway of perforated steel was completed. One end of it was under water, owing to the curve of the beach. An incoming wave might cause the huge bomber to ground-loop at the moment of her take-off, but that was a chance that had to be taken.

As the men piled into their ship they tried not to worry about this danger spot; yet there was no denying the risk. Belted into his co-pilot's seat, Hap Newton warmed up the four big engines. Slowly he increased the r.p.m. until *Rosy O'Grady* was straining to be off. The mighty slipstream ripped jungle foliage and tossed the fragments of her camouflage screen.

"Let's go, Hap!" Barry Blake said quietly.

With brakes released the bomber leaped ahead. She rushed down the narrow steel runway, her airspeed gauge climbing fast. If one of her big wheels should run off into the sand, disaster would almost certainly result.

Almost on the "step" she reached the wet end of the strip. Spray flew from her right hand wheel. The water tugged at the tire like a many-tentacled octopus. Despite both the pilots' weight on the controls, it pulled her down. The right wing dipped into a wave.

Every man on board held his breath, bracing himself for the shock and rending crash of a ground loop.... Then, abruptly, the ship righted herself. When Barry eased back on the controls she lifted her twenty-five tons as lightly as a windblown leaf.

"Home, James!" croaked Chick Enders, and a gale of laughter swept through the Flying Fortress, releasing her crew's badly stretched nerves.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SECRET MISSION

The safe return of Barry Blake and his crew to Mau River was celebrated the following night at supper. The meal was the nearest thing to a banquet that the army cooks could turn out. There was a sort of program, too, mostly humorous. It recalled the never-to-be-forgotten days at Randolph Field.

Barry himself was heralded as the "Big Dog" at the moment of his entrance into the mess tent. Colonel Bullock, as master of ceremonies, announced:

"The Big Dog is coming in to land.... The Big Dog is rolling down his flaps.... The Big Dog has landed.... The Big Dog is waiting to be serviced!"

Between each announcement, the second lieutenants softly chorused: "Woof, woof! Woof, woof!" When Barry lifted a large baked potato from the serving dish it was announced that "The Big Dog is getting bombed up."

At this point an exuberant woof from Texas lost control. Tilting his head far back, he gave tongue to a genuine coyote howl that raised the hair on the necks of more than one "effete Easterner." The bumptious ex-cowboy was penalized by being made to sing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" with his mouth full of olives.

Following that there were speeches in praise of *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* and every member of her crew. Tony Romani and Cracker Jackson received their full share of glory, as wounded heroes. Finally *Rosy* herself was described as the plane that "sighted convoy, sank same, and retired to a desert island, where she became a sort of Empress Jones, too proud to come home and associate with her sister Fortresses."

After the celebration, Colonel Bullock asked Lieutenant Blake and three other pilots to report to his tent for a brief conference. Arriving a moment after the rest, Barry noted that he was the only Fortress skipper present. The others were twin-engine pilots, who had made fine bombing records during the recent slaughter of the Jap convoy. They were Captain Rand Bartlett, Lieutenant Thurman Smith, and Lieutenant Ben Haskins.

The four young officers sprang to their feet and saluted as the colonel appeared. Bullock waved them to canvas-bottomed chairs.

"I've been asked to supply four of my best bomber crews," he told them, "for a secret and difficult mission. What that mission is I don't know myself, but you are to fly B-26 planes. The orders from headquarters stressed a high record of bombing hits. You're to take off before daylight tomorrow and fly to Port Darwin. There you will doubtless learn more details. Have you any questions, gentlemen? You are at perfect liberty to pass up the job—in which case I'll choose some other crew."

Barry Blake was the first to break the ensuing silence.

"I think we all feel alike about it, sir," he said quietly. "It's a big honor to be chosen by you under these circumstances. But as Fortress men, my crew and I might not measure up to the best B-26 performance. Those Martin bombers are sweet little ships, but they handle differently from a Boeing. We wouldn't want to let you down, sir—"

"I know all that, Blake," Colonel Bullock interrupted with a smile. "I chose you and your crew after a good deal of thought, just as I picked Haskins and Bartlett and Smith. You've flown twin-engined planes in Advanced Training School and you'll get the hang of your new B-26 on the way to Darwin. I'll supply you with a first-class tail gunner to take the place of Tony Romani.... Now, gentlemen, for the last time, do you want the job?"

"Yes, sir!" chorused the four pilots.

The C.O. arose. One after the other he gripped their hands and wished them good hunting. In that moment he seemed more like a proud parent than their superior officer. The four young officers knew that they had found a lifelong friend in Colonel Bullock.

Rosy O'Grady's crew, all except Tony and Cracker Jackson, were overjoyed at their new assignment. They lay awake talking it over until Barry curtly ordered them to "drive it into the hangar and get some sleep."

"*Rosy* will be laid up for a couple of weeks' repairs anyway," Chick added in a loud whisper, "and so will Tony and Cracker. We'll probably be back by that time. Nobody's got any kick coming, so far as I can see—unless it's the Japs!"

Out on the runway at five o'clock Barry's crew found their new ship waiting, complete with tail gunner. The latter was a little bulldog of a man with the map of Ireland jutting fiercely out of his helmet. He was Sergeant Mickey Rourke from South Boston. He greeted each of his new crew mates with an undershot smile and a brief "Pleased to meet yiz!"

Later *Rosy's* crew found out that Mickey was the lone survivor of a B-26 that had been sliced in two by a diving Zero fighter. Mickey had bailed out of his severed tail section unharmed and had swum ashore. After two weeks in the New Guinea bush he had walked into the Mau River base and calmly reported for duty.

The four Martin bombers took off by moonlight and promptly headed southwest. Barry found *The Colonel's Lady* as Hap had named their new craft, strangely quick and light on the controls, compared with her big sister *Rosy*. Flying in formation with the other three Marauders soon cured

his tendency to over-control, however.

As the sun rose, tinting the peaks of New Guinea's high backbone ahead of them, he turned over the controls to Hap Newton.

"Easy on the stick, Mister," he warned his big co-pilot. "Those crowbar wrists of yours work swell at the wheel of a Fortress, but this little lady won't stand for rough handling."

"Finger-tip control!" chuckled Hap as he took over. "I may be rough, but I can be oh, so gentle, too, Skipper! Just watch me take her upstairs."

The bomber formation was climbing steadily, to top the 16,000-foot range ahead. A bitter chill seeped into the plane. The crew found themselves breathing faster to get enough air. Automatically they reached for their oxygen masks. Those things were lifesavers when you got up above 20,000. Even at somewhat lower altitudes they helped keep your head clear and your stomach in place.

At 18,000 the air was bumpy. The flight leader, Captain Bartlett, took his bombers up to 20,000, where it was colder but smoother. Beneath them the great range was spread out like a relief map, with patches of white cloud here and there showing local rains.

An hour later the immense blue bowl of the Arafura Sea rose up to enclose them with its rim of endless horizon.

"We're like four tiny flies buzzing across a giant's washbowl," Barry thought. "And yet this Arafura Sea is just a little spot on God's Footstool. Most high school students never knew where it was before the war. A flier certainly comes to feel his smallness in time and space!"

The four planes loafed along at about 200 m.p.h., to conserve gas. They dodged a thunder storm just north of the Gulf of Carpentaria and swung back to the southwest. At noon they were over Port Darwin, Australia, with a heavy overcast obscuring sea and land. Barry took over the controls in preparation for landing.

"Ceiling one thousand feet and dropping fast," came the airfield's radioed report. "You arrived just in time. In another hour we'll be closed in."

"This weather may postpone our mission, whatever it is," Chick Enders remarked as they went down through the wet cloud rug. "Looks like a general storm coming over the coast."

"That's something for the brass hats to worry about, Chick," Barry Blake replied. "We haven't the haziest notion yet what we've come here to do—There's the field, Hap! It looks a lot better than the one we left this morning."

Though his B-26 was still a bit unfamiliar to the young Fortress pilot, he set her down without a bounce. The field was hard and smooth, with only a few patches showing where Jap bombs had recently dropped. The lowering clouds, Barry remarked, would probably keep enemy raiders at a distance for the next few days.

Reporting to the Operations Building, the Marauders' four young officers were told to return immediately after mess for instructions. The general himself would be present, with other high-ranking officers. All further information would be given at that time.

Mess call sounded as they left the place. In the camouflaged mess tent, they found a number of flying officers already gathered around rough tables. Most of these greeted the newcomers with cordial smiles, but there was one outstanding exception. A rather handsome, sleek-haired second lieutenant stared at them insultingly, then turned his back and moved to a farther table.

"Glenn Crayle!" exclaimed Hap Newton. "The same swell-headed hot pilot that he was at Randolph! Did you get that 'dirt-under-my-feet' look he gave us?"

"Hold it down, Hap!" Barry whispered. "No use in stirring up more hard feelings. The whole room heard you. After all, Crayle's a fellow officer."

"He's just as much of a sorehead as he ever was," muttered Chick Enders. "I'd hate to fly in formation with him, for fear he'd pull some spite trick and crash both of us."

"You'd probably get 'jeep jitters' and scare the life out of him if you were at the joy-stick," Hap Newton laughed under his breath. "Here come the brass hats! We'd better take places at this table, near the wall."

They saw no more of Glenn Crayle than his neatly uniformed back until the meal was over and the B-26 bomber officers assembled in the briefing room. There, after another dirty look, the sulky pilot whispered behind his hand to a hard-eyed acquaintance. The pair of them glanced toward Barry's group and laughed. Whatever "crack" Crayle had made was certainly not to the Fortress crew's credit.

The briefing room filled quickly, until the space between the long table and the walls was filled with the officers of four bomber squadrons. Facing them stood the general and a rear admiral of the Navy. As the former raised his hand, absolute silence fell on the group.

"Gentlemen," the general said quietly, "this talk will be very brief and, I trust, to the point. You are to leave sometime tonight on a mission of high strategical importance. Your objective is the Japanese-held harbor of Amboina. As you know, this is the enemy's strongest East Indian base. We cannot at this moment tell you why its demolition is so important to our war strategy. Your orders are simply to destroy every plane, ship and installation that you can, cripple its defenses. Leave it helpless to resist the regular bombardment forces that will follow up your attack."

He paused impressively. In the silence Barry could feel a rising tide of unspoken questions filling the room. How, for instance, could four squadrons of medium bombers effect such a complete destruction as the general had described? Why not use Fortresses and Liberators, such as were even now smashing the U-boat pens at Lorient and Wilhelmshaven?

"You, gentlemen," the officer continued, "have been picked from several bomber commands for a task of utmost difficulty and danger. The planes you will fly are B-26 bombers that have been altered to carry twice their normal bomb load, and about one fourth of their regular supply of fuel. Each plane will lay a two-ton, delayed action bomb directly on an assigned target, from mast-head height. You will then go on to strafe the Jap aircraft in the seaplane anchorage at the head of Amboina Bay. By that time you will have just enough gas left to fly the six hundred thirty miles back to Port Darwin—providing you meet no interference on the way."

"Are there any questions, up to this point?"

Captain Bartlett was the first pilot to speak.

"You mentioned that we should carry about one fourth of our usual gas supply, sir," he said in a puzzled tone. "But the B-26's greatest range with a one-ton load is only twenty-four hundred miles. To fly six hundred thirty miles to Amboina and back again would use up more than half of it."

For the first time a slight smile crossed the general's face.

"You are quite correct, Captain," he answered. "However, I didn't say that you were to fly from here to Amboina. That is the little surprise we are preparing for our enemies. Your three squadrons of Martin bombers are already loaded on an aircraft carrier which you will board tonight. Under cover of the weather front that is moving northwest we hope to approach within fifty miles of Amboina. The flight deck of this carrier is quite long enough for medium bombers. You'll need a bit of verbal instruction regarding the take-off, however. Am I right, Admiral?"

The naval officer cleared his throat.

"We'll take care of that after we're at sea," he said to the assembled fliers. "You won't have to worry about finding and landing on your flat-top in the fog, as the Navy pilots would. Once you leave our flight deck it's good-by—until we see you back in port."

"And now," added the general, "we'll turn to the matter of targets. Here's a map of Amboina Harbor, with all the important installations marked. As you receive your assignments, please note them down, gentlemen. With a limited number of bombs, we must have no duplication."

The target assigned to Barry's crew was the radio station at the extreme tip of Nusanive Point. Captain Bartlett, Lieutenant Haskins, and Thurman Smith were given the heavy coastal fortifications just beyond. Other crews received the airfields across the bay at Hatu and Lata and the anti-aircraft batteries mounted in the hills along shore.

Amboina City, with its piers, its big coaling station and its naval installations, offered the biggest group of targets. A whole squadron was assigned to hammer it with two-ton block-busters.

At supper time the study of contour maps, targets and enemy gun positions was still in progress. Nobody had been permitted to leave the briefing room. So great was the secrecy with which the whole venture was surrounded that guards had been posted several yards from the building, to keep anybody without a pass from approaching it. Not until ten o'clock was the order given to dismiss; but the evening was not over.

A dozen army trucks pulled up near the door. The fliers piled in, and the vehicles roared away toward the docks. There a number of speedy PT boats were waiting. In these the hundred-odd flying officers were rushed through the spray-filled darkness to a point offshore which the steersmen seemed to find by instinct.

There lay the carrier, a long, dim shape that grew rapidly huger until the speedboat paused close to her towering side. Ship's ladders had been lowered already. Each boatload of airmen climbed hurriedly to the dark port that opened into the ship's bowels. Behind them the PT boats roared away into the surrounding blackness.



The Fliers Piled into the Army Trucks

Young Navy fliers of the carrier's own company came forward to greet the Army men and conduct them to their mess. They were cordial chaps, perhaps a little more formal than the Army fliers. They stood treat for the newcomers with soft drinks and there was a lot of pleasant small-talk. Finally they got around to showing the bomber group their temporary quarters.

The enlisted members of the B-26 crews were already on board, bunking forward with the petty officers. In the morning they'd all get together and each crew would be assigned a plane. From then until the moment of take-off they'd be responsible for its care.

Barry's team took four bunks in a corner of the large room assigned to the Army group. For the first time in many hours they had a chance to talk quietly together about the mission on which they had embarked.

"It's a smarter stunt than any of the Japs have pulled off," Hap Newton declared. "B-25's and 26's are usually considered too big to take off from a carrier's deck. I still don't see how we can do it with a double load, but the experts must have figured it out. Each ship will be practically a flying bomb."

"Flying Fortresses could do the same job from a land base and do it better," Chick Enders remarked. "We've done skip-bombing with *Rosy O'Grady*. The trouble is that she's too big a target, and she cost a quarter of a million dollars to build."

"Not only that," Barry Blake put in, "but all the forts that can be spared for this job will be coming right in after us to hammer the Jap gun emplacements in the hills. That'll be high-altitude bombing, if the weather is right."

"The weather," agreed Curly Levitt, "is the big risk. There has to be enough fog or low-hanging cloud ceiling to hide the carrier from Jap patrol planes, right up to the last minute. But over the island itself our forts and Liberators will need visibility unlimited. If the meteorologists have guessed wrong, it will be just too bad."

That was true enough, Barry thought, but it didn't worry him. The brass hats who had planned this secret attack so painstakingly must know what sort of weather they could count on. Meteorology was almost an exact science nowadays.

He caught sight of Glenn Crayle talking with his co-pilot at the other side of the room. Barry could not hear what they were saying, but Crayle's cocksure manner suggested his familiar, boastful line. Probably the sleek-haired pilot was thinking of this Amboina job as offering a splendid chance to make the news headlines. At any rate, thought Barry, the fellow must be a first-rate pilot, or he'd never have been picked for such a mission.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

OUT OF THE FOG

Flanked by two cruisers and four destroyers, the big flat-top plowed through rain and fog across the Arafura Sea. Her speed was low, since the weather front was moving slowly. She must stay behind its dark curtain until the moment came for her planes to take the air.

Since the B-26 bombers were not fitted to return to her decks, there could be no practice take-offs. However, everything possible was rehearsed. A special catapult had been built to insure each bomber flying speed before it reached the end of the flight deck. The engines were checked and tested and tuned until their engineers could swear to their perfect condition. The new bomb releases were objects of especial care. At the last crucial second as they swept toward the target, nothing must go wrong.

Just thirty-two hours from the time he had boarded the carrier, Barry Blake sat at the controls of the first "flying bomb" to be launched at Amboina. Hidden in mist, the carrier had approached within forty miles of the island. The B-26 was already in the catapult; her Double Wasp radial motors were roaring at full throttle. Every man on board was braced for the launching.

The shock came, jerking the pilots' heads back as their seats pushed them suddenly. The heavily loaded Martin *Marauder* literally shot along the carrier's fog-swathed deck. Barry eased back on the stick, and felt the deck drop away.

"We're flying!" Hap Newton said hoarsely. "I never was so jittery taking off from a bomb-pitted jungle strip. I'd been wondering whether that catapult would boost us into the air or into the sea. How does she handle, Barry?"

"Like a lady!" replied the young skipper. "I can feel the double bomb load, but it's balanced perfectly. We'll have no trouble with it."

Barry glanced at his climbing altimeter. When it showed a thousand feet he leveled off, heading due north. An instant later the surrounding fog fell away like torn gauze. The carrier had been keeping just within its edge until the moment her warhawks were released.

Amboina Island rose like a deep purple cloud on the northern horizon. In less than fifteen minutes it would be directly beneath, Jap flak would be bursting; tracer shells and bullets would be crisscrossing the air. Already the Jap defenses must be seething like hornet nests. Their plane detectors had probably caught the first hum of Barry's engines—now multiplied by ten or twelve as the catapult launchings proceeded.

"Pilot from tail gunner," Mickey Rourke's voice sounded on the interphone. "I can see four of our planes jist comin' out of the fog."

"They'll scatter when they reach the harbor," Barry remarked. "That will keep the Jap guns from concentrating on any group of them."

"Yeah, but how about us?" Chick Enders asked. "We'll get to our target before the others are even in range."

"So what?" retorted Hap Newton. "The Japs will still be blinking the sleep out of their eyes when we slam 'em. And once we're rid of this bomb load, Barry's going to make us mighty hard to hit. That right, Skipper?"

"I'm not going to wait for that," Barry told him. "Do you see that fog layer hanging close to the water? It reaches almost to the tip of Nusanive Point. We'll duck into it and fool any gunners that might spot us too soon in clear air."

A long, shallow dive took them into the fog layer two hundred feet above the water. And there, for the next thirty miles, they stayed. When at last the mist thinned to a few wispy streamers the swift little B-26 fairly hugged the water. Her target, the Nusanive radio tower, loomed just ahead.

The shore batteries had spotted her now, but she was flying too low and too fast for them. The ack-ack was bursting far above and behind her. Some of it was aimed at her sister bombers who were now scattering over Amboina Bay.

"Listen, Chick!" cried Barry. "I'm going in low—just clearing the roof of that radio station."

"Can't miss it, Skipper!" the little bombardier replied. "I'll lay this two-ton egg right on their breakfast table. Boy! Look at that gun crew duck for cover.... *Bombs away!*"

Barry reefed back sharply, gaining altitude in the few precious seconds before the delayed action blast arrived. Without it he might find himself knocked out of the air by the concussion.

The plane jumped—like a baseball struck by a giant's bat. Her nose went down. With all his might, Barry pulled back the control post. At three hundred feet he leveled off, turning sharp right, to skirt the steep slope of Mt. Kapal.

"Tail gunner from pilot," he called. "What happened to that radio station?"

"Everything, sir," Mickey Rourke's answer came back. "The last I saw of the tower, it was headin' for the moon, with a few bits of the station roof taggin' along behind. Your bomb must have landed in the cellar."

"Keep your eyes peeled for Zero fighters when we start shooting up the seaplane anchorage," Barry warned him. "We're moving too fast for them now."

"You've got the best seat in the whole show, Rourke," put in Fred Marmon. "Babbitt and I are missing all the fun, with our heads stuck into this two-gun top turret. If we were flying *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* now, we could see something of the countryside."

"The countryside," said Chick Enders from his perch in the nose, "is going by too fast for me to see much of it. Oh-oh! That ack-ack battery just ahead has spotted us—"

WHAMMM!

BRRRRRRRRRR!

The explosion of a Jap shell just above the hedgehopping Marauder was answered by a two-second burst of Chick's gun.

"That crew is out of action," he said grimly as the gun emplacement swept beneath him. "They came a little too near to spotting us. Better keep below the treetops where you can, Barry."

Entering the little valley behind Hauisa Point, the B-26 fairly skimmed the bushes. At the base of Mt. Horiel she turned north, dodged behind Mt. Sirimau and cut across the broad base of Latimore Peninsula. Behind her now lay the Amboina docks and naval station, the target of bombers that were still on the way. To the left appeared the tiny villages of Halong and Lateri, Barry's landmarks.

He hopped over the little rise between them and found himself above his next objective—between forty and fifty Jap seaplanes. Nearly half of these were big three- and four-motored flying boats, *Kawanishis* and *Mitsubishis*. A few *Aichi* T98's and a number of single engined *Nakajimas* made up the rest.

"Burn 'em up, Chick," Barry Blake ordered curtly. "Between you and Rourke we ought to account for plenty of these babies."

The chatter of Chick's machine gun answered him. Barry swept over five of the huge *Kawanishis*, while Chick Enders and Mickey Rourke ripped at their engine cowlings, floats and keels. He swung over a line of little *Nakajimas*, climbed swiftly, and came back to strafe a string of *Mitsubishi* boats.

Suddenly a tracer shell streaked past the bomber's nose.

"Look out!" yelled Mickey Rourke. "One of them bloody *Aichi* float planes has opened up on us...."

WHANG!

A rending explosion in the empty bomb bay punctuated the little tail gunner's warning. Barry banked so sharply that his right wing nearly touched the water. He hopped over a *Kawanishi* and kept the big flying boat between him and the *Aichi's* shells.

"If nobody objects," he remarked drily, "we're getting out of here while we're still in one piece.... Anybody hurt back there?"

"I've got some shrapnel bites in my legs," Fred Marmon replied. "How about you, Soapy? That shell burst right behind us."

"Are you telling me, Fred?" the radioman returned. "I won't be able to sit down in the presence of my betters for a couple of weeks, anyway. I feel as if I'd squatted on a red hot stove. When this plane quits jumping like a bee with St. Vitus' dance, you'll have to look and see what happened to my south end."

Reassured that neither of his two sergeants was seriously hurt, Barry cut straight across the Hitu Peninsula, dodging between the hills. From far behind came the muffled WHUMP, WHUMP, of block busters falling on Amboina and the Lata airfield. There were no Zeros over the hills as yet. Those which had managed to take off had more trouble than they could handle in the harbor itself.

Suddenly a line of white surf stretched across the Marauder's course. Skimming low above the waves she headed for the low fog bank that lay three miles out from shore. A single shore battery opened fire, but the shells burst well behind her. Seconds later she was safe inside the wall of vapor.

"How's the gas, Barry?" Curly Levitt asked. "If we have to set down before we reach Darwin, I want to have my island picked out. We might not happen on a perfect beach like Tana Luva's, but any land is better than a rubber raft."

"We'll make it to the mainland, I think," the young skipper said, after a glance at the fuel gauge. "We haven't a lot to spare, though, after fooling around the harbor with those seaplanes. I'll go upstairs and cut the engines down to bare flying speed, Curly. That ought to save enough gas to bring us home safely."

The Marauder climbed easily now, with no bomb load and nearly empty fuel tanks. At ten thousand feet she looked down on a world of rolling clouds still dyed with sunrise colors. The air at that altitude was clear and almost windless.

"Course is southwest by south," Curly Levitt's voice came over the phone. "As long as we stay above the ceiling, I can make corrections by shooting the sun."

"Good!" Barry answered. "I'm cutting speed to one hundred fifty m.p.h. We'll try to hold her there for the rest of the trip. How are your shell-torn heroes doing back there in the waist?"

"Say, Lieutenant," came Fred Marmon's reply, "did you ever try to bandage a man's seat with a roll of one-inch gauze? I might do it if Soapy would hold still, but he's wiggling like a worm on a fishhook.... Stand still, you jitterbug!"

"Aw, don't try to be funny!" Soapy's aggrieved voice answered. "That iodine you sloshed on me burns like fire. Just wait till I start operating on your legs, wise guy!"

A chorus of chuckles bubbled over the intercommunication system. Everyone began ribbing Soapy and Fred, until the two sergeants were forced to join in the laughter at their expense.

As the merriment died down, Mickey Rourke reported another B-26 bomber overtaking them. It was flying at top speed, heading for Barry's plane as straight as a bullet.

"Hold her steady, Lieutenant," the little Irishman warned. "That crackpot pilot is intendin' to give us a scare if he can. I wish he wuz a bloody Jap and I could let him have it—yeow!"

The oncoming bomber had dived at the last moment under Barry's ship. Her vertical fin had actually ticked Mickey's tail position, sending a slight shock through the whole plane. An instant later she was nosing ahead, still perilously close to the belly of the slower flying craft.

"Look out, Barry!" Chick Enders yelled. "The crazy galoot is going to zoom right under our nose ... and I'm a dodo if it isn't *Glenn Crayle!*"

Barry gritted his teeth as Crayle's fuselage rose up just ahead of his greenhouse.

"Cut the engines, Hap!" he ordered. "I'll try to hold our nose up till that fool is clear. If only we had a trifle more airspeed...."

Hap was muttering savagely under his breath. Chick Enders was gripping his gun, obviously yearning to pour bullets into Crayle's back. Abruptly, however, the little bombardier relaxed. Crayle's tail assembly was pulling clear—and Chick had just caught a glimpse of the rear gunner's scared face.

"Slap on the coal, Hap!" Barry cried, as his plane's nose tilted sharply upward. "We're going into a spin."

The twin engines bellowed. Hap "revved" them up to the limit, but the spin continued. Instantly there flashed through Barry's mind all his instructor at Randolph had told him to do in such a situation. His hands and feet now moved automatically, applying just the right control at the right moment.

Four thousand feet above sea level he pulled out and leveled off on the compass course.

"Okay—take over, will you, Hap," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "I'm tired out."

His big co-pilot was gazing upward through the plastic window. Hap's face was a deep red.

"Wait till that cockeyed ape gets out of sight, can you, Barry?" he asked in a choked voice. "He's stunting now—and wagging his wings at us. If I took over nothing could keep me from giving him a dose of his own medicine. I'd probably crash us both."

Though his face was still damp with perspiration, Barry smiled.

"All right, Hap," he said quietly. "I'll give you a chance to cool off. But you've really no reason to lose your head because Glenn Crayle is a nut. You're playing his game when you let him burn you up. He's already punished himself, and incidentally his crew, by using up his gas with that monkey business. If they get home at all it will be on a raft."

"Say!" exclaimed Hap, his face brightening. "I hadn't thought of that."

Apparently Crayle, or someone aboard his plane, thought of it now for the first time. The stunting ship straightened out abruptly and headed for home. Her distance from Barry's craft, however, remained unchanged.

"He's reduced speed!" Chick Enders cried. "It's too late, though. We've still enough to get home, and he hasn't. Let's fly past and give him the merry *ha-ha*, Barry."

"I'll take over now, Skipper," Hap chimed in cheerfully. "It'll be swell fun pulling up close to his wing tip and giving him the old 'thumbs down' signal."

"You're taking the controls but you're keeping the interval exactly as it is, fella," Barry Blake declared. "Those are my orders. We're following Glenn Crayle as far as he goes; and when he sets down, on land or water, we'll at least be able to report his position."

An unhappy silence fell upon the Marauder's crew. They knew that their skipper was wholly in the right and they loved him for it. But their anger at Crayle was not easily bottled up. The appearance of a Flying Fortress squadron high overhead furnished a welcome change of thought.

"Wish we were going back with them!" Chick Enders exclaimed. "Dropping one egg and skedaddling like a scared sparrow isn't my idea of fun. If we'd come out in *Rosy*, we could have hung around Amboina picking our targets and making a real party of it."

"That's the trouble, Chick," spoke up Curly Levitt. "*Sweet Rosy O'Grady* had been attending too many such parties. She's all shot to junk. I don't imagine that squadron of forts will hang around after they've reached their target area. They'll drop their loads where they'll do the most good, and head for home."

"Here comes a bunch of Liberators!" cried Hap Newton. "Oh, boy, are those Japs due for a royal pasting! They'll probably send in a few squadrons of Australian Havocs and North American Mitchells with regular bomb loads to mop up the shipping in the main harbor. That place will be a shambles."

Hap's guess was correct. Half an hour later three large formations of Australian attack bombers and B-25's swept over, headed for the Jap base. The soldiers of Hirohito were going to get their teeth knocked loose before this day was over!

For the next hour Barry watched his fuel gauge as a mother watches her sick infant. From time to time he asked Curly to check their position by dead reckoning. Finally he asked his navigator to shoot the sun and make an accurate check.

"Either there's a difference between our compass and the one on that other plane," he said, "or Crayle is away off course. He could be heading for one of the Jap-held islands to make his forced landing. In any case, I want to know exactly where we are."

Curly Levitt stepped up to the top gun turret with his octant and took his shot. For a few minutes he figured rapidly.

"You're right, Skipper," he said in a shocked tone. "We're heading straight toward the Tanimbar group of islands. If it weren't for the cloud rug below us we could probably see them from here. There's a good-sized Jap base on the biggest island, and probably a holding force of soldiers on most of the little ones. Any Allied plane that lands in this area is sure to be bombed or captured...."

"He's going down!" yelled Hap Newton. "Shall we follow him, Skipper? There may be a low ceiling under these clouds."

"I'll take over," Barry answered. "No telling what we'll run into below!"

He shoved the bomber's nose down into the cloud scuff. Eyes fixed on the altimeter, he held her in a power dive, past five thousand, four thousand, three thousand....

At two thousand feet they broke through the ceiling into a thin drizzle of rain. Visibility was fair. Crayle's ship was about the same distance ahead as before, flying low toward a small land mass three miles away. Beyond the small island loomed the dim bulk of Tanimbar.

Barry dropped his plane quickly toward the water. If no Japs on Tanimbar had already spotted the two bombers, the little island's mass would hide them from the larger one. There might still be a chance to rescue Crayle's crew. Yes! There was a smooth, straight beach, now exposed at low tide.

Circling just offshore, Barry watched the other plane land. The tricycle gear touched the hard

packed sand lightly and rolled to a smooth stop.

"Neat work!" Barry applauded. "I hope I do as well. Of course a nearly empty B-26 wouldn't plow up wet beach sand like a fortress...."

"Hey! What's the idea, Skipper?" Hap blurted in alarm. "You're not going to maroon us too on that beach? Isn't losing one perfectly good plane enough to suit you?"

"Keep your shirt on, Hap—and everybody!" Barry replied. "We may have to abandon one plane, but there's nothing to stop us from picking up Crayle and his team and taking them home with us in ours. I have an idea they'll jump at the chance, too!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ADRIFT

The moment that Barry's wheels touched the wave-packed sand, he knew he had made no mistake. The beach was hard and smooth enough for a take-off. Best of all, its length at low tide made a runway as perfect as could be wished.

A hundred feet from Crayle's bomber, Barry stopped his plane.

"Everybody out and swing her around!" he cried, unfastening his safety belt. "Maybe we won't have to take off in a hurry, but we're going to be prepared."

Glenn Crayle and his six team mates were standing rather gloomily beside their ship. Evidently they had been laying full blame for their predicament on the pilot. Crayle's sulky, handsome face was flushed with anger as he glared at the newly arrived crew.

"Couldn't you find a beach of your own to set down on?" he snarled. "Or did you just want to be chummy? If you came to bum gas, you're out of luck, Blake. Our tanks are dry."

Barry ignored him. With a pleasant nod of greeting he spoke to the other crew's navigator, a blond, worried-looking chap.

"We came down to ask if you fellows wanted a ride home," he said. "Of course, if you had any gas left it would help, but I think we still have enough left to take both crews back to base. What do you say?"

The other's worried frown vanished.

"What can we say, except 'Thanks?'" he answered heartily. "It's pretty swell of you to risk a landing on this beach just to pick us up."

"That's right!" the co-pilot agreed. "This island is enemy territory. You could have just gone on and reported us forced down here. Why you didn't do that, after what happened an hour ago, I can't understand."

"Forget it!" smiled Barry Blake. "Help us turn our plane around, and pile in. We don't want to hang around here till some Jap patrol plane finds us.... Coming, Crayle?"

"No!" blurted the other pilot furiously. "Tonight there'll be a chance to find a Jap boat or plane along shore and transfer its gas. If none of my crew has the nerve to take that chance with me, I'll do it alone."

There was no answering such a crack-brained statement. Crayle's proposition hadn't one chance in ten thousand of accomplishment, even with a full crew to help him. Barry turned away with a shrug.

Crayle's crew followed him. The combined teams lifted the tail of Barry's plane and walked it around. Now the bomber was facing in the direction from which she had come. As Barry Blake stooped to crawl through the belly hatch, Crayle's co-pilot, Ted Landis, halted him.

"Wait a minute, Skipper," he said. "Crayle was lying when he told you our tanks were dry. We have nowhere near enough gas to reach Port Darwin, thanks to his stunting, but if we put it with yours, we'd all be sure of getting home. Shall we get it now?"

Barry hesitated. What Ted Landis proposed was common sense. On the other hand, Crayle would certainly prefer charges of mutiny, assault and everything else he could contrive if they drained the tank of his plane against his orders.

"All right, Landis," the young Fortress skipper decided. "We'll do that. And we'll take Crayle along whether he wants to come or not. We can all testify that he is not behaving like a sane man. Drain off that gas, Mister, and let's get away from here the minute it's transferred to our tanks."

The crew of the stranded bomber hurried back to it at Landis' heels. Ignoring Crayle, the co-pilot and his engineer dived into the open hatch. The others stood beside it, blocking their furious skipper's way.

"I'll have you all court-martialed!" Crayle shouted, completely beside himself. "Stand away from that hatch—"



“Crayle Lied When He Said Our Tanks Were Dry!”

“Look out!” yelled a member of his crew. “Here come the Japs—they’re on to us!”

The droning of airplane engines swelled to a snarling roar. Over the treetops came a twin-engined *Mitsubishi* bomber, but she was not heading toward the two B-26’s. Evidently she had just taken off from Tanimbar on patrol, with no idea that enemy planes were so near. Her Jap crewmen were probably more surprised than the Americans. Swerving, she opened fire with her bow and belly weapons as she started her climb.

“Man those guns!” yelled Crayle. “That Jap will be back for us. Inside with you!”

Without a second’s hesitation the team obeyed. A moment before they had defied his orders, but this was different. In a fight they’d stand by their skipper, crazy or not.

Barry’s team was already inside. His Marauder’s engines bellowed. Like a startled seagull she swept down the long, straight beach. As Barry lifted her into the air he saw the *Mitsubishi* coming back.

“Good grief!” he gasped. “She’s going over Crayle’s plane at a thousand feet.... She’s going to *bomb* as well as strafe it!”

Climbing as he turned, he was still too far from the Jap for his .50-calibers to take effect. In a matter of seconds the *Mitsubishi* would drop her bomb at point blank range. The stranded Marauder’s crew wouldn’t have a chance!

Evidently one member of Crayle’s team had realized this and decided to save his own skin. He was running for dear life toward the jungle. As tracer bullets began streaking past him he flung himself flat.

Leaning hard on the controls, Barry fairly whipped his plane around. Already Chick Enders was firing his bow gun. The two weapons in the top turret were raving.

“Riddle the Jap!” Barry shouted. “Don’t let him drop that egg—Oh-h-h!”

The slender, deadly shape of a falling bomb had caught his eye. To the agonized nerves of the watchers its descent seemed as slow as a falling leaf’s. Deliberately its pointed end dipped downward, aiming straight at Crayle’s doomed plane.

Barry did not wait for the explosion. With his jaw set like a rock, he headed his B-26 for the enemy. The bomb’s blast barely jolted the air about him.

“Catch the Nip before he loses himself in the clouds!” Chick Enders muttered, reaching for a new belt of ammunition. “He’s trying to run from us, and that’s his only chance.”

“He won’t make it, Chick,” Barry replied through clenched teeth. “We’re more than a hundred miles faster.... You boys in the turret—start ripping that *Mitsu’s* belly. *Now!*”

The turret guns chattered. A second later, Chick’s bow gun joined them. The Marauder was overtaking her enemy as if he were anchored.

Smoke burst from the Jap's fuselage. Flame licked at his left engine. He staggered like a wing-shot goose under the slashing American fire. His guns were still talking back, but their aim was nervous and poor.

All at once a great ball of flame appeared just behind the Jap's wings, and his nose dropped seaward. Swathed in fire, he plummeted into the water.

Barry banked sharply, turning back toward the island. The bombed B-26 was blazing on the beach. At the jungle's edge a lone figure lay motionless.

"They're all dead, Skipper," Hap Newton muttered. "Let's go home before the Nips send out a flock of Zeros to shoot us up...."

"Wait!" Barry Blake exclaimed sharply. "That bird on the beach isn't dead yet. I saw him move."

Barry swung away in a big circle and came in toward the end of the beach. The others of his team realized what he intended; he was going to land, regardless of risk, to save the neck of a coward who had deserted his fighting crew-mates. At best it meant that they all would fail to reach Port Darwin on the gas that would be left. At worst, the Zeros from Tanimbar would catch and strafe them on the beach.

Yet not a man questioned their skipper's decision. Each one was ready to back up Barry's judgment with his life. The crew of *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* would remain a smoothly functioning unit as long as it existed.

Barry's second landing was as careful as his first. Rolling as near to the burning bomber as he dared, he set the brakes, and followed Hap Newton through the hatch. The man they had come to rescue was sitting up about fifty yards away.

"It's Crayle, the yellow pup!" Hap grated.

"It *would* be!" Chick bitterly exclaimed. "I always knew a hot pilot of his stripe would be a quitter when the real test came."

Barry Blake said nothing as he helped his crew turn the plane around for a quick take-off. He was wondering whether Crayle's dazed manner was real or faked. A trickle of blood from the pilot's forehead suggested a head wound. The man was mumbling unintelligibly when they reached him.

Barry's fingers quickly explored the gash in the injured man's scalp. Crayle winced but voiced no protest. The wound, Barry found, was no more than a shallow cut. Nowhere else on Crayle's clothing did he see any sign of blood.

"Shell-shocked," was the young skipper's verdict. "His mind has snapped, fellows. Maybe he'll get over it shortly, but just now we'll have to treat him like a baby. Help me carry him back to the plane, Hap."

"Let me, Skipper!" Fred Marmon said, taking Barry's place. "I've been feeling useless ever since that *Mitsubishi* torched down."

Despite their awkward burden, they broke into a run, conscious that any second might bring the snarling of Zero engines overhead, and a hail of tracer bullets. Barry, first into the belly hatch, turned to lift Crayle's shoulders through the low door. Mickey Rourke, the last man, glanced up before ducking inside.

"Here they come, sir!" he cried, as he dived through the opening. "Five Zeros, flying low from Tanimbar."

The bomber's engine pulled her down the runway like a scared shadow. Her guns were spitting before she was in the air. One Jap exploded above her, and the others scattered briefly. As the B-26 climbed, they came in from all angles, stabbing at her with their tracers.

Again and again Barry's plane was needled by bullets. Twice she received shell hits as she roared up toward the sheltering cloud ceiling. A second Zero fell away with his engine smoking. Then a shell hit Mickey Rourke's tail gun.

Barry heard the little Irishman's yell over the intercom, and guessed its meaning. He zoomed sharply—the last thing that the pursuing Jap expected. Fred Marmon's gun blasted the Nip plane an instant before the B-26 plunged into the clouds.

"We'll just stay here for a while," Barry declared. "The Jap bullets missed my instrument panel. We can fly in any direction we choose as long as our gas lasts. What's your suggestion, Curly?"

"Wait till I glance at my chart," replied the navigator. "There's a mass of little islands at the southwest of us—part of the Babar group. We might set down there unobserved, especially if the ceiling is low. Of course, we'll take big chances on finding a place to land."

A moment later he gave the compass course. Barry, who was flying due southwest, made the necessary correction.

"How far is the island we're aiming at?" he asked.

"About a hundred miles," Curly told him. "It's not one island, but a nest of little ones. The Japs are less likely to have them guarded."

"Good reasoning," Barry commented. "I'm flying at a steady two hundred m.p.h. Figure out just when we'll be six or eight miles from the nearest island, and let me know. I'm setting down on the water. If this crate fills and sinks too quickly, we'll drown with her, but it's worth the risk. We'll probably be able to reach our rubber boats. In that case we can keep out of sight of Jap shore patrols until dark, and then paddle to land."

"Skipper," said Hap Newton solemnly, "I wish I had half of your brains. In your place, I'd probably have tried to land. Of course, the Japs would spot the plane sooner or later, and the hunt would be on. This way we'll have a swell chance of foxing them."

"We'll still be three hundred miles from Port Darwin," Chick Enders spoke up. "Maybe we can swipe a Jap motor launch some night—"

"Don't be so modest," Hap broke in. "Why not a plane while we're about it? I'd rather take a chance of getting shot down by our own fighters than be potted like a sitting duck on the water by Jap Zeros."

"Hold it down, fellows!" Barry Blake ordered brusquely. "We're hitting the pond in a very few minutes. Get out of your parachute harness, and grab a brace. Fred, you and Soapy Babbitt loosen

the topside hatch so it won't jam when we come down. Mickey Rourke will come forward so he won't be trapped in the tail if things go wrong. Hap, stand by those levers that spring the rubber rafts. Curly, the minute you give the signal, we'll cut the engines and nose down."

There were no more wisecracks. Barry's crew obeyed orders without wasting a motion, and waited quietly for the next development. Only Hap Newton spoke during those last minutes of flight.

"I'll take care of Crayle, Skipper," he said. "He'll be easy to handle, dazed as he is. I'll inflate his lifejacket and boost him through the hatch."

"Ready, Skipper," Curly's warning came a few moments later. "Time to go downstairs."

Hap Newton cut the throttles. As the engines' roar died out the plane's nose dipped seaward. When they broke through the low ceiling the water rolled barely a thousand feet beneath.

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The ocean, Barry noted with thankfulness, was calm, except for a long, smooth ground swell. He must time his landing so as to set his ship down in the middle of a watery valley. Thus he could kill her forward motion against the waning slope of the swell ahead, and the shell-torn bomber might float for a good many seconds. If he should miscalculate and strike a crest, his plane would dive like a fish.

One glance only he spared for the island that lay nearest, a full six miles away. It was tiny—little larger than a city park. The Japs might have posted a guard or two on it, but at this distance they could easily fail to notice a bomber landing on the water with a dead stick.

The long, oily swells now swept along barely a hundred feet below him. Barry picked the valley where he must try to set down.

"This is it, fellows!" he warned.

Every man in the plane except Crayle held his breath. The next seconds seemed age-long. Then came the shock.

Fixtures flew from the bulkhead above the radio panel. Green water poured in through the shell holes in the bomb bay. It roused the half-stunned men to desperate action.

Hap Newton had already sprung the rubber life rafts. These were now floating on either side of the plane, attached to it by light lines. Soapy Babbitt and Fred Marmon were first through the topside hatch, by Barry's orders. Next came Mickey Rourke, the little tail gunner. Before climbing out, Mickey tossed a queer-looking bundle to the men outside. It was a long, oilskin covered parcel wrapped in a Mae West lifejacket.

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"Don't let it get away from yez," he grunted, as he pulled himself up. "That bundle may be worth the lives of all of us before we're through."

Chick Enders was the fourth man out, Curly Levitt the fifth. They crouched on the slippery, rolling fuselage, and reached down to take Crayle's limp weight from Hap Newton and Barry.

"Hurry, you two!" Chick shouted. "This crate's sinking fast."

Salt water was already three feet deep in the cockpit, as Barry turned sharply on his co-pilot.

"Up with you, Mister!" he snapped. "I'm last!"

For the first and only time, Hap Newton was guilty of an act of mutiny. He seized Barry in a gorilla-like grip and literally hurled him through the opening overhead.

"You're worth three of me, Skipper," he panted, "in everything but pounds!"

On top of the waterlogged plane, Barry twisted himself around like a cat, to face the hatch. Hap's head and shoulders were over the edge as the bomber's nose dipped suddenly.

"Quick, you idiot!" the young skipper cried. "She's going under! What's holding you, Hap!"

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"My feet!" the co-pilot gasped. "They're tangled in a parachute harness or something. Don't wait for me, Skipper!"

Barry grabbed the bigger man beneath the arms. His feet found a purchase on the hatch combing. With every muscle of his body straining, he added his strength to Hap Newton's.

"Now," the thought wrenched at his brain, "something's *got* to give way!"

It did. Like a cork from a bottle Hap's big body popped out of the hatch. Both men went under water. Breathless, stroking for dear life, they fought to reach the surface. The water seemed like a living enemy, clutching them, pulling them down. Their lungs were on fire.

They broke surface together, gasping, not far from one of the rafts. Fred Marmon's whoop of joy blended with the splash of paddles.

"The plane—where'd it go?" Hap Newton gulped.

"To Davy Jones's locker!" Fred answered as he reached past Crayle to grasp the co-pilot's hand. "We thought it had sucked you and the Skipper down with it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CATAMARAN

Chick Enders and Curly Levitt pulled Barry onto their raft.

"Great guns, Skipper!" the little bombardier exclaimed. "I never was so glad to see anything as I was to spot your headgear poking up out of that swell!"

"Chick cut our line just in time," Curly remarked, "or the ship's plunge would have spilled us into the pond, too. And, speaking of water, I hope we find a spring on that island when we reach it tonight. Nobody ever thought to bring along anything to drink, unless Mickey Rourke has a canteen in that bundle of his."

"I have not!" the little gunner retorted. "Many a flier has been set adrift without water and lived to tell the tale. The small matter of a drink did not worry me. But the night before we took off from the flat-top I had a dream of floatin' helpless on a rubber doughnut while the bloody Japs strafed me from the air. So I brought along a waterproofed tommy-gun, just in case me dream came true! Ye can laugh at me if yez feel like it, gintlemen."

"Who wants to laugh?" Curly Levitt cried. "After this I'll trade all my day dreams for one of your nightmares, Mickey."

"We're the nitwits not to think of something like that!" Barry Blake confessed. "Did you by any chance remember to put some oil and cotton waste in the same package? Our pistols could stand a cleaning now, before the salt water makes them useless."

Rourke pulled the little oilskin-wrapped container from his bundle and handed it to Barry.

"Here it is, sir," he said with a grin. "I'm sorry I'm not a real sleight-of-hand artist, so I could produce a glass of ice water just as easy."

Barry's left eyelid flickered in a mysterious wink. Pulling out his water-soaked automatic, he handed it, butt first, to the little sergeant.

"You clean my gun for me, Mickey, and I'll produce your glass of drinking water—though it may be minus the ice. I'm afraid neither a silk hat nor a rabbit was included in this raft's equipment, but we have something just as good."

While the others watched, open mouthed, Barry turned to a small, waterproofed case attached to the side of the raft. Opening it he drew out an object that looked like a small alcohol stove built on futuristic lines.

"Here's our water supply," he said, holding it up. "You put seawater in *there* and a little can of fuel in *here* and set the thing going with a match. In an hour we'll have a quart and a pint of pure, distilled water. Hap Newton has a gadget just like this on his raft.... What do you think of it, Hap?"

"It's the only respectable still I ever saw," the irrepressible co-pilot answered. "How much 'Adam's Ale' will it turn out before all the fuel's used up?"

"About fifteen pounds," Barry stated. "One of the officers on the carrier told me each plane's rafts were equipped with it. I just forgot to pass on the news. This still is a piece of regular Navy equipment, and so is the fishing tackle that goes with it.... Look!"

Reaching into the case again he brought out a sealed, three-pound can. Under the amazed eyes of his three companions, he opened it to show a complete fishing outfit of hooks, lines and dried bait. There was even a small steel spearhead for gaffing large fish.

"We'll use this right away," the young skipper declared. "Since we're so near to land we can afford to use some of our still's fuel to broil a tasty fish dinner. Here are three hook-and-line rigs, so it shouldn't take us long to catch a meal."

The castaways discovered all at once that they were ravenously hungry. With the tension of immediate danger gone, they went at the fishing with the zest of youngsters. The fish were hungry, too. Within half an hour fifteen pounds of finny food lay on the bottom of the two rafts.

The difficult job was preparing and cooking them. Barry solved the problem by cutting the fish into fillets and broiling these on the blade of one of the raft's aluminum oars. Two cans of fuel were used for that one meal.

"We couldn't be so wasteful, out of sight of land," Curly Levitt observed. "We'd have to learn to eat our fish raw and like it."

"Which might not be so hard, after all, sir," Mickey Rourke responded. "A sailor once told me he'd drifted for three weeks on a big raft with six other lads, and eaten raw fish three times a day. They cut it thin and dried it in the sun, like herring. The sea water had salted it already. Me friend said it tasted fine."

"Your sailor friend was spinning you a salty yarn, if you ask me," said Chick. "What did he do when the water rations gave out?"

"Sure, that was easy!" Mickey Rourke replied. "He drank fish with his meals and was never thirsty except when it stormed for three days and the fish wouldn't bite—"

"Haw, haw, haw!" howled Hap Newton, whose raft had drifted closer. "You bit, all right, Chick. You ought to know better than to match wits with an Irishman. So they *drank* more fish when they got thirsty, huh! That's the best joke I've heard since I was a dodo. How about it, Barry?"

Barry Blake's smile was not sympathetic.

"The joke's on you, Hap!" he chuckled. "Mickey, hand me that fish we didn't cook, and I'll show Lieutenant Newton just what sort of a sucker he is to doubt your word."

From the bottom of the bait can Barry took a folded square of muslin and the sharp edged spearhead. After making criss-cross cuts through each side of the five pound fish, he pulled the diced flesh from the bones and placed them in the cloth.

"Now hold the can under this muslin while we wring out a fresh fish cocktail, Mickey," he directed.

From the cloth, strongly twisted by Barry and the little sergeant, a stream of watery liquid dribbled into the bait can. When no more would come, Barry threw out the squeezed fish meat and put in more diced pieces. The final result was half a cupful of fish juice.

"It's drinkable," the young skipper declared after the first taste, "just as that naval officer on the flat-top told me it would be. There's practically no salt taste, and it's not as strong of fish as you'd imagine. Who wants to hint that Sergeant Mickey Rourke is a liar, now?"

Hap Newton shook his head solemnly.

"I take it all back, gentlemen," he said. "I'll never doubt your word again, Mickey, unless I see you wink behind my back. But please don't ask me to guzzle your fish cocktail while I have a perfectly good still to make my own moonshine water. Pass me a match, Fred, and let's get the thing started. I want to wet my whistle before Crayle, here, wakes up and demands a fresh water bath."



"Now We'll Wring out a Fresh Fish Cocktail."

While their water stills boiled, the two raft crews began paddling toward the island. Their progress was less than a mile an hour, but that did not bother them. With darkness still several hours away, they dared not approach too near.

"The moon rises early tonight," Curly Levitt informed his friends. "If we're within two miles of land then, we should be able to see the shore line. The cloud ceiling isn't so thick that it will shut out all the light."

As a matter of fact, the clouds thinned as evening approached. A stiff breeze sprang up, drifting the rafts so rapidly toward land that the paddles were no longer needed. As the last daylight faded a faint glow above the eastern horizon told that the moon was up.

The rafts had been tied together all afternoon, to avoid drifting too far apart. Now, with paddles plying steadily, they were making good headway toward the dark line of jungle that marked the island. Barry Blake, in the leading "doughnut," strained his ears for any sound of breakers that would indicate a dangerous landing place. There was none—only the rhythmical roaring of the surf on the smooth beach, and the slap-slap-slap of water against the rafts' flat bottoms.

They were a hundred yards from the head of a little cove when the clouds thinned enough to show the moon. For five short seconds the light was fairly clear. A scudding cloud mass dimmed it, but

not before Barry had glimpsed a long, black shape moving out from shore.

"Stop paddling!" the young skipper whispered. "Pass the word to Hap's raft.... There's a boat putting out from the beach—due to pass us within a few yards. Have your guns ready if it spots us, and keep your heads down."

"Sure, I knew me little tommy-gun would come in handy, Lieutenant," Mickey Rourke muttered. "I'll take the oilskin bag off and be ready when yez say, 'Open fire!'"

Tense moments passed. A patch of darkness blacker than the surrounding water moved into Barry's range of vision. Mickey had seen it, too. He snuggled lower in the raft, the stock of his weapon tight against his shoulder.

Abruptly a high-pitched, chattering voice broke out in the oncoming boat. Barry felt Sergeant Rourke stiffen beside him, waiting the word to fire. But that word was never given. A girl's voice spoke from the darkness in clear American.

"Quiet, Nanu!" it said. "That's not a Jap boat, unless it's upside down. Paddle closer and we'll look the thing over."

Gusty sighs of relief went up from the bomber's crew.

"A girl! From the States!" they chorused.

"So they want to look us over," remarked Fred Marmon's voice sententiously. "Well, *I'm a monkey's uncle!*"

Feminine laughter pealed in the darkness. There were two women in the strange boat and at least one white man, to judge by the voices. Barry thought, however, that he could distinguish other figures.

"We're the crew of an American bomber, forced down by lack of fuel this afternoon," he explained. "We nearly turned a sub-machine gun on you people a minute ago, thinking you were Japs. If we hadn't heard one of the ladies speak—"

"That was Dora Wilcox," another girl broke in. "She and her father had a mission station here; and I'd just come out to join my father at his cocoanut plantation when the Japs came. We've been hiding from them ever since. The little brutes caught and killed Reverend Wilcox only last week. I'm Claire Barrows, and my father is here beside me."

"We had a hard time persuading Miss Wilcox to come with us," a man's voice added. "She wanted to stay with the native converts until they themselves urged her to leave. The Japs are due to occupy this island in force at any time."

"Nanu and Kari Luva and their wives decided to escape with us in their catamaran," Dora Wilcox chimed in. "Why don't you people join us? This craft is really too heavy for three men and four women to paddle, and we're well stocked with water and food. I'm sure that Providence brought us together—and kept you from shooting us in the dark."

There was no resisting the girl's logic. Barry Blake quickly introduced his crew by name as they lifted Crayle into the native boat. He himself came aboard last, carrying his precious still and fishing tackle. The two rubber rafts were left to float ashore and mystify any Jap patrol that might find them.

Dora Wilcox, he soon discovered, was the real leader of the refugees. The four natives showed a childlike devotion to her. Even Clarke Barrows, the middle-aged plantation owner, deferred to the girl's opinion. Barry Blake found himself consumed with curiosity to see the face of this young person who planned like a general and thought of everybody else before herself.

Dora Wilcox's hope was to sail the entire three hundred miles to Australia. She had brought palm fiber mats to cover the catamaran during the day and make it appear abandoned. The mats would serve the double purpose of camouflage and shade. At night the sail would be raised. With a favorable wind, she told Barry, the double-dugout craft could travel as much as eighty miles between dusk and dawn.

The young Fortress skipper glanced up at the scudding clouds. Weather, he realized, would have a great deal to do with the success or failure of their escape. Without a keel the catamaran would make a lot of leeway. If the wind held from the northeast, it could easily blow them ashore on a Jap occupied island. The wisest plan would be to get as far to windward as they could before dawn.

"Let us take the paddles, Miss Wilcox," he said. "My crew will relieve your native boys until it's time to hoist sail. Then perhaps we can figure out a way to beat the leeward drift."

"We're at your orders from now on, Lieutenant," the girl replied. "None of us is a navigator. If an American bomber crew can't take us through, no human power could do it."

The seven airmen fell to work with a will and a weight of muscle that sent the thirty-foot boat lightly over the swells. At midnight, when the sky cleared, they were well out of sight of land. Now for the first time the bomber team had a chance to see their companions' faces.

In the moonlight neither of the white girls looked more than eighteen or twenty years old. Claire Barrows had her father's wide mouth and turned-up nose, and a smile that was decidedly attractive. Dora smiled less often, and her features were more finely chiseled. She wore her long hair in braids wound about her head. Her calm, efficient, thoughtful personality could be read at a glance. Somehow she made Barry's pulse beat faster than any girl had done before.

The two native couples were quite young, in their 'teens or early twenties. As they sat relaxed, balancing with the boat's dip and sway, their shapely black bodies would have thrilled any sculptor. Barry could imagine what capture by the Japs would mean to these children of nature—slavery, degradation, living death!

The thought made him fiercely determined to outwit the enemy, to bring all these people through the gantlet of Jap boats, planes, and shore patrols. Thirteen persons now depended largely on him as their skipper. He must find some means of covering those three hundred miles to Australia in a shorter time.

"I have it!" he exclaimed aloud. "We'll use the paddles in place of a centerboard. Is there any rope handy, Dora?"

"Plenty," replied the girl. "But what do you mean by using paddles for a centerboard,

Lieutenant?"

"I'll show you," the young skipper smiled, looking straight into her eyes. "But please leave off the handle and call me Barry, won't you?"

"All right," Dora Wilcox answered, with a twinkle in her eyes. "It's easier to say.... Oh, Nanu! Hand me that coil of rope you're sitting on."

With the help of his crew, Barry tied four of the native paddles at intervals between the catamaran's twin floats. The broad wooden blades, thrust deep in the water, acted like a keel. Now the wind pushing on the sail would not drift the craft sidewise. Already equipped with a steering oar, the awkward-looking boat was now as manageable as a catboat.

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As the single, lanteen-type sail went up, water boiled white under the double bow. The catamaran was gathering speed.

"Splendid!" cried Claire Barrows. "All we need now is a chart and a compass to set the course. Which way is Port Darwin, anyway, Lieutenant Newton?"

"I'll be just plain 'Hap' to you, if you want me to live up to my nickname," the big co-pilot retorted. "When it comes to finding directions, Curly Levitt is the lad to consult. He carries a compass in his head, I think!"

"I have one in my pocket, which is a lot better," Curly spoke up. "And I stuffed a chart of these islands under my shirt when the plane was forced down. With that equipment I can keep track of our course by dead reckoning. It will be pretty crude, without a log to check the knots we're making, but at least we won't miss the broadside of Australia!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

FLOATING WRECKAGE

For the rest of the night, most of the catamaran's company dozed or slept. The craft was amazingly steady for its size. Although low to the water, she was not particularly "wet." The raised central platform on which her crew sat or sprawled caught only a feather of spray from time to time. The four natives slept as soundly as if they were on shore.

At dawn the breeze freshened. For three hours the catamaran skipped southward over the long rollers, while everyone kept a sharp lookout for planes. Fiber mats were lashed in place to afford the greatest possible shade. Barry noticed with amazement how cleverly Dora Wilcox had painted their top surfaces to look like wreckage to a passing plane. Only the sail and the greenish wake behind could tell a Jap pilot that there was life on the crazy-looking craft. At first sight of a plane, Barry planned to drop the sail, and trust that the fading wake would not be noticed.

"Every mile that we cover lessens our danger," he declared, "and every unnecessary hour we spend in enemy waters increases it. I think it's worth the risk to keep moving—especially in perfect sailing weather like this."

His companions agreed. There was risk, whichever way they turned, and to know that every hour cut their distance from the continent by eight or nine more miles was a great boost to their morale.

At noon the wind had slackened. The catamaran was making barely five knots, Curly judged. The sky was like a vast, blue furnace, without a speck of cloud. Had it not been for the straw mats, the white members of the company would have been painfully sunburned. The four natives were elected to keep watch for planes, as their eyes and their skins were better able to stand intense sunlight.

The watchers may not have been to blame for failing to see the Jap seaplane in time. He had probably come gliding out of the sun, invisible and silent. The roar of his motor and the snarling of his machine guns, as he suddenly power-dived, were the Americans' first warning.

Thirty-caliber bullets peppered the catamaran. A few pierced the camouflage matting. Three or four, by some freak, chewed the mast half through at a point four feet above the decking. One struck the leg of Nanu, the steersman. The rest of the little slugs struck the log hulls or missed entirely.

Glenn Crayle, who had remained until now in a shell-shocked stupor, came to life with a howl. A bullet had grazed his shin. He moaned for help, but nobody paid any attention. Barry Blake's quick, sharp orders averted the panic that otherwise might have cost them all their lives.

"Lie low, everybody. Whatever happens, don't disturb the mats. Mickey Rourke, crawl outside with your tommy-gun and pretend to be wounded. Send the native women in under cover. That Jap will be back in two shakes to look us over. If he flies low enough to make sure of your hitting him, let him have it.... Otherwise hold your fire."

Claire Barrows began weeping hysterically.

"We'll all be k-killed," she sobbed. "Like rats in a c-cage. I'm g-going to jump overboard and—"
SMACK!

Dora Wilcox slapped her friend hard across the mouth.

"Stop it, Claire, this instant!" she commanded. "A fine example you're setting Alua and Lehu. For shame!"

As Claire's sobs quieted, Mickey's voice reached the others from outside the shelter of mats.

"The Jap is comin' in low to see what he did to us," the little sergeant reported. "I'll play dead till the last second, and then pour it into him. He's a *Nakajima* single-engine job, equipped with floats."

The hum of the Jap's motor grew louder. Once more his machine guns opened up, but this time his burst was high enough to miss the catamaran's crew. It finished the mast which fell across the matting, scaring the women but doing no damage.

As the plane roared low overhead, Mickey Rourke's gun opened up. Its harsh, deadly chatter held the hopes of fourteen souls. It ceased, and the Jap's engine song rose sharply.

"I hit him!" came Mickey's whoop. "He's zoomin'.... He's goin' into a stall.... His engine's smokin' and he's goin' to crash!"

Without waiting for more, the catamaran's company threw aside the concealing mats. They were just in time to see the *Nakajima* end her tail-spin in a great splash and a burst of flame, less than two hundred yards away.

The fight was over. Except for a patch of burning oil on the water, and the three wounded persons on the sailing craft, it would have been hard to realize that the thing had not been a nightmare.

"'Twas just as I saw it in me dream," Mickey Rourke was saying. "The only part I didn't see was Nanu and Miss Wilcox bein' wounded—"

"What's that?" Barry cut in. "You wounded, Dora? Let me see what's under that cloth!"

The girl shook her head. Her face was pale, but the hand with which she pressed a folded towel to her left arm was perfectly steady.

"See to Nanu first," she replied. "Hurry—or I'll do it myself. He's lost too much blood already. You'll find clean cloths here in my little chest."

Barry flung open the cover of the teakwood box she indicated. Inside, packed neatly with a few feminine belongings, were a number of old, clean cloths. Barry snatched out a threadbare pillowcase and a man's ragged white shirtsleeve. With these, he made his way to Nanu who sat in

the stern with his hands clasped around his thigh.

The native boy's wound was a clean puncture. The small-caliber, steel-jacketed bullet had passed through his thigh muscles just above the knee. Fortunately it had missed the larger artery and the blood had already begun to clot. Barry applied a cloth pad to each bullet hole, binding them tightly in place with strips of the old pillowcase. Throughout the operation, Nanu lay quiet. When Barry slapped him on the shoulder and told him, "Everything's okay!" the boy's eyes had lost all trace of fright.

Meanwhile, Claire and Hap were dressing Dora's hurt. A bullet had gouged her forearm, making a painful but not a crippling wound. Claire showed considerable skill in the bandaging. She had brought her nerves fully under control, and was giving sharp orders to Hap.

Barry glanced at the splintered mast and fallen sail. Before much progress could be made, it was evident that the catamaran would have to land for repairs. At present it looked so thoroughly wrecked that the most suspicious Jap patrol pilot would hardly waste bullets on it.

The same thoughts were evidently in Curly Levitt's mind. Standing up beside his skipper, he pointed to a fairly large island, seven or eight miles to leeward.

"We can go ashore there tonight, Barry," he said. "With the sail hanging on the stump of the mast as it is now, we'll drift toward that island at the rate of about one knot per hour. Everybody can keep out of sight under the mats and wreckage. We'll tie the steering oar in place and let the wind do the rest...."

"No!" Glenn Crayle's shout interrupted him. "You're foolish to go any nearer to land. The Japs will bomb us. They'll shoot us down like dogs. You've got paddles, haven't you? Start using them, then, if you're not too lazy! I forbid you to head for shore, Blake!"

"He's crazy as a loon," Curly muttered. "How are we going to shut him up, Barry?"

The young skipper made his way forward to where Crayle sat binding a handkerchief around his grazed shin. He took a firm grip on the shell-shocked pilot's shoulder.

"Look there, Crayle," he said, pointing to a black triangular fin that showed above the oncoming wave. "That shark is hungry. He smells blood. He'll probably trail this boat till it lands—unless one of us falls overboard. Be quiet and behave yourself, or *you'll be that one!*"

Crayle's mouth fell open. In sudden terror he gazed at the approaching shark.

"No! No!" he moaned, clutching Barry's arm.

The young skipper freed himself with a grimace of disgust.

"Everybody under the mats!" he ordered. "There's no telling when the next Jap plane will show up. Once we're out of sight we can relax and eat a bit of lunch, if the ladies care to break into their supplies now."

Cocoanuts, bananas, smoked chicken and taro bread had been stored in the catamaran's hollow hulls—enough to last the entire company for a week. Since it was the first meal the bomber's crew had tasted for a whole day, they were given extra rations.

Crayle wolfed down his share and reached for more. A sharp word from Barry stopped him, but the young skipper caught a look of animal cunning that replaced the greed in the other's eyes. From now on, Barry decided, the shock-crazed lieutenant would need to be watched like a wild beast. There was no predicting what mad impulse might seize his twisted brain.

They were finishing their meal when another Jap plane roared overhead. This was a twin-engined *Mitsubishi* bomber, a land-based type, that appeared to have taken off from the island to leeward. It swooped low to investigate the drifting catamaran.

For a tense thirty seconds Barry's party waited, and wondered if more bullets would come slashing through their thin fiber mats. Then the engines' snarl faded to a distant droning. Their camouflage had worked!

Not so pleasant was the thought that they would have to land on a beach patrolled by the enemy. If this island were the site of a Jap air base it would be well guarded. Even the darkness might not be camouflage enough to fool the Nip patrols.

As the afternoon waned, the island's shore line grew more and more distinct. A second bomber rose from behind the wall of dark green jungle, and three more returned from some patrol or bombing mission. There could be no doubt of the existence of an air base somewhere inland from the beach.

The one encouraging fact was that none of the planes paid any particular attention to the drifting catamaran. Undoubtedly they had all looked it over. If the wreck looked so harmless to the Jap pilots, shore patrols were not likely to bother their heads about it. The real danger would come after Barry's crew went ashore to cut a new mast.

The sun was low in the west when two squadrons of heavy bombers approached at 20,000 feet. Even before the Jap ack-ack on the island cut loose, Barry's party recognized them—*American Flying Fortresses and Liberators!*

Peering up through the cracks in the camouflage, everyone aboard the catamaran raised a wild cheer. For a moment, Barry had all he could do to keep his crew from tossing the fiber mats aside and standing up to wave. His orders were drowned out by the thunder of exploding bombs.



Peering Through the Camouflage They All Cheered

The noise, even at a distance of three miles, was ear-shattering. The very ocean shuddered. More than eighty tons of block-busters, Barry later calculated, must have been dropped within the space of a few minutes on the Jap air base.

When the two squadrons re-formed and wheeled majestically away into the evening sky, not a single shellburst followed them. The Jap antiaircraft was wiped out. Instead of ack-ack a vast pillar of smoke and flame mushroomed up from the smitten jungle.

For some moments afterward no word was spoken aboard the drifting boat. That swift, devastating raid had left the watchers awed, and a little dazed. Chick Enders was the first to break silence.

"So," he exclaimed hoarsely, "that's the way a real air-blitz sounds and looks from below! The next time I'm laying big eggs on Hirohito's little boys, I'll know better what I'm dishing out to them!"

Most of the crew wanted to paddle ashore immediately, but Barry restrained them. Unless the Jap beach patrols had received orders to leave their posts, they would still be there. No single bombing raid, however terrible, could demoralize those tough, stupid little beasts. Their meager mental life was shaped and ruled by discipline. Only their higher officers were trained to think their way out of a difficulty.

The night came swiftly, with no clouds to reflect the sun's afterglow. This night there would be a brief interval between sunset and moonrise—just enough to let the catamaran paddle ashore unseen. The strong arms of Barry and his teammates made the most of it. Just as the moon's silver rim peeped over the eastern horizon, they grounded their craft at the jungle's edge, in the shelter of a little sandspit.

Since the tide was high, and already beginning to ebb, there was no need to tie the catamaran. Pulling it just out of reach of the waves, the whole party left it, and followed Barry into the bush.

"Dora," the young skipper said, low-voiced, "you and your people will stay here, within sight of Nanu and the catamaran. You can stretch your legs, but don't move about too much or make a noise. I'll leave Mickey Rourke on guard with his tommy-gun. He'll watch for Japs and keep an eye on Crayle. The rest of the boys will go with me to look for a mast. If we should run into trouble we have our pistols."

"I'd rather we all went with you, Barry," the girl responded. "We could carry Nanu into the bush where he wouldn't be found. Where there's danger, we shouldn't be separated."

"If we were all fighting men, I'd agree with you, Dora," he said. "As it is, you have no right to risk the lives of your people in order to stand by me and my crew. If a Jap patrol spots the catamaran while we're gone, your job, and Mickey Rourke's, is to fight clear of the beach and push out to sea."

Never mind the rest of us. Naturally I hope neither you nor we are going to be discovered; but if we should be—well, so long and take care of yourself!”

He turned away quickly, beckoning his team after him, and headed up the beach. By keeping to the shadows at the jungle’s edge, they remained under cover and at the same time had light enough to see where they were going. Each man scanned the jungle growth nearest him for any slim, straight young tree that might serve to support the catamaran’s sail. Bamboo, of course, would be the best, but that could only be found in the interior.

They had gone no more than five hundred yards when Barry halted, with a sharp hiss of warning.

“I heard voices,” he whispered, “ahead of us and to the left.... There! Did you hear that, Chick?”

“Jap talk!” muttered the little bombardier. “Look! Isn’t that the mouth of a creek just beyond us? I think that’s where they are.”

“You’re right, old Eagle-eye!” the skipper exclaimed. “Follow me, and don’t make a sound. I want to see what’s going on.”

The voices grew louder as they advanced. The Japs, it appeared, were some little distance up the creek. From the sounds, Barry judged that they were loading something into a boat. He found a little trail bordering the creek bank, and followed it.

Where the trail bent sharply to the left, he saw the flicker of flashlights. Less than a hundred feet away, two Jap motor launches were drawn up to the bank. Both were partly filled with soldiers. One of them was still half covered with the camouflage net that had concealed it during the day. Into the other launch someone, probably an officer, was being loaded on a stretcher. The Japs, Barry knew, lost interest in an ordinary soldier the moment he fell sick or wounded, and abandoned him promptly.

This looked like a general exodus from the island. If that were the case it could mean only one thing: The bombing raid had smashed every installation of value at the air base, including the radio. It must have killed most of the personnel, too. These thirty or forty men could be only a small part of the air field’s ground forces.

As the last soldier jumped in, the motors of both launches sputtered into life. In wondering silence the American fliers watched their enemies disappear around the bend, heading out to sea.

“Do you really think that’s the last of ‘em?” Hap Newton asked. “It doesn’t seem possible that we’re the only ones alive on the island. And yet, why would *two* boatloads of Japs clear out if they just wanted to send for help?”

“There’s just one way to make sure what has happened,” Barry Blake responded. “We’ll follow this trail to the airfield and see for ourselves. If the Japs have abandoned the island it won’t be for long, but I should enjoy a chance to look the place over.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PATCHED WINGS IN THE DAWN

The trail was easy to follow in the moonlight. It followed the creek for about a mile, and ended at the edge of a huge open space. This had been, a few hours before, the Jap airfield. Now, in the dim light, the place looked more like the cratered landscape of the moon than anything on earth.

"There," said Soapy Babbitt, pointing to a heap of coral blocks and rubble, "must be what's left of the operations building. Probably the radio was there, too."

"What happened to the planes?" queried Chick Enders. "There must have been a lot of 'em caught on the ground, but I can't see more than two or three wrecks from here."

"I guess our bombs pulverized them," Fred Marmon said. "Boy! That blitz certainly was thorough. It's hard to see how any Japs lived through it."

"Some of the barrack buildings around the edge of the field escaped the worst of the bombing, no doubt," Barry Blake observed. "We'll circle the place now and see if anything is left. Keep your pistols ready, fellows. If there should be any wounded Japs left, they'll open fire on us."

Blasted, leafless trees that rimmed the field bore ghastly witness to the size of the bombs. Moonlight made the scene of destruction more horrible, with shadows that both concealed and exaggerated. Several times the searchers stumbled on fragments of bomb-torn corpses.

One end of the field showed fewer bomb craters. It was here that a number of *Mitsubishi* bombers had been lined up when the blitz opened. Either they had been left there for servicing, or the Japs had felt so secure that they didn't bother to scatter their planes around the field at dispersal points.

At first glance most of the bombers seemed to be intact. If that were the case, a guard might have been left with them. So as not to walk into a trap, Barry led his men into the jungle and approached the line-up from the rear.

Two hundred feet back in the bush he came upon a frame building that sagged drunkenly as if a giant hand had given it a push. The tin roof had been blown off, and now lay upside down on a group of flattened tents. The building had evidently quartered Jap officers, while the tents served as shelters for the enlisted personnel. There was no sign of life in any of them—only half a dozen Japs killed by shrapnel.

The planes, too, were unguarded. On closer inspection they proved to be hopeless wrecks. Fragmentation bombs had riddled the bombers with shrapnel holes, torn off wings, ripped the thin-skinned fuselages. Strangely enough, only two ships at one end of the line had burned.

"No wonder the Nip survivors cleared out!" Curly Levitt remarked. "There aren't enough usable parts in the whole line-up to build half a plane, so far as I can see. Let's cut a mast for the catamaran, and get back to the beach, skipper."

Barry Blake did not move. Deep in thought, he stood staring at the nearest bomber, which leaned crazily on one wheel and one wing tip.

The plane's left aileron dangled loosely. Its tail fin was smashed, and one of the elevators was gone completely. Great holes showed in the fuselage. The greenhouse was broken in. Yet something about the wreck appeared to fascinate the young pilot.

"Curly," he said soberly, "you've given me an idea. We *can* build a plane with these parts, if the Japs will give us time. A few shell holes are nothing if the crate will fly. You fellows beat it back to the beach and bring the others here. We'll rig up sleeping quarters for tonight and begin work at crack of dawn.... Fred, you stay here with me. We'll start looking these planes over now, by moonlight. It will save time."

If the others had doubts that Barry's scheme would work, they failed to mention them. The idea of flying home appealed so powerfully to their minds that they would have backed a one-in-twenty chance of success. They headed for the creek trail in high spirits.

When they returned, an hour later, Barry had good news to tell the whole company. He and Fred had found two *Mitsubishi* bombers with engines apparently unhurt and wings not too badly damaged, though the tail assemblies, fuselages and undercarriages were in sad shape. A greater surprise was a two-place *Kawasaki* fighter. Its greenhouse and rear fuselage were full of holes, but its working parts were undamaged.

"Hap, you can take off first in that *Kawasaki* with the two ladies," Barry told his co-pilot. "The rest of us can rebuild one of the bombers and follow you in a day or two. Finding that fighter plane is a better break than anything we've had yet."

"Humph!" snorted the bigger man. "It might be—if you could find somebody else to fly it. But even then I have a hunch the girls would make trouble. Claire wouldn't leave without her father, and Dora wouldn't leave without Claire. Of course neither Chick nor Curly nor I would leave without you, and nobody else except Crayle knows enough to handle a plane; and so—"

"Oh, drive it in the hangar, will you, Hap!" Barry said with a wry grin. "I know when I'm licked. We'll all have to wait till one of the *Mitsus* is fixed, I suppose—and just hope that the Japs won't be back before we get off. Come on—let's see what sort of chow and sleeping equipment the Japs have left us."

In the Jap officers' wrecked quarters they discovered a flashlight, and with its help located other things. There were enough iron cot beds and fairly clean bedding to supply all the white members of the party. Best of all, there was plenty of mosquito netting.

The islanders found all they needed in the flattened tents. A quantity of canned beef and vegetables was also located, but everyone was too weary to think of preparing food. As soon as three of the tents could be set up the whole crowd turned in to sleep.

The next four days and nights were one long, frantic battle against time, heat, and mechanical difficulties that only desperate men could have solved. The men snatched an hour or two of sleep when they could no longer keep awake. Even Crayle worked at filling in shell holes to make a runway—not willingly, but in fear of punishment.

The man's reason was so warped that he regarded everyone with a sullen hatred. If he could have laid hands on a gun, anything might have happened. His companions realized this and took special precautions.

Nanu, the wounded native, was made custodian of the tommy-gun while Mickey Rourke was working. His instructions were to shoot Crayle rather than let him come near the weapon. The shell-shocked pilot was sane enough to realize that Nanu would obey orders to the letter. He made no open break, but his eyes never lost their cunning look.

The repairs to the least-damaged *Mitsubishi* were completed by Fred, Soapy, and the two Fortress pilots within three days. As the work neared completion, the four men erected a camouflage of wreckage above their plane, supporting the junk on a framework of poles. To a Jap pilot flying overhead the restored *Mitsu* would be visible only as another hopeless ruin.

At last the repair job was finished—even the radio which they dared not test. The weary mechanics filled the big bomber's gas tanks with fuel from other wrecks. They tested her engines and that of the *Kawasaki* fighter.

It was planned that Hap Newton should fly alone in the latter. Reaching Darwin a little ahead of the *Mitsubishi*, he would take the risky job of identifying himself. Once landed, he would prepare the airport's defenders for his friends' arrival in a Jap bombing plane.

One more day was needed to smooth a runway long enough for the bomber's take-off. The thirteen able-bodied members of the party worked feverishly, with shovels improvised from pieces of wreckage, to fill in the last gaping bomb craters. The knowledge that at any time the Japs might return in force was a spur to their bone-tired bodies. Only Glenn Crayle stalled, when he thought he was not observed.

By mid-afternoon one unfilled crater stood between them and freedom, and the workers, except Crayle, were all at the point of exhaustion.

"We'll lay off for an hour, friends," Barry Blake croaked, as he wiped a dirty hand across his forehead. "Can't afford to break down with success almost in sight. A cool drink and a rest will help us to finish the job by night...."

He broke off as a distant hum of engines grew on the air.

"Planes coming!" he yelled. "Take cover!"

Dropping their tools, the little crowd staggered into the sheltering bush. As they flung themselves down, a squadron of *Mitsubishis* sailed into view. At twenty-thousand feet, they looked like small silver flying fish.

Probably, Barry thought, they were scanning the island for signs of enemy activity. He wondered if they would notice the smooth strip at the edge of the bomb-pocked field.

He was not left long in doubt. Three of the bombers peeled off and circled down in wide, slow spirals. They were wary, those Jap pilots, of another Guadalcanal-style occupation. The newly smoothed runway strip must have looked to them exceedingly suspicious.

A shout from Nanu at the other end of the runway rang above the droning of enemy engines. There was alarm in it, and pain. A cry from Dora Wilcox echoed it.

Barry sprang to his feet and raced through the bush, in the direction of the planes. Behind him he could hear his crew panting.

Their progress was maddeningly slow, yet they dared not leave the bush. Once the enemy planes guessed their identity bullets would fly, and bombs would fall.

"Crayle's grabbed the tommy-gun, I'll bet," Chick Enders gasped as he fought to keep up with Barry. "The idiot *would* pick a time like this. Oh-oh! There he is—in the—uh—*Kawasaki!*"

The bomber's team halted as Crayle saw them and swung his sub-machine gun to cover them.

"Stay back!" he warned hysterically. "You can't keep me here on the ground while they're dropping bombs on us. I'll kill you if you come another step.... You, Nanu—walk that propeller around once again, or I'll kill you, too. *Turn it, you fool!*"

Nanu, sweating with the pain of his injured leg, grasped the *Kawasaki's* propeller and leaned his weight on it. Off balance, he slipped to his knees. The fall probably saved his life, for at that moment the engine coughed into life.

Crayle did not wait for the engine to warm up.... Scarcely had Nanu dragged himself out of the way of the wheels when they rolled forward. The *Kawasaki* rushed down the runway trailing a cloud of dust. Her tail came up. Then, just as she reached the end of the strip something went wrong.

Either the plane had not gathered sufficient speed, or Crayle failed to ease back on the stick soon enough. Instead of rising, the wheels struck the far edge of the unfilled bomb crater. The *Kawasaki* went end over end, with a rending crash.

Fire burst from the center section. The whole plane exploded in a giant bloom of flame. Above it the Jap bombers zoomed, and spiralled upward to join their formation. The *Kawasaki's* futile attempt to take off had at least convinced them that the field was not in enemy hands.

Barry turned around to find Dora and Claire Barrows bandaging Nanu's re-opened wound. They appeared far more concerned over the suffering native boy than about Glenn Crayle's flaming death.

"How soon do you think we can get Nanu to a hospital, Barry?" the girl missionary queried anxiously. "This new loss of blood is likely to bring on a fever, and we haven't a thing to treat it with."

The young skipper looked toward the *Kawasaki's* wreckage, blazing on the other side of the last

bomb crater.

"We'll have that hole filled before midnight, Dora," he said wearily. "It will have to be Glenn Crayle's grave. When the earth is smoothed down and the burned plane is hauled aside, there should be enough runway for the bomber. We'll take off at dawn, and be over Port Darwin in two hours—if we're not intercepted."

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At breakfast time the next morning an excited radio officer telephoned the O.C. at Port Darwin airfield.

"Message just received for you, sir," he reported. "It purports to be sent by Lieutenant Barry Blake of the United States Army Air Forces, who's been missing since the raid on Amboina. He says he is flying a *Mitsubishi* bomber with his B-26 crew and seven refugees aboard and asks permission to come in."

"Barry Blake!" exclaimed the Australian colonel. "I should know that name. There's a Yankee captain having breakfast with me, who's been talking of little else. He came here with a fantastic notion that Blake would pop up sooner or later. We'll jog down to the radio room and let Captain Tex O'Grady identify your mysterious pilot."

Not a trace of fog obscured the Australian coast as Barry Blake picked out the rugged mass of Melville Island. The *Mitsu's* patched wings glinted like silver in the early sunlight. Landing should be easy, but before giving permission, the O.C. had insisted on identifying the bomber's crew by their voices. The Jap radio was tuned on the port's wave length.

Without warning Tex O'Grady's voice rang in the crew's earphones.

"Dawg-gone you, Barry," it said. "Where did you Fortress men get the idea that you could desert *Sweet Rosy O'Grady* and go gallivanting off with a silly little B-26? No wonder you-all had to come home in a Jap crate! What happened, anyway?"

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"*Skipper!*" Barry shouted joyfully. "Where are you—at Port Darwin? What brought you here—"

"It's the Old Man himself!" gasped Curly Levitt.

"Captain!" yelled Fred Marmon. "How are you, sir? And what's the good news?"

"Reef back, boys!" Tex O'Grady's humorous drawl answered them. "I'm not answering questions until you come in and we have a chance to talk. But the news is this: Your part in finding and helping to smash the big Jap flotilla off New Guinea has won Barry a captain's bars and the rest some decorations. And here's the best little item of all, I reckon..."

He paused briefly, as if trying to control a new huskiness in his speech.

"You boys," he continued, "have drawn a thirty-day furlough, and we're all going—going home to the States in *Sweet Rosy O'Grady*, as soon as she's patched up enough to make the trip. Here's Colonel Raymond with a word you've been waiting for."

Barry's head felt queerly light, and the mention of "home" had brought a lump to his throat that would not go down. As if from a great distance he heard a strange voice speaking.

"Permission to land is herewith granted," the Australian O.C. said. "And may all your future landings be as happy as this one, *Captain* Barry Blake of the Flying Fortress!"



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Transcriber's Note:

Some punctuation errors and minor spelling errors have been corrected without mention.

A table of illustrations has been added immediately after the table of contents.

page 11 - changed "goodnatured" to "good-natured" and page 22 - changed "good natured" to "good-natured" - other books in this series use "good-natured" consistently

page 35 - changed "one hundred and eight-five" to "one hundred and eighty-five"

page 159 - changed "Fortresses were now on the seene" to "Fortresses were now on the scene"

page 225 - changed "Dora Wilcox had pointed their top surfaces" to "Dora Wilcox had painted their top surfaces"

page 232 - changed "island were the sight of" to "island were the site of"

page 245 - added endpaper illustration from book cover

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BARRY BLAKE OF THE FLYING FORTRESS ***

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