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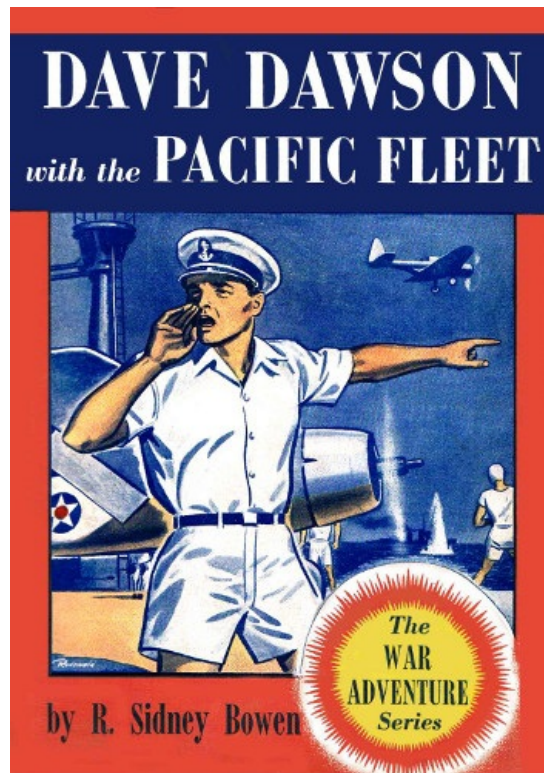
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET



DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET

by R. SIDNEY BOWEN

Author of: "DAVE DAWSON AT DUNKIRK"

"DAVE DAWSON WITH THE R. A. F."

"DAVE DAWSON IN LIBYA"

"DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL"

"DAVE DAWSON, FLIGHT LIEUTENANT"

"DAVE DAWSON AT SINGAPORE"

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DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET

CHAPTER ONE *Order For Eagles*

Very much like a little boy who is seeing his first Christmas tree, Freddy Farmer stared pop-eyed out the Clipper's lounge window and down at the man-made magic that was New York City. For a full five minutes he had been gaping at the sight, not moving a muscle, not making a sound, and practically holding his breath all of the time. At his side and with an arm thrown across the English-born R.A.F. ace's shoulders was Dave Dawson, grinning from ear to ear, and getting the kick of his life out of the spell that a first look at Gotham had cast upon his bosom pal, and hard-hitting flying partner.

Finally he couldn't wait any longer to hear what Freddy had to say.

"Well?" he encouraged.

"Well, what?" Freddy murmured in little more than a whisper.

"What do you think of the old town, huh?" Dave asked with a happy chuckle.

The English youth blinked, swallowed hard, and gave a little uncertain shake of his head.

"Unbelievable, incredible!" he finally got out. "Are—are those really buildings down there? The New York skyscrapers I've heard so much about?"

By way of making his question clear, Freddy pointed at the towering heaps of stone that formed the Wall Street and midtown sections of the city. Dave squinted down and grunted.

"Those little shacks?" he echoed. "Why, those are just the little huts where the poor people live. Wait until you see the real buildings. How high are we, anyway? Hope the pilot of this thing stays over three thousand feet. Be tough to smack into a skyscraper, you know."

Freddy Farmer snorted and dug an elbow into Dawson's ribs.

"Oh, come off it, funny lad!" he snapped. "That one wasn't even worth a quiet smile. Point out some of the buildings, will you? The Empire State Building. Where is it, anyway?"

Dawson pointed it out to his friend, and then went on to point out many of the other buildings of Manhattan that were famous the world around.

"But the Empire State tops them all," he said at the end of his little tourist guide speech. "Funny thing about it, though. The Empire State is the tallest building in the world, but it's not the highest. Ever realize that?"

Freddy took his eyes off the view just long enough to give him a quizzical stare.

"The tallest, but not the highest?" he said. "What kind of rubbish is that?"

"It's a fact," Dawson said gravely. "Didn't you know you've got buildings in England higher than the Empire State?"

The English youth sighed and gave a little shrug of his shoulders.

"I always felt there was something funny about America," he grunted. "But I never knew that seeing your homeland affected you Yanks this way. We have buildings in England taller than your Empire State? What utter rubbish!"

"I didn't say taller, I said *higher!*" Dawson chuckled. "Take the city hall out in Denver, Colorado. Denver's a mile above sea level, but New York is just about sea level. Catch on? The Denver City Hall is over four thousand feet *higher* than the Empire State. Try that on your friends when you get back to England."

"Blasted likely I will!" Freddy snorted. "They'd have me locked up sure for a balmy one. But don't talk about getting back to England. Good grief! I've only just arrived in America. And speaking of coming to America, I'd certainly like to know—"

"Yeah, me too," Dave cut in, and suddenly leaned closer to the window glass. "Hello, Sweetheart!" he cried, and threw a kiss. "Have you been lonesome for me, Sweet? Well, here I am, Precious. And am I tickled pink to see you!"

As Dawson talked and went through the motions of throwing kisses, Freddy Farmer paled slightly and glanced anxious-eyed about the Clipper's lounge to see if any of the other passengers were watching. They weren't, however. They were all too busy filling their own eyes with New York. Finally Freddy turned back to Dave.

"Are you all right, Dave?" he asked. "Not air sick, or anything? Then for pity's sake, stop all this rot! Where in the world do you think you are? On the stage? And what in heaven's name are you acting out?"

"Acting nothing!" Dawson snapped. "The real thing, pal! I'm just saying hello to my girl, my sweetheart. I haven't seen her for a couple of years, you know. There she is down there. See her?"

The English youth looked eagerly out the window again, but his eagerness disappeared at once, and he groaned softly.

"As though you could see anybody from this height!" he growled. "You've just gone plain balmy with joy at being back in your own country. But I'm telling you right now that if you keep it up, I'm going to quit you and go back to England even if I have to swim it. Frankly, I think I must have been a little balmy myself to have come over here with you in the first place. See your girl waiting for you? Rot! Matter of fact, I recall your telling me that you didn't have any girl."

"I haven't," Dawson said with a grin. "Only this lady is very special. She's the sweetheart of every returning American. Always waits in the same place, holding up a torch so you can find your way in. There she is, down there. See her? Over two million Yanks threw goodbye and hello kisses at her in the last war. She was born in France, but she's been Yank ever since the day she came over. Freddy, meet my very special sweetheart. Isn't she something, though?"

Pulling the English youth closer to the window, Dave Dawson pointed a finger down at the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Freddy stared at it long and silently. Then presently he nodded and smiled at Dawson.

"No, I guess you're not so balmy as I thought," he said. "I see what you mean and I quite agree. She is, indeed, the sweetheart of all you Yank chaps. She stands for the most cherished thing in all of your great country: Liberty!"

"Yes," Dave said gravely. "And I hope and pray that before long what she stands for will extend around the world and to each of the Poles."

"Amen!" Freddy Farmer breathed softly. Then, as his young face grew hard and grim: "It will come, Dave. Maybe you, and I, and thousands of chaps like us, may not live to see it. But it will come, just as sure as there is a sun in the heavens by day, and stars by night. I'm not one of those heavy-thinking blokes who can spill out wonderful words by the yard, but ever since this blasted mess started I haven't once had even the tiniest feeling that Hitler and his murderers would win in the end. And now that the United States is in it, I simply feel that victory will be ours just that much sooner."

"Feel the same way," Dave murmured, and stared unseeing out the window. "But it's going to be a scrap, and a tough one. Those dirty Japs got the jump on us. And they're in high gear right now, while Uncle Sam is still shifting into first. But it won't be long before the old guy with the whiskers gets rolling. And when he does, Mr. Jap, and Adolf, and Muzzy the Fuzzy, you're going to catch it from all sides—and plenty! And—Hold everything! I sound like a Congressman dedicating a post office, or something. Let's change the subject. Gosh, Freddy, but you look funny in civilian clothes."

"Oh, do I?" the English youth flared up and flushed. "Well, let me tell you, my little man, you'd never take any prizes at a fashion show for men. You'd—"

"Get down off your ear, pal!" Dave stopped him with a chuckle. "I didn't mean that the way you took it. I mean that I've been so used to seeing you in uniform that it seems sort of cockeyed to see you in civies. They're a swell fit, and you'll knock the ladies of Broadway and Fifth Avenue for

a loop. So don't get hot under the collar."

"Well, that's a little better!" Freddy growled. Then, with a sheepish grin: "To tell the truth, I feel just as strange as I must look. It's really a very nice suit of clothes, but I feel all out of place wearing it. That is—"

"I know what you mean," Dave chuckled. "Feel that way, too. As if a Wing Commander, or somebody, were liable to pop up out of nowhere and bawl the pants off me for not being dressed for a rush take-off and a scramble. Well, anyway, never a dull moment for us, hey, Freddy?"

The English youth laughed and shook his head, then ran a fingertip along the bottom of the window and furrowed his brows in a puzzled scowl.

"No, never a dull moment," he said. "But I wish that some of those moments could be explained to us now and then. I—well, I don't mean anything against America, Dave. And I'm certainly willing and anxious to go wherever I'm ordered. But—well, you've got oodles and oodles of pukka pilots over here. Why should we be sent over here to instruct? After the Singapore business, why were we recalled to England and then sent out here? Why not to some other Front? Russia, or Libya, or right where we were in the Far East?"^[1]

"*Instruct?*" Dave echoed sharply, and gave his pal a keen look. "What do you mean, instruct? Were you told something I wasn't told? Holy tripe! If they make a darned instructor out of me, I'll wreck every ship until they realize I'm no good at that sort of thing. Instruct? Why, doggone it, I —"

"I say, don't go sailing off your topper!" Freddy cried in alarm. "Nobody told me anything. I simply said instruct, because I'm blessed if I can think of any other reason why the Air Ministry should send us over here."

"Instruct!" Dave groaned and made a face. "Gosh! Have you spoiled my homecoming by bringing that up. But, heck, Freddy! You must be all wet on that idea. Why ship us halfway around the world to teach Yank fledglings how to fly? That doesn't make sense. Why not at least send us straight to Canada?"

Freddy Farmer pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. But there was a very impish look in his eyes that Dave missed completely.

"Well, of course you're very famous," Farmer murmured. "You have quite a record for bringing down Nazi planes. British ones, too. Crashes, and rotten landings, you know. Come to think of it, perhaps it's because of those crashes."

"Crashes!" Dawson cried as his eyes flashed. "Listen, you little wing crumpler! For every crate I've busted up, you've—"

"No doubt Churchill got in touch with your President," the English youth went on as though he hadn't been interrupted. "They often talk with each other by trans-oceanic phone, I understand. Perhaps right after Pearl Harbor, Churchill called up and said, 'I say, Mr. President! That chap, Dave Dawson—he's one of you Yanks, you know.' And your President said, 'Oh, yes, Dawson. Has that blighter crashed again, Mr. Prime Minister?' To which Churchill replied, 'Can't say, Mr. President. Haven't looked over the R.A.F. flight reports for the day yet. It's quite likely, though. But what I called about, Mr. President: Now that you're in this war, do you think you could take the little beggar off our hands? Our aircraft production is on the rise, but—"

Freddy Farmer cut off the last as he suddenly realized that he was only talking to the Clipper's window. He swung around on his heel, gulped, and blushed to the roots of his hair. Dave Dawson and some dozen other passengers of the Clipper were standing there in a group smiling at him.

"It's the altitude, ladies and gentlemen," Dave said loudly. "On the ground he's really quite a nice guy. But go on, Freddy. I didn't mean to interrupt. Sorry."

His whole face on fire, Freddy Farmer took a step forward, fists bunched. Then he quickly relaxed, and grinned.

"Fancy I asked for it," he said. Then, with a grave bow at the other passengers, he added, "It's undoubtedly the truth, though. He has crashed more than any other pilot in the R.A.F. Just look at his face. Nothing but countless crashes could make it look like that. I ask you!"

"Okay, that evens up!" Dave cried, as everybody joined in the laugh. "But you sounded as if you were set for hours."

At that moment the steward came into the lounge and requested the passengers to take their seats while the landing was being made. As Dave dropped into his seat next to Freddy, a tingle of excitement quivered through his body, and his heart started whanging around in his chest like a broken piston rod. Back home! Back home to the good old U.S.A. He still could hardly believe that it was true. It was more like living out a dream—a wonderful, joy-filled dream. He was afraid that almost any second he would wake up and find himself back in his hut at some Royal Air Force Fighter Squadron in England, or Egypt, or India, or the Far East.

"But it's not a dream, it's true!" he heard his own voice mutter softly. "And that's just *why* it doesn't make sense! Why *should* it be true? Why *did* the Air Ministry send Freddy and me over here?"

CHAPTER TWO

Center Of The World

As the giant Pan-American Clipper went sliding down toward the landing basin off LaGuardia Field, that question sounded again and again in Dave's brain like a tolling bell. But each time he could think of no answer that seemed reasonable or logical. And each time he groped for the answer, he mentally kicked himself for not having taken the bull by the horns and found out a few things when he had the chance.

That chance had come just a few days ago; two days after he and Freddy had returned from their special assignment in the Singapore area of the war. They hadn't been appointed to any squadron upon their arrival in London. Fact was, they had been given a week's leave to enjoy themselves in the war-torn but still very much chin-up city. They did have fun for two days. Then came the order to report to a certain room at the Air Ministry. It turned out to be the office of Air Vice-Marshall Stoneham, in charge of Active Service Personnel.

For the first few minutes the high ranking Air Ministry official had inquired about their health, how they liked being back in London, and a lot of other things that were of equal "value" in waging a winning war. Then suddenly he had informed them that they were leaving the next day for the United States. It was with great difficulty that they kept from toppling right out of their chairs. And while each struggled to catch his breath and gain control of his tongue, the Air Vice-Marshall had gone on to say that they would fly to Lisbon by British Airways, and from Lisbon to New York by Pan-American Clipper. Upon arriving at New York they would be met by a member of the British Embassy at Washington who would escort them to the Nation's Capital.

"So there you are, Flight Lieutenants," the Air Vice-Marshall had finished up with a smile while they still tried to get their feet back on the ground. "You can pick up traveling vouchers and what-not on the way out. Good luck, and happy landings, and all that sort of thing. Certainly wish I were going along with you. Wonderful country, America. Of course it isn't England, but it's still quite all right, no end."

Perhaps fifteen seconds after that, Dave and Freddy found themselves accepting travel vouchers and other papers from a junior officer. And another couple of minutes after that they found themselves out on the street and headed back toward their hotel. Gosh, yes! He should have asked a few questions of that Air Vice-Marshall when he had the chance. But that had been the trouble. He hadn't had the chance. Things had happened with such startling suddenness and rapidity that—well, *bingo*, he and Freddy were on the Clipper flying west.

"I wish I hadn't even said it!"

Dave snapped out of his old thought trance and glanced at Freddy Farmer.

"Wish you hadn't said what?" he demanded.

The English youth sighed, made a face, and gestured with one hand.

"That bit about us coming over here to instruct American fledglings," he said. "The more I think of it, the more I'm afraid that it just might be true. That would be terrible, Dave. Not that I don't want to do everything possible to help, you understand. But instruct? I'd be perfectly rotten at that game. I'm sure of it!"

"Me too!" Dawson groaned as his heart started sinking again. "And it would just be my luck to get some student who didn't know a flat spin from a three dollar hat. But I'm sure it can't be that. Heck! Let's look at the bright side. Maybe they've sent us over here to take charge of American war flying."

"Hardly!" Freddy said with a chuckle. "After all, the United Nations really are very keen to *win* the war, you know. And with you—"

"Skip it!" Dave cut in. "I was only trying to make conversation."

"Don't bother," Freddy murmured, and looked out the window. "It's quite interesting enough to watch one of these big ladies come down and land. Phew! That LaGuardia Field is certainly a big place, isn't it?"

"Fair, just fair," Dave grunted. "It's really just one of our emergency fields, you know. Why, we've got airports over here that are so big that they serve breakfast at the start of the take-off and lunch when the transport passes over the far end of the field. And—"

"And glide from there to a landing on the next airport, eh?" Freddy Farmer grunted.

"You're learning too fast," Dave said with a grin. "I wonder who'll meet us."

"I wonder if he'll be able to tell us anything!" Freddy added. "For two pennies I'd refuse to budge an inch until I'm told what this is all about."

"Do that and you'll *be told!*" Dave said with a chuckle. "But not the way you think, sweetheart. Ah, nice! A sweet landing, that one. These Clipper captains sure know their onions when it comes to over-water flying. Well, there's the dock, and customs shed. And I wonder who in that crowd is our welcoming committee. Gee! I hope we can spend a little while in New York so I can show you off to the natives."

"Never mind the natives," Freddy said as the huge Clipper was mushed through the water toward the landing dock. "I'll be perfectly content to see the sights."

"And I'm just the guy who can show them to you," Dave said. "Right from the Battery up to the Bronx Zoo. No. Nix on the Bronx Zoo. Can't take chances."

"Chances on what?" Freddy said as he walked into it with both eyes shut.

"The chances of coming out with the wrong baboon," Dave replied instantly.

Freddy Farmer swung but missed by a mile. Dave had caught up his bag and was out of his seat and heading forward. Five minutes later they had cleared customs and were standing on American soil. They stood there for a minute wondering if the party who was supposed to meet them had missed connections, and if they should go on into the Administration Building waiting room and kill time until he showed up. However, they had hardly started wondering when a neatly dressed man approached them with a smile. One look and you practically saw the map of England stamped on his ruddy face. He wore civilian clothes, but it was easy to see that he was more accustomed to a uniform.

"Flight Lieutenants Dawson and Farmer, eh?" he said, and extended his hand. Then, before they could do no more than nod: "I'm Captain Smith-Standers, attached to the military mission at Washington. The welcoming committee, and all that sort of thing. Have a nice trip, what?"

"A swell one, thanks, Captain," Dave said. "Sure seems good to get back. Of course, Farmer, here, was a little worried coming across. Not used to flying, you know. But we've got a million questions to ask you, Captain. And the first is—"

Dave stopped as the British officer shook his head and raised a restraining hand.

"Don't even bother to ask the first one, you chaps," he said with a laugh. "I'm blessed if I know what the answer is. I was simply ordered to pop up here and pop you two back to Washington. But I say, you mean you don't know why you're here, eh?"

"Quite!" Freddy spoke up. "We haven't the faintest idea. And I can tell you it's been driving us balmy wondering on the way across. Air Vice-Marshal Stoneham simply gave us our traveling vouchers and shooed us out of Air Ministry."

"Well, that's the way they do things these days," the Captain said with a shrug. "Very hush-hush, you know. But you'll find out everything presently, I fancy. I say, do you want something to eat before we push along? We've forty minutes or so before the plane leaves."

"Hey!" Dave yelped. "What do you mean, push along? Farmer, here, isn't going to have a look at New York?"

"Only from the air," the other said with a smile. "I'm to take you to Washington on the very next plane. Perhaps some other time, though. Let's get along, shall we?"

Dave looked at Freddy and shook his head sadly.

"We're either a couple of very important guys," he grunted, "or else somebody doesn't trust you on Fifth Avenue, even under my watchful eye."

"Or else it's to be a court martial, and I'm here as a witness *against* you!" Freddy snapped. "Which I sincerely hope!"

"Well, you two can carry on with that rot aboard the plane," the Captain said. "Come along. But tell me, how are things in London? Marvelous place, America, but how I wish I were back there. Feel just like I'd run away from the home chaps. Have the Jerries really been letting London alone? The War Office communiques are so blasted uninforming, you know."

That started the two R.A.F. youths off, and by the time they woke up to realize they hadn't asked Captain Smith-Standers a single other question about their status, they had landed at Washington, and were on their way by car to the British Embassy. There they met the Ambassador, and even had lunch with him and his subordinates. It was a very wonderful luncheon, and the conversation was highly interesting to them both. They were treated almost like returning heroes—rather, visiting ones. However, not one word was dropped that gave them so much as an inkling as to why they were in Washington. And although they were both fairly exploding inside with questions, they had sense enough to keep their mouths shut, and wait.

They had to wait until late in the afternoon. Then Captain Smith-Standers escorted them out of the Embassy and into a waiting car. It whizzed them halfway across Washington to a building that was perhaps the most unimposing of all the heaps of Government marble and stone in the whole city. He got out of the car with them, and walked with them up the flight of stone steps as far as the door. There he stopped, and extended his hand.

"Well, I fancy we part for good now, chaps," he said, and smiled at them out of eyes that held just a trace of awe and admiration. "Been wonderful meeting you, and all that sort of thing. Good luck, and worlds of it to you both."

"Sure, thanks," Dave gulped. "And the same to you. But look—what's this place, anyway? And what do we do now? I've seen better jails than this."

"Quite!" Freddy Farmer breathed. "Did we do something wrong at the Embassy? I say, can't you tell us anything?"

"Sorry," the British captain said with a smile and a shake of his head. "Fact is, there isn't anything I could tell you. I've been here before, though, and it's no jail. Wish the devil I was in your shoes. Well, I must trot. Go inside. You're expected. And—and good luck!"

Captain Smith-Standers shook hands with them again, saluted, though he still wore civies, turned

on his heel and went down the steps to the car. Dave and Freddy watched the car drive away, then turned and stared at each other.

"Have you ever been cockeyed drunk, Freddy?" Dave suddenly blurted out.

"No, never," the English youth replied. "Have you?"

"No," Dave grunted.

"Then why do you ask?" Freddy demanded.

"Just wondering," Dave murmured, and reached for the handle of the door. "Just wondering if it makes you feel the way I do now. In sixteen million pieces, and every doggone thing upside down. Well, I suppose this is our next move, eh?"

"Fancy it is," Freddy replied with a shrug and a frown. "So open the blasted door, and let's go in."

CHAPTER THREE

Special Assignment

The first thing the two R.A.F. aces saw as they opened the door and stepped inside was a long badly lighted corridor. It was more of a lobby; the lobby of an office building that hadn't been used for quite some time. The second thing they saw was the figure of a man in civilian clothes who seemed to pop out of nowhere and advance toward them. He was a nice enough looking man, about middle age, and with just the faintest hint of the military about him. He fixed them both with a keen searching stare, then seemed to relax a bit, and smiled.

"Dawson and Farmer?" he murmured. And without waiting for either of them to so much as nod: "Come along with me."

They followed him over to an elevator bank, and into the nearest car. Without speaking a word, or even so much as looking at them, the man took them up six floors. Dave studied the man hard, and the result of his study netted him just one thing. The man wore a shoulder holster, and there was a gun in it.

At the sixth floor he stopped the car, opened the doors, and stepped out, crooking his finger. They went down a hall halfway to the rear wall of the building, and stopped before a door. The man pressed a button three times, then twice more, and then looked at them as the latch made a clicking sound.

"Go on in," he said. "They're waiting for you. Good luck!"

"Same to you," Dave grunted. "What is it, a new slogan for the war? Everybody's been wishing us good luck. But for what, for cat's sake? Do you—?"

"Inside," the man cut him off, but grinned. "I only work here. Good—No, make it 'happy landings,' for you two."

For a brief instant Dave had the wild impulse to stand his ground and get a few explanations before he took another step in this seemingly screwball journey that had begun outside Air Vice-Marshal Stoneham's Air Ministry Office. However, he killed the desire even as it was born, and after a quick side glance at Freddy, twisted the door handle and stepped inside.

He had no idea what he expected to find inside, and what he did find had all the effect of a bucket of ice water dumped down over jangling nerves. In short, inside was just a rather dusty room, a desk, a chair, and another man in civilian clothes sitting in the chair. Oh yes, there were some cleaning mops, and a couple of pails in one corner. And on the left wall was a calendar of the year before, torn off only as far as the month of April. There was a door on the right, and the man behind the desk pointed at it.

"Through there, Gentlemen," he said, and immediately returned to a book he was reading.

Dave hesitated, clenched his fists, and groaned inwardly.

"Am I getting tired of doors!" he grated. "What in thunder gives around here, anyway?"

The man reading the book looked up and pointed again.

"Through there," he said, and went back to his book.

Dave and Freddy walked over to the door, but when he reached it, Dave stepped to one side.

"Your turn," he said, and stabbed a thumb at the knob. "Maybe you'll have better luck."

Freddy shrugged, cast a quick apprehensive look back over his shoulder at the man reading the book, and then turned the knob and pushed open the door. And he did have better luck. The room they entered was huge in size, and it contained so much stuff, and so many things, that it was impossible for either Dave or Freddy to concentrate on anything for several seconds. But by that time a tall, thin-faced man in shirt sleeves had risen from a desk and come over.

"Glad to meet you, Dawson and Farmer," he said in a quiet but warm voice. "I'm Colonel Welsh. Come in. We've been waiting for you."

If the man had introduced himself as Santa Claus Dave couldn't have been more dumbfounded. Colonel Welsh was the man who made U. S. Army and Navy Intelligence click. He was in charge

of the intelligence work of both services, and—in a vastly different way, of course—he had as much power in the United States as Himmler had in Nazi Germany. Perhaps no more than a dozen people knew what he was, for he acted as a colonel of infantry as well. But that job was simply a cover for his real work. He was seen and known as Colonel Welsh, of infantry, but few people knew that he was the same mysterious Colonel Welsh who was in charge of all U. S. Intelligence.

But it wasn't so much meeting the man that caused Dave to gasp and stare hard as it was the man's looks. His thin face had a nice smile, but beyond that you somehow didn't expect him even to know the time of day. The eyes had a dreamy, almost vacant look in their depths, the lips of the mouth had a dozey downward droop, and the chin was too pointed, and sort of too country parson looking.

"That's all right," the man suddenly said with a chuckle. "I've had this face all my life, so I'm used to it. Don't worry, I won't bite you."

Dave flushed to the roots of his hair and heartily wished there were a hole in the floor into which he could jump.

"I'm sorry, sir," he managed to stammer. "You see—well, Farmer and I have been going around in circles ever since we left England. And—well, it's sort of caught us off balance, if you know what I mean."

"I understand perfectly," the U. S. Intelligence chief said kindly. "Coming here must make a fellow feel he is acting out one of those crazy pulp paper thrillers. You know: secret doors, and special code-words. Well, we're not as bad as that. However, we find it does help to play just a little on the mysterious side. These are the offices we use when we have work to do. Those over in the War Department Building are just for show. Fact is, I personally would go crazy with all the silly trimmings they have over there. But pardon me. I want you to meet my comrades in this daffy business."

Colonel Welsh turned and led them over to a desk so big that it could have easily been cut up into five desks of the usual size. Three men were seated at the desk, and they pushed up from their chairs as the Colonel and the two youths approached.

"Captain Lamb," the Colonel said, pointing to a chunky redhead. "Next to him, Captain Stacey. And that chap who's as thin as I am is Lieutenant Caldwell, our coding expert. Gentlemen, Flight Lieutenants Dawson and Farmer."

Dave and Freddy shook hands with the other officers, and then dropped into chairs the Colonel pulled up. It was not until then that Dave had an opportunity to take a good look about him, and what he saw set his blood to tingling through his veins, and his heart to pounding against his ribs. He had often been inside the inner offices of British Intelligence, and on each occasion he had been stunned by the number of gadgets of all sorts, and the vast array of equipment they were used to operate. But the stuff he stared at now put the British equipment in the shade. There was every conceivable piece of equipment from ultra-ray flashlights to giant X-ray machines. One whole wall was lined with telephones and short wave radios for both sending and receiving. And along another wall was a row of file cabinets that operated electrically. One had only to push a file button, and the correct drawer slid open and the exact file folder shot up out of its clamps. In truth, Dave believed that Colonel Welsh had at his fingertips complete information of everyone of importance in the war, and that within a matter of seconds he could establish contact with any one of his agents, no matter in what part of the globe he might be. And those two items were but two of the many, many things that could be made possible with the equipment in that huge room. It was like the mechanical wizardry of Scotland Yard and the F.B.I. all set up in the same room.

"Interesting stuff, isn't it, Dawson?"

Dave turned his head to see Colonel Welsh grinning at him. He blushed slightly, and nodded.

"It certainly is, sir," he said politely. "A fellow could have some fun in this place."

"Depends on what you call fun," the Intelligence officer said with a grimace. "There's been more than one death warrant issued from this place. However, you're not here to be taught how to handle this stuff. Matter of fact, though, I suppose you're wondering just why you are here, eh?"

"Decidedly, sir!" Freddy Farmer fairly exploded the words.

"And how!" Dave echoed. "If I don't find out something, and soon, I'm going to dive right out a window, and end it all. For three days, sir, Farmer and I have been living a crazy, cockeyed dream. Maybe it's a nightmare, I don't know. But if you can possibly give us an inkling what it's all about, then consider me down on my knees and begging you to do just that! Honest! I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

The Colonel and the others joined in a loud laugh, and then presently the senior officer's face grew serious.

"You're here at my request, frankly," he said. "Here because I feel that you're just the men we need to help us crack a few tough nuts. Among those who came over with Prime Minister Churchill last December was General Sir John Gately, chief of all British Intelligence. Perhaps you know him?"

"Only of him, sir," Dave replied. "I never had the pleasure of meeting him. A wonderful man, though."

"The very best England has," Freddy Farmer added. "I've never had the chance to meet him, either."

"Yes, Sir John is just about the best in England," Colonel Welsh said with a firm nod. "We had several talks together, and he struck me as being just about the most brilliant man I ever met. He has certainly made it hot more than once for Herr Himmler's Gestapo boys. Well, to get to the point, I talked over with him a plan I had in mind. After a moment's thought he stated that you two were the type of men that I need. Fact is, he said you were *the* two I needed. So there's a mighty fine compliment for you. And let me hasten to add that it's a compliment well deserved, in my opinion. This is the first time I've met you, but your accomplishments in England and Libya and in the Far East are no secrets to this office."

Dave laughed embarrassedly and glanced at Freddy Farmer.

"It was mostly Farmer, sir!" he said. "I usually went along just for the ride."

"Rot!" Freddy snorted, red-faced. "More often than not it was I who blundered us right up a tree, and you got us out of the mess. Stop being modest, my lad. You're in your own country, you know."

"I'm pretty sure it was fifty-fifty," Colonel Welsh settled the argument with a chuckle. "Anyway, you're the two lads I need, and here you are. When Sir John and I reached an agreement about you, he simply started the ball rolling, and without your knowing it you were released from the R.A.F., and sent over to me. Right now you haven't any rank, and you don't belong to any branch of service of any country. What do you think of that?"

Dave gulped and gave a little confused shake of his head.

"What do I think of it?" he echoed. "I—well—well, it sounds as if we were headed for a firing squad, or something."

"Good grief, yes!" Freddy Farmer said in a hushed tone. "At least that!"

"Well, you can relax; there's no firing squad," Colonel Welsh chuckled. Then as his chuckle died, and his face became grim: "At least not a United Nations firing squad. But let's not think of it as even a remote possibility. I mean, some Axis crowd putting you against a wall. Now, here's the reason I had you sent over to me, and the plan I have in mind."

The chief of all U. S. Intelligence paused, and frowned off into space for a moment as though deliberately choosing the words he would speak next. Finally he brought his gaze back to Dave's and Freddy's faces.

"There are over one hundred and thirty million people in this country," he began slowly. "Over one hundred and thirty million men, women, and children, who have the Constitutional right to be regarded as loyal Americans—until proved otherwise. That for the moment is my biggest, and toughest task: to find out who in our Army and Navy *isn't* a loyal American. In short, to find out who is working for Berlin, and Rome, and Tokio, instead of for Washington and Uncle Sam."

The Colonel paused, clenched one fist, and a hard agate look came into his dreamy eyes.

"And we're starting off by not kidding ourselves about a single thing," he said. "We know perfectly well that Hitler has some of his spies planted right in our armed forces. Some are buck privates; some are seamen, third class; and others hold commissions. It's not been made known, and I hope it never will be, but only the other day we nailed a Nazi spy who had actually graduated from West Point. So we're not starting off on this gigantic spy hunt by kidding ourselves that the Axis rats are all civilians living near munitions factories, or camps, and that they only go slinking around corners, and down dark alleys. No, none of that! We're going after this job just as though some of them were in the White House, and in the Army and Navy Departments!"

The Colonel paused again for breath and to make a little explanatory gesture with his hands.

"Don't misunderstand me," he continued presently. "Our idea isn't to pull any of this Himmler stuff. I mean, fill the service branches with Gestapo spies ready to cut some poor devil's throat because he gripes at the way Hitler runs things. That isn't our idea at all. We're simply going to try and ferret out the rats Hitler put in our Army and our Navy. Now before you throw a fit wondering how just the two of you could possibly handle a job that size, let me say that you're only going to be given part of the job to do, a little at a time. And your first assignment will be with the Pacific Fleet."

The chief of U. S. Intelligence emphasized the last with a nod, and then fell silent. Dave looked at the man, chewed his lower lip for a moment, then started to speak, but thought better of it and closed his mouth.

"Go ahead, say it, Dawson," the Colonel encouraged. "I'm not through yet, just pausing for breath. Go ahead. What's on your mind?"

"I guess my mind's sort of spinning, but hard, if you want the truth," Dave said. "Things are coming at me sort of in bunches. Naturally, Farmer and I are eager and willing to take a good crack at any job handed out to us. But—well, maybe Sir John blew us up to you too much. I mean, we've done some Intelligence work on the other side, sure. And we were lucky. But I don't rate us as experts. At least, I certainly don't rate myself as an expert. I should think you'd have dozens of men right in your own command who could do that sort of a job a darn sight better than we could."

"Quite! And definitely so!" Freddy Farmer echoed, and shifted nervously in his chair.

"Maybe," Colonel Welsh grunted. "Maybe not. The point is, I think not. Certainly I've got some good men under my command. Mighty fine agents, as far as that goes. But you two have something that unfortunately they all lack. That's youth. Then there is another item, and it's probably the most important item of all: the matter of whether or not Axis agents *know who they are*. One of the inside stories of Pearl Harbor, that may come out some day, is that Jap agents and Fifth Columnists knew several of our Intelligence agents stationed in the Islands. That's no reflection on our agents. The Japs just knew who they were, that's all—and walked easy.

"But your youth is important, too. Don't get sore, but looking at you two, no one would suspect you were connected with Intelligence. Frankly, you look like a couple of red-blooded kids who skipped away and joined up before your parents could stop you. Holy smoke! Just sitting here looking at you for the first time, it's mighty hard to realize that you two youngsters pulled off all those wonderful stunts on the other side. No, you can stop right there with that kind of an argument. You're *just* the two I need for a job with the Pacific Fleet. I'm completely convinced, and satisfied."

Dave gave a little laugh and shrug.

"Then I guess that's that," he said. "We're all for it, if you really want us. What next? What exactly do you want us to do?"

"I could say, the impossible, and I don't think I'd be very far wrong," Colonel Welsh said gravely. "However, I'm going to hope for the best—even believe in miracles, if I have to. And if there ever was a miracle pulled off, it was that little stunt of yours in Belgium just after the Dunkirk business."^[2]

The Intelligence chief paused to nod for emphasis. Then he looked across the huge desk at Captain Lamb.

"Fish out that X-Four-Six-B case photo, will you?" he said. "I think as a starter it would be good for Dawson and Farmer to have a good look at it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death In The Pacific

The redheaded Captain nodded, and got up and walked over to the row of files. Dave watched him and got a big kick as the officer jabbed one of a row of buttons and then went back a step. There was a series of clicks, then the file drawer slid noiselessly open, and a folder inside popped up to Captain Lamb's outstretched hand. The instant he pulled it out there were more clicks and the door slid silently shut again.

"Good grief, magic!" Freddy Farmer gasped. "Just as though there were a bloke inside waiting to hand it to him."

"Just about that, yes," Colonel Welsh chuckled. "Now if we can only work out some way for the file folders simply to *tell* us what they contain, then we'll have something. That would save a lot of time."

"But what would you do with all the time you saved?" Freddy asked innocently.

Colonel Welsh looked at Dave and winked.

"Figure up something that would save us more time, I guess," he said. "We Americans are all crazy, you know. Ah, thanks, Lamb."

The Intelligence chief took the folder the redheaded captain handed him, and thumbed through it for a moment. Then he pulled out a photograph and placed it face up on the desk between Dave and Freddy.

"Take a good look at it," he said in a grim voice. "That picture was taken ten days ago."

Dave and Freddy bent forward eagerly, but what they saw sobered them instantly. It was a picture of the flight hangar aboard an aircraft carrier. It showed several folded-wing Vought-Sikorsky "Corsair" fighter planes parked so that they could be trundled onto the elevator and raised to the flight deck in fast time. Right in front, though, was a Corsair that was blackened and charred by fire. And on the floor were the figures of two men in flying gear. They, too, were blackened by flames, and it didn't take a second look to see that they were dead. To the left and right was portable fire equipment that had been used to put out the fire.

"Poor devils," Dave murmured, and looked up at Colonel Welsh.

"How in the world did they get so close to the flames?" Freddy Farmer murmured as though talking to himself.

"They were murdered!" Colonel Welsh said bluntly. "We didn't know it when this picture was taken. We found that out later. They had both been shot through the head. And it's quite definite that the murderer tried to burn up the plane so that it would look like an accident. Fortunately the fire squad got to it and put the flames out before everything was destroyed. Thank God, everything wasn't destroyed. If it had been, we should never have learned the real truth."

"You mean that the two pilots had been murdered, sir?" Dave asked as the senior paused.

Colonel Welsh shook his head.

"No," he said. Then, reaching out, he almost reverently touched the picture of the two dead men with a fingertip. "One of those officers was Commander Jackson, executive Flight Officer of the Aircraft Carrier Indian. The other was Lieutenant Commander Pollard, senior Section Leader, and one of the best air tactical men in Naval Aviation. They were murdered and then robbed. Had they been burned to a crisp we would not know the killer had stolen the operation plans of the part the Carrier Indian is to play in a Navy attack on the Jap-mandated islands of the Marshall group."

Dave whistled softly, then stared hard at the Intelligence chief.

"But is that such a big loss, sir?" he asked. "Those plans, I mean. Can't they be changed, so that even if the Japs have them it won't make any difference?"

Colonel Welsh sighed heavily and shook his head.

"I certainly wish they could be changed," he said presently. "I wish it were as easy as that. But, unfortunately, it isn't. The Indian's plans are just part of a huge plan to knock a good big hole in the Jap naval and air forces in that part of the Southwest Pacific. And an attack on that scale can't be thought up overnight, and put into execution the next morning. It's not simply a question of rushing ships and planes to a certain spot and banging away until you're out of shells and bombs. There's much, much more than that. Your forces must be split up. Your operation timetable must be worked out so that the slower ships will arrive at the same time as the fast ones. Worked out so that certain groups will have mine sweeping and destroyer protection. Worked out so that there will be a covering force in case parts of any unit are forced out of action and must retire. No, Dawson, it's not that simple. There are a hundred and one things to be worked out, so that you stand the maximum chance of the entire operation being carried out like clockwork. So it follows that if one unit is off whack, other units are bound to suffer. The effectiveness of the striking force is reduced. For that matter, effectiveness is reduced all down the line. And at the snap of the fingers you can barge bow-on straight into serious trouble. No, to change the Indian's plans would mean that we'd have to change and alter the entire plan as a whole. And there is the chance that in doing that we would discover that it would be best to give up the whole project."

"Phew, I never dreamed a navy show was that complicated!" Freddy Farmer breathed. "But I say, sir! If the blasted Japs know the part the Indian's unit is to play, what can you do about it *but* change everything, or else give it up entirely."

"I didn't say the Japs had the plans for the Indian's unit," the Intelligence chief said. "Maybe I misled you. I said that the plans are lost. They were stolen from Commander Jackson and Lieutenant Commander Pollard. They had the only copies of the plans, as they were to be in complete charge of the Indian's fighters and bombers in this action. Those plans they carried on their person at all times. And when they were last seen they were on their way below to the hangar deck to check a new gun sight that is to be tried in this coming engagement. They were seen to reach the hangar deck by the Watch Officer. The next time they were seen, they were dead and about to be burned beyond recognition by flaming high test gasoline. But for a machinist's mate who happened to pass that part of the hangar deck, they would have been burned beyond recognition. And we would never have known that their copies of the plans were stolen. True, we would have discovered that they were murdered, shot, just as we did discover. And we might have suspected that the killer had stolen the plans. But now we know that somebody aboard the Indian has those plans."

"Huh?" Dave gulped. "Somebody aboard her? You mean, right now?"

"I mean right now," the chief of U. S. Intelligence said grimly. "The Indian was at anchor in San Diego Harbor. She's still there. However, the instant it was realized what had happened, the Indian became an isolated ship. Not a man, not even her captain, was allowed to go ashore. I radioed those orders myself. And not a boat of any type was permitted to come so much as within hailing distance. An order was issued to shoot anybody who attempted to leave the Indian, and to shoot anybody who attempted to approach the Indian. That order still stands. Mighty hard on the chaps who were due shore leave—she hadn't been in port more than a day. But we're not taking chances."

Colonel Welsh paused for breath, and Dave nodded his head slowly.

"I get it," he said. "So far no darn Jap has got his hands on those plans. No real Jap, I mean."

"What's that?" Freddy Farmer spoke up. "What do you mean, no real Jap?"

"A Nazi can pass for an Englishman, or a Yank, or 'most any nationality under the sun," Dave said. "But that's barring the yellow races, of course. And that's just what I mean. A Jap aboard an American ship can't pass for a Yank. He's out and out of the yellow race. And you haven't any Americanized Japs on the Indian, have you, sir?"

Dave directed the last at Colonel Welsh, who instantly shook his head.

"None," the senior officer said. "Not a one. And you've got the right idea, Dawson. It couldn't have been a Jap who killed Jackson and Pollard. So it must have been one of Hitler's men, or maybe one of Mussolini's. I doubt that, though. Italians just haven't got the brains to be that clever. So a Hitlerite is our man. Naturally he's cooperating with the Japs, and will pass on what he has the first instant he can. That's our job, though: to nail him, and nail him good, before he

has that chance."

"I suppose you've checked the Indian's list of officers and lesser ratings, haven't you, sir?" Dave asked.

"Backwards and forwards!" the Colonel said savagely. "And up and down as well. We've dug into every man's life with pick and shovel, you might say, and didn't come up with so much as a single suspicion. That's the devilish part of this kind of a thing. It's quite possible that this particular rat, or rats, has served in our navy for years. The whole civilized world is learning more and more each new day, to its sorrow, how thoroughly Germany and Japan planned for this thing long, long ago. When Hitler was somebody we just laughed at and made jokes about, he was sending his confounded spies to the four ends of the earth, and getting them all set to do their part when *Der Tag* arrived. But I don't have to tell this to you. You two have no doubt seen countless examples of that sort of thing."

The chief of Intelligence paused for a moment and slowly closed his long tapering fingers into rock hard fists.

"I'm a spy myself," he said eventually, "so I think I have a good idea of both sides of the picture in this kind of business. A spy is regarded as the lowest form of worm in wartime, and he's usually shot five minutes after he is caught. But there have been a lot of spies who were brave and gallant men, and they took the job of going behind the enemy lines because that was the best way they could serve their country. But the type of spy such as we're dealing with now—the slinking rat who in peace-time becomes the citizen of another country, enjoys all of its advantages, and then turns on that country when his former country goes to war—well—he is in my opinion the rottenest form of vermin that ever existed. He doesn't rate the privilege of being shot when caught. He should be strung up by the thumbs, and skinned alive."

"And even that's too good for him!" Captain Lamb echoed viciously. "Those who bite the hand that's feeding them deserve the worst of the worst. And man! Would I give my life just to get my hands on that skunk aboard the Indian, whoever he is!"

Dave was slightly startled by the almost berserk rage in the redheaded Captain's voice. He glanced at Colonel Welsh and saw a look of pity and sympathy flit across the chief of U. S. Intelligence officer's face. That expression told much to Dave, and he glanced at Captain Lamb again.

"You knew Jackson and Pollard, Captain?" he asked quietly.

The Captain nodded and licked his lower lip.

"I knew them both well," he said in a low voice. "Pollard was my dearest friend. We came from the same town. Played football together at Dartmouth before he changed over to the Naval Academy. They don't make them better than Jake Pollard was."

"If it helps any," Dave said quietly, "I'll be thinking of you, Captain, *if* and *when* Farmer and I catch up with that dirty rat aboard the Indian."

"Thanks," the redhead mumbled, and lapsed into brooding silence.

Dave started to say something else to him, changed his mind, and turned back to Colonel Welsh.

"I suppose you've got a plan of operation you want Farmer and me to follow, sir?" he asked.

"I have the *start* of a plan of operation," the senior officer replied gravely. Then with a helpless shrug: "But from there on you two will be on your own."

CHAPTER FIVE

Silent Wings

Dave waited for the man to continue, and when he didn't he put another question to him.

"We start from scratch, sir, you mean?" he asked. "There isn't any kind of a clue for us to work on? You're stationing us aboard the Indian, of course?"

"That's right," the chief of U. S. Intelligence replied with a nod. "The Indian is shy two flying lieutenants, and you two are going to fill the vacancies. Matter of fact, the Indian is also shy two machinists' mates, and they'll be put aboard too before she weighs anchor sometime the day after tomorrow."

"Two of your men, sir?" Freddy Farmer spoke up, giving the Colonel a keen stare.

"Right," the senior officer said briskly. "But, I'm not going to tell you who they are, any more than I'm going to tell them who you are. That may sound strange, but it's been my experience that agents working in pairs accomplish more than agents working in a group. As officers you two will have the run of the ship, you might say. At the same time, though, you might tip your hand if you went poking around in the non-com and enlisted men's quarters. It works the other way around, too. So I'm planting men in both departments of the ship. You won't know who the other two are, and they won't know who you two are. But here's a very important point to remember. This Intelligence work I'm counting on your doing is, in a way, over and above the call of duty.

"I mean by that that you two will be aboard ship as flying lieutenants. That will be your main job,

and you'll take orders from your Section Leader, or higher ranks, just as though we'd never had this talk at all. You'll have no special privileges any more than anybody else aboard ship will have. You won't because not a living soul aboard will know the real reason why you are there. Not even the Indian's captain will know. As they say in England, this is going to be a strictly hush-hush job. Yes, you'll be starting from scratch. All I can arrange is for you to be assigned to the Indian to fill the two flying officer vacancies. What happens after that is up to you. A tough one, eh?"

"The odds aren't so good," Dave said with a faint grin. "But I see your point, sir, and its advantage. If nobody knows why we're there, then there's no chance of the truth leaking out."

"I say, one point, though," Freddy Farmer spoke up with a worried expression on his face. "What about me? My accent, I mean. Won't it seem a bit odd for me to be put aboard an American aircraft carrier?"

"Not a bit, so stop worrying about that," Colonel Welsh said with a smile. "A month or two ago, yes, but not now. You have only to pick up the papers to see that both American and British airmen are being trained in this country. We're not keeping things separate any more. Take Java, for example. There are Yanks, British, and Dutch over there all fighting together, and under the Dutch Command. We're the United Nations now. And we'll become more so before this thing is over. No, Farmer, it won't seem odd at all for an English youth to have been trained in this country and be assigned aboard a U. S. Navy aircraft carrier for sea duty. True, you may get a bit of ribbing—about your English accent, and stuff. But I guess you can take that, eh?"

"Farmer has learned fast, sir," Dave said with a chuckle. "He can dish it right back with the best of them. Snappy come-backs are apple pie for him. I even have to bear down myself at times. Fact is, I wouldn't be surprised but that in six months or so you won't be able to tell him from a Yank."

"Goodness, no, if the Yank is you!" Freddy said with a groan.

Dave laughed and cocked an eye at Colonel Welsh.

"See what I mean, sir?" he grunted. "Right on top of the ball all the time. He's good!"

"Well, I don't think any of us have anything to worry about on that score," the Colonel said. "And I've a hunch, Farmer, that once your shipmates see you in the air they'll realize that how a chap speaks is pretty small potatoes, considering. Well, I guess that's all. You leave tonight for San Diego. There's a Navy plane out at Alexandria Field. You can take that. And there'll be a passenger on your trip west, if you don't mind."

"Glad to have company," Dave said. "Who is he, sir?"

"Me," Colonel Welsh said with a grin. "I've got some business out on the Coast. So I might as well hitch-hike on your plane. Oh! In case you're wondering, you'll be fitted with uniforms and gear before we leave. For this job you'll have the rank of lieutenants. That's below your R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant's rank. Our Navy Lieutenant is equal to your rank of Flying Officer. An R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant is equal to our Lieutenant Commander, or an Air Corps Captain. But I don't think it wise to put you aboard the Indian as Lieutenant Commanders. Fact is, too, the vacancies are for lieutenants. So I hope you don't mind, eh?"

"Not a bit, sir," Dave replied instantly, and laughed. "As a matter of fact, just a few minutes ago you told us that we weren't even R.A.F. any more, so any rank you give us is bound to be okay. But, speaking for both of us, what rank we hold doesn't mean a thing. If we can pull this thing off, it's okay by us if we go aboard the Indian as a couple of seamen, third class. But—well, there are a couple of questions I'd like to ask. Or are you in a hurry, sir?"

"No hurry except to nail that rat aboard the Indian before she gets into the Marshall Island attack," Colonel Welsh said bluntly. "No. For heaven's sake, go ahead and ask all the questions you want. I certainly don't want you to go into this thing not knowing everything you should, or at least everything I can possibly tell you. What's your first question?"

"Something I hope won't happen, but might," Dave said with a frown. "Supposing Farmer and I catch onto something—get a line on this rat, or rats—but really need help. Is there anyway we can contact the two mechanics you're putting aboard to help us?"

Colonel Welsh glanced at his three junior officers and smiled before he looked back at Dave.

"A good question, Dawson," he said. "I was going to tell you about that as we flew west tonight, but now that you've brought up the point, I might just as well do it now."

The chief of U. S. Intelligence paused long enough to pull open one of the countless drawers of the huge desk. When he took his hand out of the drawer, he held two pins. They were common ordinary looking pins save that the top was painted a bright orange. He gave a pin to each of the former R.A.F. aces.

"Many, many times my agents have worked on a case and didn't know who else was working with them," the Colonel began presently. "And often they got in tight corners and needed help badly. So—But hold it a minute. Let me mention something else right here. When I say tight corner, I don't mean that the agent is about to be caught, or about to be killed. I mean *more than that!* I mean when he gets in a spot where *valuable* information he has collected may be lost unless he gets help. Or when something is about to happen that will seriously harm his country unless he gets help. That sort of thing. *Not* the present or future welfare of the individual agent. You see what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," Dave replied, as his stomach suddenly felt a little hollow and empty, and his mouth went just a little bit dry. "Help to save your country, but not to save your own life, eh?"

"Exactly," the senior officer said, and nodded at the two orange-headed pins. "That pin is an agent's SOS sign when *all else has failed*. Keep that hidden on your person at all times. If the occasion ever does arise when you need help in the way I described, take that pin out and stick it in the right side of your shirt collar. If you're not wearing a shirt, then in the right side of the top of whatever garment you're wearing. In short, so that the orange head of this pin is nearest the right side of your face. If there is another agent near by, he will immediately make himself known by placing his pin in the exact place where you have put yours.

"Remember that. Don't forget it for an instant! If you need help, place this pin at the top of whatever garment you're wearing where it will be nearest the right side of your face. Even if you've only got a pair of pants on, put the pin in the right side of the pants at the very top. That clear?"

The two youths nodded. Then Freddy Farmer leaned forward a bit, and stared questioningly at the Colonel.

"Supposing, sir, you see the SOS pin on another chap," he said. "In the right place, of course. But supposing it may interrupt your own work to make yourself known to him. What then?"

"Establish your identity, regardless," Colonel Welsh replied bluntly. "That is a fixed rule in this department. And here is why. Because of what the SOS pin stands for: a last appeal for help when the welfare of the U. S. is in serious peril. I know what you're thinking. Your own case may be just as important as the agent's who is appealing for help. That is the chance we have to take, though. That is why the SOS pin can only be shown as a desperate last resort to forestall a great military and naval calamity. And to give you an idea of what I mean, I know of only two cases when the SOS pin was shown during the fifteen years I have been in this department. True, the coming of war will increase the possibility of the SOS pin being shown. But—well, that's for the future to bring to light. Now, let's have another question."

The Colonel glanced at Dawson, but it was Freddy Farmer who asked the question.

"If this skunk chap is still aboard the Indian, sir," he said slowly, "and if the aircraft carrier is to put to sea the day after tomorrow, what harm *can* be done by that chap? Do you believe that while at sea he will make some effort to get in touch with Japanese forces? And is our job to stop him from doing that?"

The senior officer thought over the answer to that for a moment, and scowled hard at the opposite wall.

"The best answer to that," he finally said, "is what I told you a moment ago. I mean that I can see that you are put aboard the Indian, but from then on you are absolutely on your own. Frankly, you will be doing no more than punching in the dark. I feel certain that the spy is still aboard, but *I don't know for sure*. If he is aboard, and the Indian puts to sea, the information he has collected may be just a beautiful white elephant on his hands. He may not be able to do a single thing about it until it is too late, and his information not be worth a darn. But the point is, we can't take chances on anything.

"You see, we have no idea whether our man is a seaman, a mechanic, or a flying officer. Suppose for a minute that he is a flying officer. Think of the opportunities he'd have to contact the Japs. On patrol he could sneak a message over the side that would drop down to be picked up by a Jap submarine. He might even break formation and scoot off to some point where he knows Japs naval vessels are on patrol, and contact them that way. He might not even return. No, Farmer, the fact that he goes to sea with the Indian doesn't make anything certain for us."

The senior officer paused, looked very unhappy, and sighed heavily.

"That is the rotten part of Intelligence work," he grunted presently. "Nine cases out of ten you have absolutely nothing to work on. You've just got to make blind stabs in the dark, and trust that you'll connect with something that will get you somewhere. The only suggestion I can give you is to keep your eyes and ears open every minute of the time—particularly your eyes. It seems certain that the murderer isn't going to keep his secret any longer than he has to. It's plain dynamite, and he knows it. He's going to try somehow to get that knowledge to the Japanese Fleet. If you can spot him and nail him, you will be everlastingly blessed by the Navy, from the President on down."

"Well, we'll do our best," Dave said grimly. "And I hope and pray it will be good enough."

"Amen, to that," Colonel Welsh said softly. Then, pushing up onto his feet, he said, "Well, we can start now by finding you two uniforms that don't look as if they were picked out in the dark. Then we'll go on out to Alexandria Field—and head west."

CHAPTER SIX

Midnight Menace

With her twin engines roaring full out, the Navy Lockheed R40-1, a "cousin" of the famous Lockheed Hudson bomber, shook the dust of the airport runway at Albuquerque, New Mexico,

from her wheels, and went climbing up into the night sky on the last leg of the trans-continental flight to San Diego. At the controls was Dave Dawson. In the co-pilot's seat was Freddy Farmer, and between them and just aft in the navigator's seat was Colonel Welsh.

For quite some time now conversation between them had been at a very definite stand-still. At the start of the trip they had talked on this and that to help pass the time, but long before Albuquerque was reached all three of them had run down like clocks. There wasn't anything more to talk about, and each was quite content to sit with his own thoughts and hope for a speedy arrival at San Diego.

However, when Dave had lifted the Lockheed high enough to clear the mountains ahead by a good margin, he got fed up with the silence, and nudged Freddy in the ribs.

"Say something, pal," he said. "Tell me the story of your life, before the silence puts me to sleep. Don't be bashful. Colonel Welsh won't mind. Will you, Colonel?"

"Certainly not," the senior officer said with a chuckle. "Fact is, I'll bet it's mighty interesting, and well worth listening to."

"There you are, Freddy!" Dave cried. "Both the Colonel and I are all ears, and eager to hear about it."

"Very well," the English youth said. "If you insist. There isn't very much to tell, though. Up to May, Nineteen Forty, I led the usual English boy's life. You know, school, play, and all that sort of thing. But in May, Nineteen Forty—it was May Tenth to be exact—I met an American chap named Dave Dawson. Well, that was the turning point in my life. *Downwards*, you know. I've rued the day ever since. And there you are!"

"Ouch!" Dave cried. "A bull's-eye for the young man. And he has the nerve to say that after all I've done for him. He's—Hey! What's that?"

"What's what?" Freddy demanded as Dave spoke the last sharply.

The Yank born war ace took a hand off the controls and pointed off to the right.

"Over there," he said. "Thought I saw a flash of light. Guess it was a falling star."

"Probably was an airways beacon," Colonel Welsh spoke up. "There's one up that way a bit, I believe. That was all right, Farmer. Now it's your turn, Dawson. See if you can match it."

"Fat chance, but I can try," Dave said with a grin. "Well, up to that never to be forgotten May Tenth, when Hitler really started to try and drown the world in human blood, I too had led pretty much the average boy's kind of life. But May Tenth changed everything for me, too. In a different way, though. Up to then I had all kinds of ideas about fighting my way through life and maybe up to the top in whatever profession I chose to follow. No soap, though. That meeting with Farmer on May Tenth changed everything. Since then I've had to carry him on my back, and try to make the grade for *two* people instead of just for myself. However—"

"That *is* some kind of a light over there!" Colonel Welsh interrupted sharply. "And it isn't the flash from any beacon. Sort of a blue kind of light. Saw it for a second, just now, and it was slanting upwards."

"Could be another plane," Freddy Farmer opined. "Engine exhausts show blue in the dark, you know. Might be one of your transport planes."

Colonel Welsh glanced at his wrist watch in the glow of the cabin light, and shook his head.

"No," he said. "At least, not one of the scheduled planes. Besides, we'd see the red and green navigation lights."

On impulse Dave reached out his hand and switched off all of his own lights, save the wing-tip navigation lights. Then all three of them stared hard off to the right. For a full two minutes nobody spoke. The three of them simply strained their eyes at the vast array of night shadows in the heavens. But all that it got them was aching eyes.

"Nothing there evidently," Colonel Welsh eventually broke the silence. "Perhaps it was just a falling star, but I never saw a star fall *up*."

"Maybe it was some of that Saint Elmo's Fire," Dave said with a chuckle. "I never heard of it being seen in this part of the country, though."

"Saint *what*?" Freddy Farmer echoed. "What in the world are you talking about? And what is it?"

"Saint Elmo's Fire," Dave said. "Didn't you ever hear of it, Freddy?"

"Would I be asking, if I had?" the English youth snapped. "Go on. Stop waiting to be encouraged to show all your knowledge. Just what is Saint Elmo's Fire?"

"Well, I can't give you a scientific answer to that one," Dave said. "But Saint Elmo's Fire is the name given to globular electric light often seen on the spars and rigging of ships at sea during a storm. And of recent years it has been seen on the wing tips of airplanes flying through electrically charged air. Frankly, I've never seen any of the stuff in my life. But I knew a pilot once who used to fly over the Andes in South America, and he said they used to see it often. Little bright balls of fire that seemed to roll right along the leading edges of the wing, and then disappear just when you thought they were going to bump into the gas tanks, or something. The first few times he witnessed such a display he lost a dozen years off his life. He said, though, that after a while he got used to it—even looked forward to it every time he took off."

"You're pulling my leg!" Freddy snorted.

"No, Farmer, that's true," Colonel Welsh said. "I've seen some Saint Elmo's Fire myself. And I can tell you that it scares the pants off you the first time you see it. Ever fly through a thunder storm, and see lightning playing around your wing tips?"

"Yes, I've seen that," Freddy admitted. "And I was sure I'd never live to land safely on the ground again."

"Well, then, you know how it feels to see Saint Elmo's Fire," the Colonel chuckled. "Only I think the Saint Elmo stuff gives you a worse scare when you see it actually come rolling along the wing toward you. But that light I saw just now wasn't shaped like a ball. More like a streak, or like the powdered tail of a comet. It was strung out in a—"

If Colonel Welsh finished the sentence, nobody heard it. At that moment the night skies shook and trembled with the savage yammer of aerial machine gun fire. And the cabin window not eighteen inches in front of Dave's eyes seemed to crack in a trillion places and then melt away into oblivion.

"My word!" Colonel Welsh cried. "What was that?"

Dave didn't bother to answer for a second or so. His heart had zoomed up his throat to jam hard against his back teeth, and his eyes had bulged out of their sockets like marbles on sticks. Instinct took split second charge of his movements, however, and almost before he realized what he was doing he had booted the Lockheed up over on left wing tip and was slicing down through the air. At practically the same instant he whipped out his free hand and switched off the navigation lights. Then as the craft went slicing down through the night sky, he dragged air into his aching lungs.

"Those were aerial machine guns!" he cried. "And whoever was working them was in earnest. Look at that window! Just a shade improvement on his aim and it would have been curtains for the three of us."

As the last left Dave's lips, he pulled the plane out of its wild sideslip and went curving up and around to the left.

"Aerial machine guns?" Colonel Welsh echoed in blank amazement. "You're crazy, Dawson!"

"Could be, and maybe!" Dave snapped. "But I've heard those sky choppers often enough to recognize them every time. And do you think an eagle or something flew into that window, sir?"

"No, of course not," the Intelligence chief grunted. "Sorry I sounded off. You're right, of course. But it doesn't make sense. Who the devil would want to take a crack at us?"

Dave shrugged in the darkness, and for a moment or so as the plane roared heavenward he strained his eyes for a glimpse of some other shadow cutting about in the air. He saw nothing, however, and then turned his head and spoke back over his shoulder.

"Maybe not *us*, sir," he said, "but I guess the Axis would be pretty tickled to see *you* put out of circulation. If you want my guess, some rat saw you take off with us. Maybe he used a hidden radio and sent word ahead. This mountainous country is a swell place to hide a plane, you know, sir."

"And those *were* exhaust plumes you saw!" Freddy Farmer cried. "The lad was probably climbing up to get around in back when you saw his exhaust plumes. Well, let the beggar come again. We'll—Good grief! This plane isn't armed!"

"No," Colonel Welsh said in a slightly hollow voice. "Guess they never figured it was necessary to arm these utility planes used to transport personnel about the country."

"If only the chaps in high places would stop *figuring* so much in this war!" Dave groaned.

"Quite!" Freddy Farmer echoed the truth bitterly. "But bemoaning the lack of common sense in the average High Command won't help us now. If the blighter comes back for another fling, Dave, you'll just have to—"

"Don't bother telling me!" Dave shouted. "Here he comes—from the left and up! Hang onto your seats!"

The last had hardly left Dave's lips before he was hauling the Lockheed straight up on its tail. Before the plane reached stalling speed, however, he kicked it over on wing and then sent it dropping nose first toward the black carpet below that was the ground. No sooner had he kicked the plane over on wing than he switched off both engines, and shoved the compensator throttle open wide, so that no carbon sparks or exhaust light of any kind would etch their path downward through the night.

Meanwhile the mysterious attacker had opened fire again, but Dave's quick action at the controls caused the unknown killer to miss by a wide margin. The flickering ribbon of tracers didn't even come close. And at the end of another three or four seconds the Lockheed was well on its way earthward and out of sight.

"See that bird as he banged on by us?" Dave cried, when he was able to talk again. "It looked to me like a small Beechcraft. Or maybe it was a Waco. But he's carrying two guns—and he wants us mighty badly. Heck, if there were only guns aboard this crate. I had a beautiful broadside bead on him."

"Yes, I saw his silhouette as he tore by," Freddy said through clenched teeth. "But I didn't

recognize his type. I don't know the Yank planes very well, though. But I say, Dave! Watch our altitude, you know!"

"You're telling me!" Dave grunted. "I'm watching it plenty, and praying, too. There must be some of those mountains under us by now. I think we've got a couple of thousand feet to play around in, but no more than that. I'm flat gliding her as much as I can, but keep those eagle X-ray eyes of yours on the job, Freddy. And yell if you see a mountain peak looming up."

"Mountain peak!" Colonel Welsh cried excitedly. "For pity's sake, keep above them, Dawson. Start those engines and get us some altitude!"

"That would be risking more than this glide, sir," Dave told him. "That bird up there has been spotting us by our exhaust plumes, and aiming blindly. So long as we show no light at all he stands to lose us completely. But if we open up the engines and show exhaust light he's going to be able to take another crack. And—well, third time never fails, you know, and stuff. Our best bet is to try and lose him before we get too low. He has a ship that can travel, but if we get a little lead on him we'll be all right."

"But remember all those mountain peaks down there!" the Intelligence chief persisted. "One thing this plane has got is parachutes. Perhaps we'd better bail out and let the blasted ship crash. At least we'd save our own necks."

"Not me!" Dave barked without thinking. "Go ahead and bail out if you want to. You, too, Freddy. But I'm sticking with this ship if I possibly can. I don't want to see her bust up, if I can help it. Anyway, I'm going to give her all the breaks she's got coming."

"And of course I'm staying with you," Freddy Farmer said quietly. "I'm a blasted fool to put my precious neck in your hands. But there you are, anyway."

"No wonder you two are famous for pulling miracles out of a hat!" Colonel Welsh growled. Then after a short pause: "Very well! If Farmer trusts you that much, I suppose I might as well. But if you have to hit a mountain, for pity's sake try and pick out a soft one. I bruise very easily!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pilot's Luck

Dave chuckled as the Colonel's remark came to his ears, but his heart pounded a little harder and the warm glow of pride rippled through his veins.

"Thanks, sir," he said. "And sorry that I exploded that way. But don't worry, I'll get us out of this little jam if it's the last thing I do."

"Well, see that it *isn't*, my good man!" Freddy Farmer grunted.

For the next few moments nobody said a word. All three of them leaned forward in their seats and strained their eyes at the darkness ahead and below. Dave's hands felt cold and clammy, and he could feel the little drops of sweat ooze out on his forehead and trickle down his face. For the last fifteen seconds or so he had spotted what he believed to be a mountain peak just ahead, and not more than a hundred feet below. He didn't say a word to the others. He kept his mouth shut and eased the plane a little to the left so as to be able to pass on by the peak with enough free air to spare between his right wing tip and the unseen trees or jagged rocks he knew must dot all sides of that peak. Once past it, he could start the engines again and climb for altitude. It was a cinch that the unknown attacker was cutting about in the black sky somewhere far behind him. But once he got beyond that peak he felt that his lead would be great enough for him to risk showing his exhaust plumes. As a matter of fact, though, it was quite possible that the unknown attacker was miles and miles behind. It was possible that the man had cut around to the east, believing that Dave wouldn't dare chance holding his westerly course with the mountains so close.

"Yeah, maybe!" he murmured. "But I'm going to make sure just the same!"

"What did you say, Dave?" Freddy Farmer cried out in a voice of alarm.

"I didn't say a thing," Dave grunted, and tightened his hold on the controls. "Just thinking a little out loud. Shut up, little man, or you'll make me rock the boat."

Freddy Farmer caught his breath as though he were about to speak. Instead, though, he said nothing. He simply leaned farther forward in his seat. Dave caught the movement out the corner of his eye, and grinned, tight-lipped. Freddy had sighted the mountain peak, but realized that he had seen it and was trying to slide by on the left. So the English youth had snapped his lips shut so as not to give Colonel Welsh a slight case of heart failure. Good old Freddy. Always knew when to open his mouth, and when to keep mum.

Perhaps it was six seconds, but it seemed like six thousand years to Dave before the slightly darker shadow that was the mountain peak slid past the tip of the right wing and disappeared behind. The instant it was gone from view he whipped on the switches, caught both engines, and fed them high test gas at full throttle. The roar of the engines breaking into life was a sound akin to worlds crashing into each other. Yet at the same time it was a welcome sound to Dave's ears, and to Freddy Farmer's too. But what filled their hearts with an even greater happiness was the Lockheed climbing upward to a safe altitude above the mountain range. The instant he was well

clear, Dave swung the plane onto its westerly course again, and relaxed in the seat.

"Top-hole, Dave," Freddy Farmer said quietly. "A very pukka bit of flying, that."

"Thanks," Dave replied. "We got away with it okay. But I'd hate like heck to have to do it every day. You spotted that mountain peak, didn't you?"

"Quite," the English youth murmured. "But I thought it best to keep my mouth shut. Realized that you knew what you were doing. And besides, no sense in—"

"No sense in giving this old dodo grey hairs, eh?" Colonel Welsh spoke up with a chuckle. "Well, it was nice of both of you, but I saw it, too. The only reason *I* didn't speak, though, was because my tongue was frozen stiff. As you say, Dawson, I'd hate to have that sort of thing for a daily diet. Very sweet flying, though, very sweet."

"We could have made it sweeter if this plane had been armed," Dave grunted, and stared at the black sky ahead. "That tramp certainly had his nerve jumping on us. Wonder who the heck he could be. Sure you haven't any ideas, Colonel?"

There was a long minute of silence while the senior officer seemed to make up his mind.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," he finally said slowly. "As you mentioned awhile back, there are probably plenty of birds who would like to see me out of the way. Somehow, though, I can't see them going about it in this manner. Their style is more along the line of pot shots from dark doorways. Or a bomb in my car, or tossed through my window. Frankly, I can't make head nor tail of this business tonight."

"Many chaps know you were headed west, sir?" Freddy Farmer asked quietly.

"What do you mean, many?" the Colonel replied sharply. "Did I broadcast it, you mean?"

"Hardly that, sir," Freddy chuckled. "I mean, did you tell many people that you were making this trip? Not that any of them are in the pay of Tokio or Berlin, sir, but it's possible that one of them might innocently enough mention the fact to somebody who was. You understand what I mean, sir?"

There was another moment of silence while the chief of U. S. Intelligence thought things over.

"I see what you mean, Farmer," he grunted presently. "No, I didn't tell anybody who didn't have the right to know. Fact is, the only ones I told were those three officers you met in my office. And if those three aren't one hundred per cent Americans, then I'm Adolf Hitler in the flesh."

"What about the other end?" Dawson asked.

"What other end?"

"San Diego," Dave said. "Is your man in charge there expecting you? Or are you just dropping in on a surprise visit?"

"No wonder you chaps always come out on top," Colonel Welsh said in a frank tone. "Once you get your teeth in something you keep at it until there's nothing left. Yes, I did wire my head agent in San Diego that I was coming west tonight. And—"

"And my first month's pay as a U. S. Naval Aviation Lieutenant says somebody read that wire!" Dawson cut in quickly.

"Hold it!" Colonel Welsh cried, and laughed shortly. "You're flying one wing low this time. I said in the wire that I was coming out, but I didn't say *how*, or *what* time I'd arrive. Afraid you're off on the wrong scent there, Dawson."

"Maybe, maybe not," Dave said doggedly. "But that chap didn't have a crack at us tonight just for gunnery practice. He was shooting for keeps. He knew darn well who was in this plane—and he was out to get us. He—"

Dave didn't finish. At that moment the right outboard engine of the Lockheed lost revs fast and began to sputter and clatter. Dave snapped his eyes at the dash dials, and sucked in his breath sharply as he saw the oil pressure needle sliding around the face of the dial toward the zero peg. However, even as he glanced at the needle, it stopped swinging back and promptly climbed upward again. The engine stopped sputtering and clattering, and once again sang its full throated song of power.

The tiny lump of ice remained in Dave's chest, however. He glanced sidewise at Freddy Farmer and saw the corners of the English youth's mouth tighten a bit.

"What the devil was that?" Colonel Welsh demanded in a sharp tone. "Something wrong with the engine?"

"Not now," Dave said with an easiness he didn't feel. "Guess it picked up a bit of ice but got rid of it in time. Anyway, she's back where she should be. As I was saying, that lad tonight was out for blood. So it must follow that somebody knew where you were going, when, and how. Don't you think so, sir?"

Dave spoke the words, but it was really just an effort to keep the conversation going. The lump of ice in his chest was hurting him again, and he was feeling far from calm and collected. The way the oil pressure of the right outboard engine had dropped told him that there was trouble ahead. Many people claim that the carburetor is the heart of an engine, and probably it is, if you want to look at it that way. However, countless hours in the air had proved to Dave that your real danger signal is when oil pressure starts dancing around. Engines can run, often for a long, long time,

when the carburetor is out of whack and the engine is getting a bad feed. But let oil pressure go screwy and you'll have real trouble on your hands. There are no halfway measures about oil. It has to be right or your engine is worth no more than its weight in junk. Gasoline is food for an engine, but oil is its life blood. If it hasn't got the proper amount it dies, but definitely!

And so Dave spoke the words just to keep the conversation going and fixed his eyes on the instruments pertaining to the functioning of the right outboard engine. He hoped and prayed that the skipping had simply been just one of those things. But in his heart there was gnawing fear and dread. He feared that bullets from the guns of that unknown attacker had nicked one of the oil feed lines, and that continued vibration of the engine was slowly but surely shaking the feed line connection loose, or at least causing it to crack and buckle slowly, so that eventually the pressure set up in the line would be reduced to nil.

If it had been daylight, or if he had been sure of the terrain below, he would have landed and made sure what had happened. But a landing was too great a risk right now. His best bet was to keep going, nursing the right outboard engine as much as he could, and hoping and praying that it would continue to tick over and produce power.

"Yes, I guess your reasoning is sound enough," he heard the Colonel say. "It's rather hard to believe, though. I mean, why go about it in such a—well, in such a story book thriller style, you might say? I'm not going to San Diego on any vital mission. Fact is, I could make this trip tonight or next week, and it wouldn't make much difference. That's what makes it seem so—so utterly crazy."

There was a moment of silence, and then Dave laughed a trifle flat-toned.

"I don't mean to be conceited," he said. "But what you've just said, sir, doesn't make me feel so good. Or maybe it should make me feel important as heck. How about you, Freddy? Catch on?"

"I think so," the English youth replied. "But it's a bit—er, fantastic, you know. However, I would feel a bit better if we had been able to shoot the beggar down. Always did say night attacks weren't quite the sporting thing, you know."

"Not the sporting thing, huh?" Dave echoed with a snort. "Pal, that's only putting it by half. In my book they're plain murder."

"Of course, I'm only the passenger," Colonel Welsh spoke up sharply. "So don't mind me. However, I would like very much to know what the devil you two are jabbering about. What's it all about, anyway?"

"You tell him, Freddy," Dave said. "I—I feel too modest."

"Rubbish!" the English youth snapped. "You couldn't be if you tried. Besides, you brought it up."

"Listen, you lads!" the chief of U. S. Intelligence boomed in exasperation. "Have I got to use my authority as a Colonel? What in blue blazes are you two talking about?"

"The fantastic, sir," Dave said with a chuckle. "Yet, on the other hand, possibly the truth. Maybe the pilot of that plane didn't want *Farmer and me to go aboard the Carrier Indian*."

Colonel Welsh made a hissing sound as he sucked in his breath sharply.

"Great guns!" he gasped. And then in the same breath: "But that *is* impossible. Not even my three closest assistants knew that was to happen until I informed you. And we went from my office straight to Alexandria Field. No, you must be wrong, Dawson. Captains Lamb and Stacey, and Lieutenant Caldwell, wouldn't breath a word of that even though a gun were held at their hearts. That *is* fantastic!"

The two boys looked crestfallen.

"See, Freddy?" Dave cried, and jabbed an elbow in his pal's ribs. "You get the screwiest ideas. I never—!"

"None of that, funny boy!" the English youth barked back at him. "No, you don't, not by a jugful. You brought it up. I simply agreed with you, to be polite. You're quite right, Colonel. It's ridiculous. But when you get to know Dawson better, you'll understand how he's—"

The rest of what Freddy Farmer would have said to the Colonel stuck fast when only halfway up his throat. The right outboard engine had started kicking up again, but this time it was really doing it in earnest. The oil pressure needle went around to the zero peg in a single jump. And even as Dave grabbed for the throttle, the right outboard engine let out a grinding scream as though it were actually something human, and in mortal pain. It had run dry and was seizing up. Almost at the same instant, and as though in sympathy for its mechanical brother, the left outboard engine started falling off in revs at an alarming rate. Dave killed the right engine completely, shoved hard on the left rudder to check the plane yawing, and concentrated on keeping the left outboard engines alive as long as possible.

"That tears it!" he said between clenched teeth. "I was afraid that right engine had been nicked. Getting ready to drop a couple of those landing flares, Freddy. At least we can take a look at what it's like below."

"Take a look?" Colonel Welsh cried sharply. "You don't have to, boy! There are mountains down there. Get us as high as you can, and then we'll all bail out."

A hot wave of anger swept through Dawson, but he was able to choke the words back in time. Instead he turned to Freddy Farmer and nodded.

"Let a couple go, Freddy," he said quietly. "We're only losing a foot or two of altitude. We'll take a look *first!*"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nobody's Airport

Freddy Farmer didn't bother acknowledging the request by word of mouth. He simply nodded, and reached out his hand and jerked the little handle that released landing flares fitted into the wing tips. There were a few seconds more of silence; then a great silver-white light came into being below, and spread swiftly outward toward the four points of the compass.

Fighting the tendency of the Lockheed to yaw toward the dead engine side, and struggling to keep the left outboard engine turning over, Dave leaned over close to the shattered window and peered down into the sea of silver-white light below. For a couple of seconds he couldn't see anything but eye-dazzling light. Then as the flares dropped astern, he was able to get a good look at the type of terrain below.

What he saw didn't exactly cause his chilled heart to warm up and loop over with joy. True, they had safely crossed over the highest peaks of that part of the mountain range. Below, though, were the tree-covered foothills, cut by deep jagged stone sided ravines, and narrow plateau formations of ground that would be hard for even a crow to alight on.

"It's no go, Dawson!" Colonel Welsh's voice suddenly broke the tingling silence that had settled over the trio. "I know what's in your mind, but our safest bet is for all three of us to jump. We've still got three or four thousand feet of clearance. I think we should jump."

"I don't, not yet," Dave said bluntly, and raked the terrain below with his eyes. "I think we should hang on a bit longer, and try to pick out some spot big enough to slip into. This is wild country here, Colonel. If we bail out we'll lose contact with each other, and all three of us get lost. Let's look hard, first. I can keep her up a big longer. That left outboard hasn't quit cold yet. And we're not losing altitude too fast."

"All right," Colonel Welsh said grimly, and leaned forward the better to study the flare-lighted ground below. "Confound that rat! I'd give a lot to have his neck between my two hands right now!"

"I can think of things to do to him, myself," Dave grunted. Then, out of the corner of his mouth: "Work those eagle eyes hard, Freddy. This is where you should star. You always do see things first. Hurry up and find Papa a place big enough to set us down in."

"Shut up and tend to your flying!" the English youth growled. "You dropped our nose two feet while you were talking. Want to power dive us in, or something? You—hold it, Dave! Bear right a bit. What's that down there? It looks like—oh, blast it! They would, wouldn't they!"

The last was caused by the two flares finally touching ground and being snuffed out. Quick as a flash Freddy Farmer shot out his hand and released two more flares. The instant his eyes were again accustomed to the bright light, Dave looked in the direction of the English youth's pointed finger. His heart did loop with joy this time, and he gulped with relief. What at first looked like the rock studded side of a foothill was actually a strip of barren and seemingly level ground between two foothills. It wasn't very big, but it seemed big enough—unless Lady Luck deliberately turned her face the other way.

"Yeah, check, Freddy!" Dave murmured, and eased the laboring Lockheed around and down. "That's us, that spot. Just hang on, everybody. It won't be long now!"

"I don't like the way you say that!" Colonel Welsh said with a mirthless laugh. "But I guess you don't mean it. Go ahead, though. I was wrong again. We'll keep the parachutes in their packs. What a fine night this has turned out to be!"

"Me, I'm thinking of tomorrow and next week," Dave muttered grimly as he eased the Lockheed lower and lower, and around toward the near end of the narrow landing space. "This is wild country here. It's plenty wild. Right in the middle of nowhere. And this baby isn't going to do any more flying until she has a couple of new engines stuck in her. Oh well—"

Dave let the rest go with a shrug and hunched forward slightly over the controls. The time for talking had passed. Now was the time for action, and prayer. The Lockheed was down low now, too low to correct any mistakes. The first swipe at that narrow landing space had to be good. It had to be perfect. The jagged rocks and trees on all four sides would make a second try impossible.

Dave's whole body felt dry as a chip, yet at the same time sweat poured off his forehead, and the palms of his hands were clammy and cold. He could almost feel Freddy Farmer and Colonel Welsh hold their breath. As far as that went, he could almost feel the whole world stand still and hold its breath. The dropped flares were throwing off less and less light, but he refrained from telling Freddy to drop a couple of new ones. Their first moment of brilliance might blind him just enough to misjudge things by a hair. And misjudging by a hair would be more than enough to pile them up in a heap among the trees and jagged rocks.

"Now!" he whispered softly. "Now, baby! Easy does it, now. Down you go. Down you go. Ah-h-h...!"

That's the stuff!"

The Lockheed's wheels touched, touched hard, and the plane tried to push itself off and up into the air again. But Dave had killed the forward speed as much as he could. And after a short run forward, and gentle but firm application of the wheel brakes by Dawson, the twin-engined craft finally bumped to a halt not ten feet from the lip of a sharp drop-off in the ground.

"Now I've seen everything!" Colonel Welsh fairly exploded the words. "I've seen two miracles come to pass in the same night. It couldn't be done, but you did it, Dawson. Congratulations from the bottom of my heart. Good work! We really are on the ground, aren't we?"

Dave didn't bother to answer. As a matter of fact he couldn't have said a single word at that moment even though it would have gained him a million dollars. His heart was stuck halfway between his chest and his throat, and refused to go up or down. It was the same with Freddy Farmer, too. The English youth sat stiff and straight in his seat, working his lips but making no sound. Eventually, though, he did manage to get control of his tongue and of his frozen muscles. He reached across and pressed Dave's arm.

"Top-hole, Dave!" he got out in a husky voice. "A bit of the very, very best, and I mean it, really. As a pilot bloke myself, I know how good you have to be to get away with that sort of thing. It was absolutely perfect."

"What else?" Dave cracked back with a shaky laugh. "Look who did it! But skip it. Is my hair grey, Freddy? Do I look very much older? I know doggone well I gained forty years in those last couple of seconds. Jeepers! Take a look at that drop-off ahead. Another ten feet and you *wouldn't* be thinking I was so hot. And I'm not, really. If Lady Luck ever landed a plane, she did it that time, and I'm not kidding."

"Well, we're down, anyway," said Freddy. Then, getting practical: "What do we do now? Do you know this area very well, sir? Have we got far to go to the next village?"

Both Dave and the Colonel laughed in spite of the seriousness of the situation. And Freddy made angry sounds in his throat.

"What's so blasted funny about that?" he demanded. "Do you plan to stay here all night?"

"Sorry, Freddy," Dave said, and patted his pal's knee. "But this isn't England, where you can throw a rock from one town and have it land in the next one. This is our wild and woolly west. I don't know exactly where we are, but I'd make a rough guess that we're a good two hundred miles from the nearest town. And that's as the crow flies. Going over and down these mountains and hills, you could add another two hundred miles. What do you think, Colonel?"

"Well, not quite that far, Dawson," the senior officer said with a laugh that was just a little too tight. "You're stretching it a little, I'd say. Call it a hundred by air and two-fifty by foot, I guess. We're just over the Arizona line and south of Holbrook. I'm afraid, though, Farmer, that we will have to sit here for the rest of the night, worse luck. To try and get out of here in the dark is just about like deciding to step off some cliff and smash yourself to bits on the bottom of a ravine. No. We've got to sit here until they find us."

"Hey!" Dave cried. "Aren't you forgetting something, Colonel? I mean, who knows we're on our way? We—Oh, I see! You planned to send word back to your office, eh? When they don't hear, they'll send planes hunting for us, huh?"

The Colonel groaned heavily and clapped a hand to his forehead.

"You spoiled it that time, Dawson!" he muttered. "But you hit the nail on the head. I did forget. I mean, I didn't say anything about letting Lamb or Stacey know when I arrived at San Diego. They simply expect to hear from me, when they hear. And my man at San Diego doesn't actually know when I expect to arrive. This *is* a sweet mess. I should be demoted and kicked back into the ranks for not thinking of this possibility. We're stuck, and no two ways about it."

"But we took this plane from the Alexandria Field," Dave said. "What about their flight board there? Don't they list every take-off, the pilot, and where he's heading?"

"Usually, but not in a case like this," the Colonel replied unhappily. "When I borrow a plane, I don't tell them where I'm going. And naturally, they don't ask me. But do we have to sit here in this darkness, Dawson? The lights don't run off the engine, do they? How about some light, eh?"

"Sure, sir," Dave said, and flipped up a couple of switches.

The interior of the compartment glowed with light, and the three looked at each other. They grinned in a friendly sort of way, but neither of them was particularly happy looking. Freddy Farmer twisted around in his seat and looked at the Colonel.

"Then we might be here for some time, sir?" he asked.

"For several hours, at least, Farmer," the senior officer replied gravely. "Nothing to worry about, though. As soon as it's light, we'll build a fire and get a smoke signal in the air. A passing transport plane may see it and come down to investigate. We're a bit south of their regular run, though. Still, one of them may see it and get some rescue parties sent out. Nothing to worry about."

"Not even your constant worry, pal," Dave laughed, and stuck a hand in his tunic pocket. "Your constant worry about starving, I mean. Here's a flock of chocolate bars I picked up at Alexandria Field before we left. One thing I didn't tell you about Farmer, Colonel. If he can't eat forty times a day he gets as weak as a kitten. And where he puts it, I'll never know. Doesn't weigh more than a

hundred and fifty soaking wet. He's—"

"Some other time, my funny little man!" Freddy cut in harshly. "I wasn't thinking about eating, if you must know the truth. Something more serious. Or at least it will be serious if we're stuck here for a considerable length of time."

Dave's smile faded immediately. He stared at the English youth. Colonel Welsh also regarded him keenly.

"Okay, what?" Dave finally asked.

"The Carrier Indian," Freddy replied. Then, looking at the Colonel, he asked, "Didn't you say that she weighs anchor sometime tomorrow afternoon—this afternoon, really? If we're stuck here, will she sail without us? Or has her skipper orders to wait for word from you?"

The chief of U. S. Intelligence swallowed hard and made a wry face.

"That close-shave landing!" he muttered savagely. "It still has my brains all scrambled up. You're quite right, Farmer. What you say makes it more of a mess than ever. The Indian is to sail whether her skipper hears from me or not. Those two men of mine serving as machinists' mates are already aboard. At least they were to go aboard last evening. But she won't wait for you two. The skipper has his sailing orders, and he'll sail whether he's shy two pilot lieutenants or not. Blast and double blast it all! What you say, Farmer, gives me a very disquieting thought. Perhaps I *wasn't* the one that unknown killer was interested in. It's quite possible that it *was* you two. The attempt was made to stop you from reaching the Indian before she sailed. Confound it! If I've fumbled this thing all up, I'll go out somewhere and cut my throat. But—but I still can't see how anybody else could possibly have found out about this flight, let alone the real reason!"

Dave didn't say anything, but he was thinking of a case he had heard about in England not so long ago. A bad leak had been found in the Air Ministry Intelligence, and when it was eventually tracked to its source it was discovered that a high official's own secretary—a supposedly loyal Englishman who had held his post since long before the outbreak of war—was actually in the pay of the Nazis.

"I'm wondering something, myself," he said presently. "Not to toss more cold water on things, Colonel, but—well, you don't know for sure if your two men went aboard the Indian last evening, do you?"

"No, not for sure," the senior officer replied with a shake of his head. "But it's—Oh, I see what you mean. Maybe they were—er—delayed, too, eh? You think of the nicest things, Dawson! But keep on thinking. Don't stop. Maybe you'll think of a way to get us out of this jam in a hurry."

"I sure wish I could!" Dave said fervently. Then, reaching out and taking a flashlight from the instrument panel clamps, he said, "Meantime I'm going to have a look at the engines. I could be wrong about an oil line being nicked. It wouldn't be the first time. Maybe it's something that we can patch up with some gum and a piece of our shirts, and we can get ourselves out of here come daylight. That's a hope, anyway."

Half an hour later, though, it wasn't a hope. The oil feed lines of the right outboard engine were split and parted in three different spots. Besides that, she was seized up tighter than a drum, and couldn't be made to move short of using dynamite. The left outboard engine wasn't in a much better condition. Bullets from the unknown attacker's guns had started a bad leak in the gas line that couldn't be repaired without the proper tools. And so at the end of the half hour Dave wiped oil and grease from his hands and climbed down off the wing onto the ground where Freddy Farmer and the chief of Intelligence waited.

"No soap," he said bitterly. "If that bird's job was to delay us, he did it up brown. The only way you'll get this plane out of here is to fly in a couple of new engines. Nothing to do but wait for daylight."

"Why wait?" Freddy Farmer protested. "Let's get a fire going now. No telling but what it might be seen by somebody. It—I say, though! What about your Indians? They'd give us a bit of trouble, wouldn't they? I've heard—"

"Hold everything, pal!" Dave chuckled, while Colonel Welsh struggled to keep a straight face. "Nowadays you only find that kind of Indians in books, or in the movies. Let's get the fire started. It's a good idea. And if Indians do show up I'll welcome them as the flowers in May."

Freddy Farmer hesitated and looked hard at Dawson. After a moment or so he shrugged.

"Very well, then," he murmured. "But I swear I don't know when to believe you, and when not to. If I get scalped—"

"You won't!" Dave stopped him, and backed away. "Head's too hard!"

Freddy took a quick half step forward, but gave it up. Then the three of them started collecting deadwood, and stuff from the plane that could be used to make a good fire.

CHAPTER NINE

Rescue Wings

Dawn came roaring up over the mountains to the east to touch off their peaks with fire, and send rainbows of color arcing off in all directions. It was a sight to make a man catch his breath and stand in awe of the glorious majesty of nature. But for Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer and Colonel Welsh, the coming of the new day was more than just something beautiful to watch and admire. It was like being released from a prison of darkness.

As soon as there was enough light to allow vision at any great distance, they eagerly and hopefully scrutinized their immediate surroundings. But what they saw dashed their hopes even lower. Heart-chilling wilderness met their gaze on all sides. It was as though they had landed at the very end of the world; landed in a little pocket of level ground completely lost in the depths of jagged rock sided hills and towering snow-capped mountains.

For several minutes they looked about them in silence. Then, as though at an unspoken signal, they turned and looked at each other, each man reading the message of utter helplessness reflected in the next man's eyes. It was Dave who finally broke the silence, and spoke the thought that was in the minds of the other two.

"Our smoke signal won't be seen by any plane unless it passes directly over this spot," he said. "These hills and mountains are such that it's as if we were at the bottom of a well. And it's going to be even tougher getting out of here on foot."

Neither Freddy Farmer or Colonel Welsh said anything. There wasn't anything they could say. Dave had spoken the truth. And that was that. Eventually Colonel Welsh knocked the ashes from his dead pipe and stuck it back in his pocket.

"We'd better not try going out on foot for a while," he said, "at least not until tomorrow. Better to stick here today and see if anything happens. I'm mighty sorry this happened, you fellows. It's all my fault, and I could kick myself right up the side of that mountain."

"I wouldn't say that, sir," Freddy Farmer said with a smile. "You had no idea that chap was going to attack us last night."

"No," the chief of U. S. Intelligence growled. "Just the same, ignorance is no excuse. I should have made sure, just in case the unexpected did happen. I certainly should have taken a plane fitted with a radio, instead of this one that hasn't got any. At least we could have let the world know that we were going down for a forced landing. But as it turned out—"

The Colonel sighed heavily and let the rest slide. Dave and Freddy looked at each other and shrugged. It was no use crying over spilled milk, but as a matter of cold hard fact both of them had been just a little surprised when they had boarded the plane and seen that it carried no radio. Neither, though, had said anything about it.

"Why wasn't it fitted with a radio, sir?" Dave finally blurted out the question. "I mean—well, a radio is standard equipment on any ship. Is there no radio on this for some particular reason?"

"Yes," the senior officer replied with a wry smile, and tapped his chest. "I'm the reason. On a couple of occasions when the plane I was in did have a radio, I was contacted about this and that every half hour or so. Once I even turned back because of a message I had received, only to find I'd wasted my time. Ever since then I've flown without a radio. Been able to get more done, too. But I certainly struck out this time. I'm sorry."

"Well, those things happen," Dave said politely, and let the subject drop. "How about a short scouting trip about here? Or better yet, what say I to make the top of that mountain, there? I guess I could do it in a couple of hours. Maybe we're not buried as deep as we think we are. Maybe I'll see a town, or a Ranger camp from there. Also, I may find some berries and stuff, and a spring. The chocolate we have aboard, and the drinking water, isn't going to last us for very long. What do you think, Colonel? Think you can keep Freddy cheered up while I'm gone? See that the Indians don't get him?"

The Colonel grinned and opened his mouth to speak, but what he was about to say never left his lips. At that moment all three of them heard the faint drone of a plane somewhere up in the sky, but out of sight behind the towering mountains north of them. As one man they spun around and stared hard at the dawn light bouncing off the snow-capped peaks. Nobody said a word. Nobody could. They were all too busy holding their breath, and praying as they had never prayed before.

After a few seconds Dave snapped out of his trance, ran over to the pile of deadwood they had collected, grabbed up an armful, ran back to the fire and dumped his load. Then he picked up a can of oil drained from the engine and poured it on the licking flames. A second more and a column of oily black smoke went towering up into the dawn sky.

"He can't miss that, unless he's blind!" Dave muttered through clenched teeth as the black smoke mounted higher and higher. "Come on, whoever you are, take a look, take a look!"

"Steady, Dawson," Colonel Welsh cautioned gently as Dave's voice rose to a wild shout. "We've got to steel ourselves in case he doesn't see it. Then it won't be so tough. This thing might happen several times, you know. No telling. Save your strength, son. Take it easy."

Dave hardly heard the words of wisdom. His eyes were glued to the north, his ears strained to catch every beat of the plane's engine which was still out of sight, and his two fists clenched tight as though he were actually pulling the unseen plane closer and closer. Then, suddenly, the drone of the engine grew louder. It rose to a mighty roar. And then the plane came sailing into view above the mountain peaks. It was a five-place Stinson cabin plane, a commercial plane probably owned by some rancher. There were no markings on the craft other than the usual Bureau of Aeronautics license letter and number. A wild cry of joyous relief struggled up Dave's throat but

was unable to pass his lips. A riot of emotions boiled up within him, and his lips and his tongue were suddenly too dry to form sounds. So he simply stood stock still and grinned from ear to ear as the cabin plane cleared the peak and then came nosing down toward them; circling down like some giant bird seeking a spot to light on.

When it was less than five hundred feet over their heads, the three men shook themselves loose from their paralytic spell and started jumping around and waving their arms wildly as though the pilot of the plane hadn't seen them yet. The pilot waggled his wings as a signal that he had, and then leveled off and went coasting toward the eastern end of the landing strip. There he circled back, suddenly fed hop to his engine and started to climb. For one horrible moment Dave was afraid the pilot had decided that he couldn't put his plane down on the small strip. But he was wrong. The pilot had simply goosed his engine to add enough to his speed to clear the tops of some tall trees. He slipped over them, went up on left wing a bit, and slid down to level off in a perfect landing.

Even as the plane was braking to a stop, Dave, Freddy, and the Colonel rushed back to it. They pulled up to a halt, waited for the plane to roll the last few feet, then ducked under the left wing and around to the cabin door. They had already seen that there were two men aboard the plane, the pilot and a passenger. As Dave watched them come back from the pilot's nook to the cabin door, he was faintly surprised by their looks. Why, he didn't know, but somehow he had expected to see a couple of youngsters climb down from the plane. But they weren't young. They were both well along in years. They had hard, rugged faces, covered by at least a two week's growth of whiskers. They wore rough clothing, and each man carried a gun slung at his hip. The guns were not pistols, though. They were automatics, and Dave suddenly had the hunch that their rescuers were a couple of fire rangers, or at least some kind of government men. The way they leaped cat-like out the cabin door and down onto the ground seemed somehow to suggest the military to Dave. But what they were didn't matter in the slightest. They had arrived to rescue them, and that was all that counted.

"Stuck, huh?" the older one of the pair grunted, and grinned. "Lucky we happened to see your smoke signal. You might have camped here for quite a spell. Army and Navy, huh?"

"And in a hurry," Colonel Welsh said. Then, after introducing himself: "We had a forced landing. Er—engine trouble. Can you fly us to the nearest Air Corps Base where we can pick up another plane? I'll see that you're paid for it, of course."

"Guess so," the man grunted after a look at his partner. "But where're you headed? Maybe we could hop you all the way, and save time, if you're in such a hurry."

"San Diego," Colonel Welsh said. "I have to get there as soon as possible. But maybe you haven't the gas."

"San Diego, huh?" the older one, who was the pilot, murmured, and arched his brows. "Yeah. I guess we can make it there from here. Had engine trouble, huh? Not much fun in this neck of the woods. Okay. Get aboard."

A hidden thought was tugging at Dave's brain, but he couldn't seem to get it out in the open. Something was just a wee bit wrong with the picture, but after a moment of deep thought he decided it was worry about a take-off from the narrow space of level ground.

"Think you've got a long enough run?" he asked, and jerked a thumb at the crippled Lockheed. "Maybe the five of us should haul that out of the way. But even then you wouldn't have much extra. There's a sharp drop-off just ahead of it."

"Don't get in a sweat, kid," the man mouthed, and gave him a hard stare. "I wouldn't have come down if I'd thought I couldn't get off again. Just get aboard and keep your seat. We'll get you places, and with no trouble at all. Okay, Colonel, let's get going."

With a curt nod the pilot and his passenger turned and climbed back into the plane. Colonel Welsh followed at their heels, but for an instant Dave and Freddy hung back. They looked at each other and frowned slightly.

"Queer couple of blokes, aren't they?" the English youth murmured. "Can't say I like their looks much."

"I've seen better," Dave replied with a nod. "But so long as they get us out of here, I don't care what they look like. But—is there something on your mind?"

"Not a thing," Freddy replied. Then, with a puzzled scowl: "Just sort of feel funny, though. One of your confounded hunches, I guess. Oh well! No doubt it's your American climate. I'm sure I should have stayed in England."

"Hop in, or do you two kids want to stay and play boy scout?"

The Stinson's passenger stood framed in the cabin doorway. His blue green eyes stabbed down at Dave and Freddy, and the mop of coarse red hair on his head actually did look like fire in the glow of the dawn sun. Dave stared at him, felt that elusive thought tug at his brain for the last time, and then climbed into the plane with Freddy right behind.

The pilot at the controls glanced back just long enough to see that everybody was aboard, and then he goosed the engine and taxied around on one wheel, and went trundling back toward the far end of the landing strip. His friend, the redhead, sat in the co-pilot's seat, but he was twisted around so that he faced Dave, Freddy, and the Colonel, who were sitting in the three passenger seats. A grin parted his lips, but he seemed to be grinning over their heads rather than at them.

For a brief instant a clammy chill rippled through Dave. He shook it off, angrily told himself that he was letting his imagination run wild, and concentrated on watching the pilot take the plane off. It was a beautiful bit of flying, and Dave nodded his head in silent approval and admiration as the pilot held the Stinson on the ground until he had plenty of forward speed, then gently eased it off and up as nice as could be.

Holding the nose up, the pilot circled the Stinson upwards until the mountain peaks were almost on a level with the wings. Flattening off the climb, he banked around for the last time and went roaring between two mountain peaks to the north. For a couple of minutes Dave was too thrilled by the wild, heart stopping beauty of the mountain scenery below to pay much attention to the course of the plane. Eventually, though, when the sun continued to stay on the right wing side, he stopped gaping at the terrain below, and glanced sharply ahead. The redhead was still grinning, very comfortably relaxed in his seat. And the pilot was still holding the nose pointed north as though he planned to keep going in that direction for quite some time to come.

Dave held his peace for a moment or so longer. Then curiosity and an eerie tingling sensation at the back of his neck forced the words off his lips.

"We're heading north!" he called out. "San Diego isn't north of us!"

Both Colonel Welsh and Freddy Farmer jumped as though they had been shot. They turned and stared at him, wide-eyed. The redhead stared at him, too. But his eyes were slightly narrowed, and his perpetual grin stiffened slightly. He didn't say anything.

"Well, what is the idea, anyway?" Colonel Welsh finally boomed angrily. "San Diego is west and south of here!"

The redhead shrugged and nodded, but the pilot didn't even turn his head.

"That's right, isn't it?" he called out. "Well, what do you know about that? I guess we ain't heading for San Diego, Colonel. Kind of looks that way, don't it, huh?"

Colonel Welsh blinked and looked blank for a moment. Then his face reddened and he started up out of his seat.

"See here!" he thundered. "What in—?"

The redhead made a quick motion, and the chief of U. S. Intelligence choked off the rest. But it was the automatic that suddenly seemed to jump right into the redhead's hand that really stopped him. He froze motionless half up out of his seat. The redhead waved the gun a little.

"Relax, and sit, Colonel!" he said in a voice that sounded like small stones on a tin roof. "I couldn't let you have it down there, but up here it's easy. Relax and get smart. And that goes for you two kids, too!"

CHAPTER TEN

Vulture's Nest

For a long minute there was no sound inside the cabin save the faint drone of the plane's engine. Like three men suddenly struck dumb, Dave, Freddy, and the Colonel stared at the redhead. Rather, they stared at the automatic he held in his right hand; held so that at the bat of an eyelash he could send a bullet into either of them, or into all three of them, for that matter. Then, finally, Colonel Welsh broke the silence.

"What in thunder *is* this?" he demanded. "Who are you two? What's the idea?"

The redhead hunched his shoulders and half nodded his head toward the pilot.

"That's Ike, and I'm Mike," he said with a chuckle. "But it isn't any act. We're just keeping you on ice for a while, Colonel. Be nice and you'll get back into circulation again in time. Be dumb, and you'll be dead."

As the Colonel struggled for words, Dave leaned forward a little, arms resting on his knees.

"This isn't the plane you flew last night," he said.

The redhead grinned all the more and shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "And that makes you a bright little boy—Flight Lieutenant Dawson. And that was nice flying last night. I thought that second time I had you cold. I guess you're as good at the controls as I've heard tell you were. Or was this English kid, Farmer, doing the flying?"

Dave didn't reply. He suddenly felt as though his seat had been jerked out from under him, and as if his brain were tumbling down through space. This redhead knew his name, and Freddy's, too? An eerie chill swept through him, and he impulsively looked at Colonel Welsh. The chief of U. S. Intelligence's face was bright with dumfounded amazement. He in turn was staring speechlessly at the redhead. The man with the gun dragged down a corner of his mouth in a scornful gesture.

"Why so surprised, Colonel?" he asked. "Did you think you were the only smart one in this war?"

"You won't feel so smart when you're facing a firing squad!" the Colonel clipped out. "And that's where you're headed. Both of you!"

"Well, what do you know!" the pilot cried out, and turned around just long enough to give the Colonel a horse laugh. "Maybe you ain't got it yet, Colonel, who's holding the gun. Snap out of it. I know it's tough, but there's nothing you can do about it. Don't be a sap and make us let you have it. We just want to keep you on ice for a while. That's all."

The Colonel seemed to swallow his wrath, because when he spoke again his voice was normal, and almost friendly.

"All right, we'll be smart," he said. "But where are we heading? And why are you keeping us on ice, as you call it? What good is it going to do you?"

"What good?" the redhead echoed with a laugh. "Well, about ten thousand dollars' worth, for one thing. For another—well, I guess we just don't like you."

A hard, glittering look leaped into the Colonel's eyes, and Dave could tell that the man was employing every ounce of his will power to stop from leaping from his seat and hurling himself at the redhead, gun or no gun.

"A couple of bought and paid for American traitors, eh?" the chief of U. S. Intelligence suddenly grated. "American by birth only. Actually lower than the rats in Berlin and Tokio are—the ones who are paying you your blood money. Well, paste this in your hats. You'll never live to spend that money. And that's a promise!"

The redhead simply continued to grin. Then suddenly the gun in his hand spat flame and sound, and Dave saw the Colonel's left shoulder strap fly off as though cut by a knife. The bullet tore on out through the side of the cabin. Colonel Welsh didn't so much as flinch, or even bat an eye. He held the redhead with a steady agate-eyed stare.

"Put the next right between my eyes!" he grated. "You'll still not be able to spend that blood money. You'll be run to earth like the anti-American vermin you are. And you'll be wiped out, along with the rest of your fifth column brood."

The redhead didn't say anything. Dave wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a look of fear flash across the man's unshaven face. However, it came and went in a flash. The pilot turned from his controls again, and gave the Colonel a long look.

"Maybe!" he finally said harshly. "That's the chance we take. But let's not kid each other, Colonel. The point is that the Carrier Indian won't be sailing with these two little heroes of yours aboard. Yeah! So don't look like you're going to faint. We know all about it. The boys we work for are smart. And your whole country is going to find that out in short order, too.

"You guys in Washington have got a New Deal. Well, another guy has a *New Deal*, too. I like his better. So don't waste breath trying to unsell me. It can't be done. I've been kicked around too much by your cops and F.B.I.

"I'm looking out for my own good, see? I found out how my pal and me can make dough easy, and we're making it. No more working my life away for nothing. I'm sold on *my* New Deal.

"Now shut up, and relax. My pal and me have dough to earn."

"Aw, let 'em talk!" the redhead said with a hoarse laugh. "Maybe they'll try selling us some of them Defense Bonds."

"And you shut up, too!" the pilot snarled. "I don't feel like hearing anybody talk, see?"

The redhead looked both surprised and angry.

"Okay, okay!" he said. "So nobody talks."

Silence once more settled over the interior of the cabin, but it was the kind of a silence that feels charged with high voltage electricity, and apt to strike all over the place at an instant's notice. Turning his head, Dave snapped a quick glance out the window, but what he saw didn't help his spirits any. The plane was grinding northward over wild mountainous country that looked every bit as uninviting as that narrow strip of ground where they had force landed. Whether or not they had reached the Utah line, or were still in Arizona, Dave couldn't tell with that one quick glance. And he didn't bother taking a second look.

Fact was, it didn't matter where they were. Through a crazy twist of fate they were helpless prisoners in the hands of two men who would shoot them dead at the slightest provocation. The single warning shot that the redhead had snapped across Colonel Welsh's shoulder had been proof enough that he wasn't afraid to use his gun.

Yes, they were helpless prisoners. And their captors knew all about them: who they were, where they had been heading, and why. As those three truths came home to Dave, again he swallowed hard and shivered slightly. It was like a crazy nightmare, only it wasn't. It was stark reality; nothing out of a story book. The pilot and his redheaded companion had received orders to make sure that Freddy Farmer and he did not sail on the Aircraft Carrier Indian. They had tried the first time last night by attacking them with machine guns in a plane.

They had failed, yet in a way they had succeeded. They had drilled the Lockheed's engines and forced Dave to sit down on that narrow strip of smooth ground deep in a valley. Not knowing the exact results of their efforts, the two men had cruised about over the area as soon as it became light, and—by another crazy twist of fate—they had seen the smoke signal that had been sent up to attract *help*. Seeing that the plane had not crashed, the two men had done the logical thing, from their point of view. They had landed and picked up their prey. Kidnapped them, yes, but for a very good reason. Some other plane passing over might have landed and given them a quick lift

to their destination. So the redhead and the pilot had picked them up to make sure somebody else wouldn't do it.

And the reason they hadn't been killed on the spot was simple to figure. Death in the dark during that air attack last night would have been different. The plane would have crashed and burned up, and when its charred ruins were found no one would ever have dreamed that bullets had sent it hurtling down to its doom. But three dead men lying beside a force landed plane was something else again. A scene like that naturally screamed murder all over the place. And so the redhead and his pilot had kidnapped them so that if another plane landed to investigate, it would look as though the occupants of the Lockheed had tried to find their way back to civilization on foot, and had become hopelessly lost in the mountains.

"But they know all about us! How?"

Dave didn't speak the words aloud. He spoke them only in his brain, but as he glanced at Colonel Welsh and met the man's eyes he knew that the senior officer understood what was in his mind, just as though he had heard the words spoken. Even as Dave met his eyes, Colonel Welsh bit his lower lip and gave a sharp little puzzled shake of his head. A hundred and one answers to the question leaped into Dave's brain, but every one of them seemed too fantastic even to bother considering.

However, fantastic or not, one thought kept hammering away until he was forced to admit that it at least must be true. It was that somebody close to Colonel Welsh—very close—was unquestionably in the pay of Berlin, or Tokio. Somebody in the drab, unpretentious building where Colonel Welsh maintained his real head-quarters was a traitor to the American flag, a paid rat of the lowest form who gnawed at the very heart of America.

But who? Dave thought of Captain Lamb, and Captain Stacey, and Lieutenant Caldwell—and shook his head vigorously. He thought of the man who had taken them up in the elevator—and wondered. He thought of the man reading the book in that room with the mops and pails—and wondered some more. In fact, he wondered until his head ached and his brain rang. It just didn't seem possible that any spy could get close enough to learn all that somebody had learned. That, however, was one of the many cockeyed things about war. The impossible was constantly popping up to prove to be a cinch. There were over two years of proof of that. Poland for one. The Maginot Line for another. And Crete, and Malaya, and Singapore—and Pearl Harbor, too, for that matter. All that had happened at those various places just couldn't happen. Only it *had!*

"So maybe Lamb, or Stacey, or—"

Dave cut short the unspoken thought. The pilot up forward had throttled his engine and was nosing the Stinson downward. Leaning over close to the window, Dave peered down and ahead. He saw a stretch of wild wasteland that seemed to extend to the four horizons. Scrub growth, a few patches of towering trees, and all the rocks in the world, it seemed, met his scrutiny. The plane seemed to be nosing down toward an area of tableland. And as Dave squinted his eyes he suddenly was able to make out a couple of weatherbeaten shacks built close to a patch of woods. He thought he saw something glistening just under the branches of the trees, but he was too high and too far away to tell what it was.

"Okay!" the redhead suddenly called out. "We're getting near the end of the line. Remember what I told you, you three. Be nice and nothing will happen. Get funny and I'll drill you and think nothing of it, so help me. I ain't a killer often, but when I am, I'm good. So watch your step."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Little Bit Of England!

Dave didn't bother looking at the redhead as the man pushed words off the tip of his tongue. He kept his nose pressed against the cabin window and watched with beating heart as the area of tableland came sweeping up closer and closer to the plane. The nearer the plane got to the ground, the more weatherbeaten and deserted the two shacks looked. In fact, Dave knew that if he should be flying over them at even a thousand feet or so, he would instantly take them for a couple of prospectors' shacks abandoned to the wind and the rain years and years before.

Another couple of minutes and the Stinson went up on wing, cut around in a dime turn, and then leveled off and settled to earth between two rows of sun-bleached rocks. Hardly had the plane braked to a halt than the redhead was at the cabin door, pushing it open with one hand behind him, and backing out. Every second of the time, though, he kept his blue green eyes fastened on his prisoners.

"I'll take them inside while you put the job away," he said to the pilot. "Stick her way under the trees with that Waco, just in case some nosy guys come flying over. Nuts to take chances, you know. We'll—"

"Can it!" the pilot snarled. "Who are you, giving orders? Take them inside. I'll be along in a minute, and help tie them up. But keep that gun ready, and use it if you have to. We can't risk anything, see?"

"I see, sure I see!" the redhead snarled back. "What's eating you, anyway?"

"Nothing, and shut up!" the pilot said in a brittle voice.

The redhead nodded, and motioned with his gun to Dave and the other two.

"Out!" he snapped. "And watch it. And keep your hands in sight, too."

Dave obeyed to the letter, but his heart was thumping against his ribs. He had a sneaky feeling that Colonel Welsh's words had had a profound effect on the pilot. Sure, he had snarled, and boasted, and cursed the United States, the land of his birth. But like all rats of his ilk, deep down in his black heart he was scared stiff of the Old Man With the Whiskers. Deep down in his heart he knew that he might get by with this back stabbing for a little while—just like the Japs—but not for long. In the end he would be caught in the wheels of right and justice and be ground to a pulp.

With the pilot feeling as he obviously did, snapping and snarling at his own partner in this dirty work, perhaps something could be made of it. Perhaps—

Dave didn't finish the rest. Without realizing it he had sort of stopped to mull things over as he climbed down from the plane. He had unconsciously started to push one hand into his tunic pocket. He didn't even realize he was making the movement, but the redhead saw it, took it for the wrong thing, and moved with the speed of light. The barrel of the automatic was slapped against the left side of Dave's jaw just hard enough for him to see stars and stumble. He ended up by falling the rest of the way out of the cabin doorway and landing flat on his face on hard dirt.

"And stay there!" he heard the redhead growl. "I'll take that gun just as soon as your two pals are down. Okay, you two. Out, and keep your hands where I can see them. Okay! Now, flat on your bellies and hands outstretched. Either of you move, and you get it."

A moment later Dave felt the muzzle of the automatic pressed against the back of his head, and felt the redhead's other hand going through his pockets. He didn't move a muscle, and presently an angry curse told him that the redhead realized he was wrong. Then the gun tapped him lightly on the head.

"Stay put, with your hands out!" the redhead said. "I'll just make sure about your pals."

Dave kept his throbbing face buried in the dirt until he heard the redhead's voice again.

"Okay, on your feet, and inside! And no more kidding moves like that last one, Dawson. My trigger finger's getting plenty itchy. Okay, move!"

Dave got slowly to his feet, blinked from his eyes water caused by smacking the ground with his face, and walked stiff-legged in through the door of the nearest shack. He expected to step into a room heavy with age, and dust, and dirt, and all the countless smells of the years. But he didn't. He stepped into a large sized room that was comfortably furnished and fitted out like a hunting lodge. No, not exactly a hunting lodge. Rather, it looked more like an arsenal. There were guns all over the place, of all types: pistols, automatics, rifles, and machine guns. Along the entire right wall were heavy wood boxes that obviously contained thousands and thousands of rounds of ammunition.

But what caught Dave's eyes and held them was the powerful gas engine operated short-wave radio receiving set and transmitter that took up most of the space at the rear of the room. One glance told him that every part of it was of the finest equipment, and that its operator could contact points thousands and thousands of miles away. One look at the set and he guessed instantly that one of its chief uses was to send weather data to listening Axis ears. This was probably one of several such stations hidden in the vastness of the United States. In time they would be smoked out and destroyed. Meantime, though, they were serving the Axis powers well, and, unquestionably, in a dozen different ways.

"Not bad, huh?" he heard the redhead's voice with its taunting note. "We have lots of fun here, Mike and Ike. See what I mean, Colonel? We got it all doped out. You Army and Navy guys are suckers. You don't stand a chance, what I mean. When the time's right, we'll move in. And that's all there'll be to it, see? Steady, Colonel! Steady, pal. Rushing me will just get you a bullet in that belly of yours. Take it easy, and relax. Back up, and sit down on that case. You two kids, too."

As the redhead grinned and made motions with the gun, Dave, Freddy, and the Colonel slowly backed up until they were sitting on a couple of gun cases. Once they were settled, with their hands carefully kept in sight, the redhead hooked one leg over a nearby table and absently stroked the palm of his other hand with the barrel of his automatic. Dave heard Colonel Welsh's tight, rasping breathing beside him, but he didn't look at the man. Nor did he glance at Freddy Farmer, who hadn't spoken a word since they had entered the Stinson. Instead, Dave kept his eyes fixed on the redhead—and waited, and hoped, and prayed.

"Yeah, we have us some fun here," the redhead went on, and looked straight at Colonel Welsh. "But soon we're going to have some real fun. See all these guns, Colonel? Lots of people are going to hear them pop off, soon. People east in Washington, too. The boys running this show have it all doped out. It'll be a cinch."

"Do you know what you are?" the Colonel suddenly asked with an effort.

"No, you tell me, Colonel," the redhead said with a chuckle. Then, before Colonel Welsh could get a word in edgewise: "You know, I'd never tab you for head of the Intelligence, Colonel. You don't look the part to me at all. But maybe that's what's made you the great man of mystery, eh? Well, the mystery is over as far as I'm concerned. And to tell you the truth, I'm kind of disappointed. When we got the radio flash that you were aboard a plane heading west with these two kids, I got

kind of all excited. I got kind of sorry, too, that I'd have to shoot you down without having a look at you. But—well, I did get that look after all. And I'm disappointed."

"And you are a complete and utter fool!" Colonel Welsh said, tight-lipped. "I told you once, and I tell you again! You'll never get away with this. You'll be caught and either strung up, or shot. You'll get—"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up? Well, do it. We can't be bothered listening to your junk. Shut up! *Do you hear me!*"

It was the voice of the pilot, who had suddenly appeared in the doorway. He stood glaring at Colonel Welsh out of eyes that held a wild, glassy glitter. Two white spots appeared on either cheek, and as the last left his lips they came together to form a thin cruel line. Then before Colonel Welsh, or Dave, or Freddy Farmer could so much as move a muscle, the man leaped forward and slammed his upholstered gun against the Colonel's left temple. The chief of U. S. Intelligence slumped over, but caught himself and straightened up slowly. A trickle of blood ran down from the cut on his temple, but he made no effort to raise his hand to it. He looked at the pilot and smiled grimly. Dave marveled silently at the man's courage and ability to take it. The blow he had received was enough to knock over a horse.

"Swing again, you rat traitor!" the Colonel got out evenly. "You know in your heart that you're sunk. And it's making you lose your grip."

For an instant Dave thought the pilot was going to go stark raving mad with rage and hurl himself at the Colonel. But he didn't. With a visibly tremendous effort he regained control of himself and forced a harsh laugh off his lips.

"That's what you think!" he snapped. Then out of the corner of his mouth to his partner: "Get that rope, and we'll tie them up. We'll gag this big slob. I'm sick of hearing his yapping."

Less than five minutes later Dave and Freddy were bound hand and foot. Colonel Welsh was bound hand and foot, too, but he was also gagged. The pilot made sure that the ropes were tied right, then turned his back on them and walked over to a table on the other side of the room. He picked up a whiskey bottle there, took a long drink and choked on it. He coughed so hard he almost dropped the bottle. He would have if the redhead hadn't jumped quickly forward and grabbed it.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" the redhead demanded angrily. "You getting the jim-jams? This is no time to fall apart. Snap out of it. Get hold of yourself. Boy! Wouldn't the big boss like to see you, now. I knew he should have put me in charge of this station."

The pilot suddenly went white about the corners of his mouth, and there was cold murder in the eyes he fixed on the redhead. He reached out and tapped the redhead on the chest with the barrel of his automatic.

"Just say that again, lug," he grated. "Go on! Just say it again!"

The redhead seemed to wilt like a flower tossed into a blast furnace. He gulped and swallowed hard, and backed away a couple of steps.

"Okay, okay!" he got out hastily. "I was only kidding. But I only thought—"

"Nobody wants you to think!" the pilot snarled, and took a step forward. "Get it? Cut out the thinking. Now, get on that key and contact Frisco. Tell them we've got them on ice, and what do we do now? Tell them this place is cooked, if either of these three should get away. Find out where he wants them delivered, or what. He was nuts to have us go hunting them, and bring them back here. They'd have been stuck there a week, anyway. And that's more time than we need to fly these guns and stuff to the other places. But skip that last. Don't tell them that, understand. The big boy wouldn't like it."

"I'll say he wouldn't!" the redhead said with a tight laugh, and went through the motions of slitting his throat from ear to ear. "Okay. I'll find out what we do now. Fun, I hope."

The redhead flung the trio of prisoners a leering look, then went to the back of the room and sat down at the radio equipment. A moment or so later the crackling of the spark gap of a wireless set filled the room. Dave closed his eyes and strained his ears. He caught the signal being sent out. It was S-T. It was repeated a dozen times or more. Then the man stopped sending, and there was silence as he listened to whatever was coming through his earphones. After twenty seconds or so he started sending again. Dave caught all the signals, but that's all the good it did him. He glanced at Freddy Farmer and Colonel Welsh, and knew that they were catching the signals, too, and that the code going out over the air was just as meaningless to them as it was to him.

For five minutes the redhead "talked" with the man at the other end of the wave length. Then he switched off his set, got up and turned around with a grin on his face that stretched from ear to ear.

"He thinks we're great guys," he said to his partner. "He thinks we're the nuts."

"Horses to what he thinks!" the pilot growled, and ran a nervous tongue tip along his lower lip. "What do we do now? What are his orders?"

"To sit tight," the redhead said. Then, after flashing Colonel Welsh a smirking look, he went on, "He's coming up here sometime tonight. He didn't say, but I've got a hunch he wants to work on our three friends here. But he's tickled silly about it all. What a break for us we were bum shots last night. This little job puts us in good, I'm telling you. Boy! You can't top the big boss, can you?"

He knows his onions right down the line. Yeah! Old blabber mouth, there, is going to have plenty of chance to work his yap. And I mean, but plenty! Maybe he won't want to, but I've seen the big boss's way of getting guys to talk. He's got a technique, he has!"

"Coming up tonight, huh?" the pilot echoed with a happy smile. "Swell! That means you and me will be shifted to some other station. And that'll suit me okay. This neck of the woods is giving me the creeps. Thirty days here. It's been like thirty years. Let's have a drink on getting out of here soon."

"Yeah!" the redhead said, and licked his lips. "Let's have a couple of them. I'm dry as a bone."

With that moment began an hour and a half that was just about the toughest ninety minutes Dave Dawson had ever spent in his life. The two unshaven men went over to the table and dropped into chairs and proceeded to ignore their prisoners. That didn't bother Dave in the slightest, though. He was quite content to have the two ignore him, for he was too busy with his thoughts—thoughts that tumbled and spilled around in his brain like little red hot stones. A hundred times at least he strained at the ropes that held his wrists bound behind his back. And a hundred times circles of white pain about his wrists convinced him that he didn't stand a chance in the world of freeing his hands, to say nothing of his ankles. A hundred times he cursed himself bitterly for not getting away from that attacker last night—and without damage to the Lockheed's engines. A hundred times he thought of the Aircraft Carrier Indian and the unknown doom that hovered over her; the unknown doom that was aboard her in the form of some rat Axis spy who had killed and obtained vital information that could easily spell disaster for many of Uncle Sam's fighting men of the sea if it reached Japanese hands soon enough.

A hundred times he thought of many things, and each time his utter helplessness to do anything about them was like a hot knife twisting in his heart. But the most torturing thing of all was the realization that he and Freddy had been stopped cold before they had even been able to get started. The Carrier Indian was over three hundred miles away, riding at anchor in San Diego harbor. Who knew when they would see it? Who knew if they would *ever* see it? Caught cold before they had even got started on the very first of the special assignments they were to carry out for Uncle Sam. What a sweet beginning! Yes! What a sweet beginning that could well be the end, too. And that end might come when the man referred to as the big boss arrived.

Thoughts, thoughts, and more thoughts that walked, raced, cut and slashed their way through Dave's brain. Seconds dragged on into minutes, and the minutes seemed to drag on into an eternity of time. Then suddenly sound forced its way through Dave's thoughts and brought him back to the present. The sound was soft moaning and groaning. And it came from Freddy Farmer's lips.

The English youth was sitting on a gun case just beyond where Colonel Welsh sat, but out in front of him so that Dave could see his pal. And the look on Freddy's face was one of great pain, and not a little of terror, and fear. His eyes were half closed, and he seemed to be staring at nothing at all as he rocked jerkily back and forth like some African savage praying to his idol gods. For a brief instant Dave could hardly believe his eyes or his ears. Then a wave of sympathy mingled with just a little annoyance swept through him.

"Pull up your socks, Freddy!" he said in a low voice. "Show these rats you can take it. Come on, Freddy. Chin up, pal!"

The English youth groaned louder and opened his eyes a little. The look he flung Dave burned with scorn.

"Blast you and your chin-up rot!" he grated. "I've had enough of this. Gangster stuff, this is, not war. I know now I should never have left England. This is a madman's country. I tell you I've had enough of it!"

Freddy fairly screamed the last, and had Dave not been tied hand and foot he would have leaped over and slapped his pal's jaw. Something had happened to Freddy Farmer. Something had snapped inside of him. Dave had seen his pal in a hundred tight corners, every bit as tight as this one. He knew full well that Freddy was red-blooded courage from his head to his feet. But something had happened, and the English youth was ready to crack up like an hysterical old woman.

"Freddy, cut it out!" he snapped. "Buck up, old man. Show them. Come on, Freddy. The old R.A.F. stuff. We're not licked yet, and we won't be. You know that!"

The English youth didn't answer at once. He sat swaying and groaning, and staring at Dave out of half closed eyes. Then suddenly he began to laugh softly. The laugh grew and grew until it was almost a scream. The pilot and the redhead had put down their whiskey glasses and were staring at him in wide-eyed amazement.

"R.A.F., my hat!" Freddy suddenly shouted. "This isn't war. This is gangster business, like I've seen in your American movies. Well, I've had enough of it. I can't stand it, do you understand. *I can't stand it!* These ropes are killing me. I feel as if I were all on fire!"

Freddy stopped short, looked over at the unshaven pair and spoke again before Dave had time to open his mouth.

"I say, a drink of water, please!" he gasped. "I must have a drink of water. I'm dying, really. I can't stand the pain. A drink of water, please!"

The pair stared for a moment longer; then the redhead burst out with laughter.

"The tough English, huh?" he jeered aloud. "Look at the brave R.A.F. pilot, I don't think! Well, what do you know? The English can't take it. I always said they couldn't. Mama! Mama! Sonny boy wants a drink of water. Here! Pour a slug of this whiskey down his throat and make a man of him. Okay, I'll do it!"

The redhead laughed some more and splashed whiskey from the bottle into his glass. He pushed up from the table and came swaggering over to Freddy Farmer.

"Here you are, sonny boy," he said, and leaned over to put the glass to the English youth's lips. "Be Papa's great big man. Have a drink. Go on, take some!"

Freddy Farmer groaned just once more, then leaned forward as though he were going to drink. But he didn't drink. He became an exploding ball of chain lightning, instead. Almost before Dave Dawson's startled eyes could register what was taking place, Freddy Farmer whipped his right hand around from behind his back and plucked the redhead's automatic from its holster. In what was practically the same motion, the English youth stood up and clubbed the gun down on the redhead's ear. At the same time Freddy brought up his left clenched fist and landed solidly on the man's jaw. The man closed his eyes, and folded up like an old army cot to the floor.

The English youth didn't so much as watch the redhead crumple. Instead he brought the automatic down into line with the pilot sitting stunned at the table on the other side of the room.

"Don't even wink an eye!" Freddy barked, and slowly sat down again. "I can put a bullet in your rotten heart from here with my eyes closed. Keep your hands just as they are on the table. Don't move them an inch, you dirty blighter!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Westward To War

As Freddy Farmer hurled the words at the pilot, he reached down with his other hand and fumbled with the ropes tied about his ankles. In less than a minute he had them free. Still keeping his eye on the pilot, who now was practically green with terror, he went over and around in back of the man. In less time than it takes to tell about it, he had his gun. Then he jerked him from his chair and spun him around.

"Sorry, old thing," he said, tight-lipped. "But you shouldn't say things like that about America. Next to England, it's the grandest country on earth."

The pilot blinked stupidly. Then he closed his eyes for good. He did so because Freddy Farmer slugged him on the jaw, putting every ounce of his one hundred and fifty-five pounds behind the blow. The pilot turned slowly around twice, then fell flat on his face alongside his unconscious pal. And it was then Dave realized he was not dreaming, and was able to find his tongue.

"Holy jumping jellyfish!" he gasped. "I—I thought you'd blown your top, Freddy. But it was a gag, huh? Boy, oh boy! Me for you, pal, every day in the week, and twice on Sundays. Gee, Freddy! I'm a no good bum for thinking—"

"Quite!" the English youth said with a wide grin. "But I'll forgive you this once. But speaking of gags. I'll free the Colonel, and then see about you. Just cool your heels a bit, my little man."

Moving over to the Colonel, Freddy took the gag away and freed the senior officer's hands and feet. It wasn't until he was completely free that the Intelligence chief was able to speak.

"I'll never forget this, Farmer, never!" he exclaimed in a rush of words. "One of the finest things I ever saw in my life. I can hardly believe it even now. It—well, it was like magic. It must have been. How in blue blazes did you manage to free your hands? Mine were tied so tight they still feel broken in a dozen places."

As the Colonel spoke he rubbed his hands and wrists vigorously. Freddy blushed to the roots of his hair, but there was a pleased grin on his lips.

"They tied me pretty tight, too, sir," he said. "But a chap in England once showed me a trick of holding your hands so that there's still a little slack no matter how tight they're tied. It doesn't work with most people. I mean you have to have thin hands, and be able to sort of fold them up so's they're no thicker than your wrists. Then you can slide the ropes off, if you work at it long enough. I—well, I was able to do it. The moaning and the request for a drink was just to get one of them close enough. I hope you don't think I meant the things I said, sir."

"Don't worry," the Colonel said, and slapped Freddy on the shoulder. "You can say anything you want, at any time, and it will always be okay with me, after this. I mean it! You make me feel like an amateur, Farmer. It was wonderful. But let's get these two tied up while they're still listening to the birdies. What a sweet punch you've got, Farmer. And at your weight, too! You'd keep Joe Louis busy any time. But let's get at these two, and get going."

Freddy and the Colonel bent over the two prostrate forms and started roping them up hand and foot. Dave watched for a moment, then made sounds in his throat.

"Hey!" he shouted. "I'm here, you know!"

Freddy turned his head and looked at him. Bright lights danced in the English youth's eyes.

"Why, so you are," he murmured, and gave the Colonel a quick wink. "Just who are you? And when did you come in?"

"Cut the comedy!" Dawson howled. "Get these confounded ropes off me, or I'll fan your breeches plenty next time I get my hands on you, young fellow!"

Freddy shrugged, pursed his lips and cocked an eyebrow at the Colonel.

"Bit violent, isn't he?" he grunted. "Think we should let him loose, or wait a bit until he cools down?"

"I don't know," the Colonel said with a chuckle. "You're the boss. Do as you think best. Maybe, if he said 'pretty please,' or something."

"Quite," Freddy said, and turned to Dave. "Say 'pretty please,' and I'll consider it," he grinned.

Dave looked daggers, and pressed his lips tightly together. Freddy sighed, stood up and started brushing dust off his uniform.

"What do we do now, sir?" he asked, and deliberately turned his back on Dawson. "Want me to fly you to San Diego, and have somebody come back for these three? Or—"

"Okay, okay, you win, you sawed off made in England little runt!" Dave roared. "Pretty please, confound you. Now untie me, for cat's sake."

Freddy walked over to him and leveled a reprimanding finger.

"Such a tone of voice!" he admonished sternly. "Say it nicely, just as you were taught in school, now."

Dave turned forty different colors of the rainbow, but he finally managed to swallow his wrath.

"Pretty please," he said. "I will remember this moment always. And I mean *always*, you cluck!"

Freddy laughed, and in half a minute had Dave free. As he pulled the last rope loose, he stepped quickly backward and set himself for the expected rush. But Dave simply rubbed his hands and wrists and glared at him.

"Relax!" he growled. "I'm going to save this one up, you betcha! And when the right time comes, will you sing a song and dance a dance for me! Kidding aside, though, Freddy, that was something. I really mean it. Boy! Can you always come up with something new! But don't think that means I'm going to forget, you little bum. My turn will come."

Freddy grinned at him impishly, and then both stopped their horse play and turned serious eyes toward the Colonel.

"We can still make San Diego with time to spare, sir," Dave said with a glance at his watch. "Are we going to take those two along with us?"

"We certainly are," the Colonel said, and pointed a finger at the pilot. "That one is just ripe to be cracked wide open. He'll blab everything he knows to save his own neck. I've met his type often. Hard as nails on the surface, but completely yellow underneath."

"It's pretty hard to believe that a couple of Americans would stoop this low," Dave said, tight-lipped. "But I suppose the Axis has a fifth column working here in the States just as they had in every other country they tackled."

"True enough," the Colonel replied with a nod. "And as the saying goes, some men will sell their souls for gold. Those two are the type. Country and flag don't mean a thing to them. Something twisted inside of them. They weren't put together right in the first place. But this is a big thing for my bureau, boys! And for the F.B.I., too. I have a hunch I know who their big boss is—a man the F.B.I.'s been after for weeks. There'll be a welcoming committee waiting for him tonight. Have no fear of that. Before we get going, however, I want to have a quick look around here. Give me a hand. Maybe we'll find something of importance. We've got an hour or so, haven't we?"

"Easy," Dave replied. "Shall we hunt for something special?"

"Hunt for anything!" the Colonel said grimly. "And pray for a miracle find."

Exactly one hour and six minutes later they had finished going over the room with fine tooth comb thoroughness. The net result was a batch of papers that the Colonel clutched in his hand. A couple of them had lists of names and addresses. The others were covered with messages that were all in code, and couldn't be broken down right at the moment. The Colonel was pleased with the results, but there was just the slightest gleam of disappointment in his eyes. Dave saw the gleam and wondered.

"We didn't find the miracle, sir?" he asked. "What was it?"

The Colonel tapped the papers and shook his head.

"It could be in this stuff, but I doubt it," he said. "I mean a clue that would help us with the Carrier Indian business. However, I don't think—"

The chief of U. S. Intelligence suddenly stopped, and a cold hard glint came into his eyes. He turned around and stared down at the two trussed up men on the floor. Both had recovered consciousness and were watching him out of eyes brimming with terror. The Colonel eyed them for a moment, then stepped forward and deliberately picked up one of the two automatics Freddy had placed on the table. Turning, he sighted the gun and pulled the trigger. The gun roared sound and flame. A hole appeared in the floor a half inch from the redhead's left ear, and the man

screamed like a stuck pig. Colonel Welsh leveled the gun again and drilled a hole in the floor a half inch from the redhead's other ear.

"See?" he barked. "I know a little about trick shooting, myself. Okay. How's this for a bull's-eye? Right between those two. Right on the end of your nose!"

The man screamed and writhed about on the floor.

"Don't, don't!" he gasped. "Oh, please don't, Colonel! Don't let me have it."

"Then what about your brother rat aboard the Carrier Indian?" Colonel Welsh thundered. "Who is he? What name is he using? What's his rank? Speak up, you! I've got an itchy trigger finger, too!"

The redhead gasped, and gurgled, and choked, and sobbed in a desperate effort to get the words out of his mouth in a hurry.

"I don't know, I don't know!" he cried. "We don't know anything about the Carrier Indian. Honestly, we don't, Colonel. We just got orders to stop you and these two kids from getting to San Diego. We only got orders to stop them from going aboard the Indian. We don't know nothing about her, honest to Pete. We don't even know why our boss didn't want them two kids to go aboard. That's the truth, on my word of honor."

"You have no honor!" the Colonel told him coldly. Then he slowly sighted the gun on a point between the pilot's eyes. "Well?" he demanded. "You tell me then!"

The pilot turned white as a sheet under his beard, and looked as if he were going to faint. His eyes popped way out, and spittle drooled out the corners of his mouth.

"I don't know either!" he cried hoarsely. "So help me, Colonel, I'm willing to spill everything I know. But I don't know a thing about the Indian business. Go on, shoot me right between the eyes if I'm telling you any lie. We just manned this station. And like he said, we got orders to stop those two from going aboard the Indian. So help me! That's the truth!"

Colonel Welsh hesitated, then shrugged and stuck the gun in his pocket.

"It was too much to hope for, anyway," he muttered more to himself. "Let's get going. You lads get the plane started while I lug these two outside. A mighty big day for America so far. Now, if only you two can—"

The senior officer sighed and let the rest hang in the air. Then he bent over, caught each man by the heels, and hauled them out into the brilliant sunshine like a couple of logs. They yelped and babbled with pain, but the Colonel had deaf ears. Twenty minutes later the two fifth column prisoners were stowed aboard the Stinson, and the plane's props were ticking over. Dave and Freddy had refilled the tanks from tins of gas they found in the second shack. The shiny thing that Dave had seen under the trees from the air proved to be a high speed Waco fitted with two machine guns. For a moment they debated whether or not one of them should fly it back. On second thought, though, they decided it was best for them all to stick together in the same ship, and let somebody else pick up the Waco later.

"Okay, all aboard!" Dave finally announced, and gave Freddy a friendly slap on the back. "Go on and fly her, pal. You've sure earned the honor. And, heck, my nerves can stand anything, now."

"I knew the compliment would have a nasty ending to it!" the English youth growled, and shook his head. "No, fly her yourself. I've done my share of work today. Besides, you know this neck of the world. I don't."

"Well, somebody fly it!" Colonel Welsh shouted from inside the cabin. "We've still got to get to San Diego, you know. Come on, snap it up, you two!"

"Okay!" Dave growled, and shouldered Freddy Farmer out of the way. "If I must I must. Who was your slave last year, Mister?"

"Same chap," Freddy said with a chuckle. "And his good manners haven't improved a bit. San Diego, my good man! And in a bit of a hurry, please!"

"Very good, sir!" Dave grunted and made a face. "And you can guess what I'm *thinking!*"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Death Strikes Often

A huge ball of gold and red hung balanced on the western lip of the world. Shafts of shimmering fire radiated out from it in all directions. They filled the sky with a mixture of shades that ranged from a delicate pink to blood red. They bathed the earth with the same hues, and seemed actually to creep into every nook and corner. The line of planes on the San Diego field looked like the work of an imaginative artist on nature's canvas rather than the real thing. It was a sight to hold the eye and catch the breath—but Dave Dawson stared at it and wasn't even conscious of what he was looking at.

He and Freddy Farmer were in the field Commandant's office, waiting for Colonel Welsh to show up. But that was just the trouble. They had been waiting for three solid hours for the Intelligence chief to return from wherever he had gone. Three hours before Dave had put the Stinson down on the field. At Colonel Welsh's order he had taxied it straight into an empty hangar and cut the

engines. The Colonel had jumped out and disappeared for five minutes. He had returned with the field's C.O. and a half dozen mechanics, and a closed car. The two fifth columnists had been dumped in the car, and driven away. After hasty introductions to the field Commandant, the Colonel had led them over to the field office and told them to wait for him to return.

That had been three hours ago, and they were still waiting.

"Stop worrying, and come finish this food they sent over," Freddy Farmer presently broke the silence. "Good grief, Dave, it doesn't do any good to wear out the floor like that. Come on and have some more to eat. Eggs, mind you! I haven't had an egg since I don't know when."

"You and your stomach!" Dave grated, and half turned from the window. "You should choke on them. Look out there. The Indian! If they're not getting ready to weigh anchor, then I'm nuts! Where is that guy, anyway? He should have told us that—Jeepers!"

Freddy stopped some egg halfway to his mouth and looked up.

"What?" he demanded. "What's the matter?"

"The Colonel," Dave said with an effort. "I mean—I sure hope nothing's happened to him."

Freddy Farmer considered that for a moment, then shrugged and carried the egg the rest of the way to his mouth.

"Not likely, I think," he finally said. "Probably got those two chaps to talk. Maybe it's made a difference. I mean, maybe he's decided to call off this Indian show. Wouldn't mind that at all. They might post us here at this field. Wonderful food, you know."

"It certainly *sounds* good!" Dave cracked. Then, glancing out the window again: "I sure hope they don't call off the show. That Indian looks pretty nice to me out there. I could go for a trip on her. Besides, I'm itching to take a whack or six at those dirty Japs. I think I hate them worse than the Nazis, Freddy."

"Me, too, if that's possible," the English youth replied. "But I was really talking just to hear myself. I'd like a trip on the Indian, too. She's the latest of her class, and should have everything. Also, according to the Colonel, she's steaming out to do battle. I could fancy a little combat work. Doesn't pay to get rusty. My, but that meal was good!"

"What a man!" Dave sighed at the window. "On an empty stomach he's not worth a dime. Fill him up and he's a one man air force, and raring to go. He's—"

Dave stopped short and wheeled quickly as the door opened and Colonel Welsh came inside. The man's face was grim, and there was the look of angry defeat in his eyes.

"Sorry I took so long, fellows," he said, and dropped into a chair. "I had to check up on a few things, and get a few things underway. Took longer than I figured."

"Those rats told the truth, eh?" Dave grunted. "They still don't know a thing about the Indian?"

The Colonel shook his head and clenched his two fists in a helpless gesture.

"Not a thing!" he got out savagely. "But they seem to be the only two who don't."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" Freddy asked.

"Well, I don't mean it exactly the way I put it," the Colonel said with a shake of his head. "But it seems the entire Axis organization in this country has found out that their agent aboard the Indian has stolen the battle plans of the carrier, and that I was to put four men aboard to try and trap him and nail him to the mast. Those two agents of mine, and you two."

"Your two agents got aboard last night, sir?" Dave prompted as the senior officer stopped talking abruptly.

"No," was the bitter reply. "They were shot and killed as they stepped into the waiting tender at the Navy pier."

"Shot?" Dave gasped. "Gee! That was tough. I hope the killers were caught."

"They were, and captured dead," the Colonel said bluntly. "Two waterfront rats. Looked that, anyway. One a Jap, obviously. The other looked like a German. No papers or anything on him, though. So he could have been almost any nationality. But the important thing is, that I found the leak in my own organization. I put through a call to Captain Lamb and he told me. He'd sent word to our San Diego office last night for me to contact him at once. I called him, and—"

"The bloke reading the book in your outer office!" Freddy Farmer cried.

"The man who ran the elevator!" Dave exclaimed.

Colonel Welsh caught his breath and shot a hard look at Dawson.

"How did you know?" he demanded.

"I didn't," Dave replied. "But I had a hunch it might be one of those two. It had to be somebody close to you, and—well, Freddy had already picked the one in the outer office."

"It was the one who brought you up in the elevator," Colonel Welsh said with an effort. "It's—it's things like this that almost make me lose faith. That man had been in the bureau for six years. For four years before that he was connected with Secret Service. His record was spotless. And the amazing part is that he had performed some valuable services for me. But that goes to show you the finesse of the Gestapo and Nazi agent technique. Shows you how long ago Hitler laid plans for America. I would have staked my life on Babson, but—"

The officer paused and gestured despairingly.

"But of course I would have lost my life!" he suddenly bit off. "But for an accident I'd never have found out, perhaps. And who knows what else that would have cost us? He was taking Lamb down late last night. As he opened the doors a slip of paper fell out of his pocket. Lamb caught it in mid-air, and was starting to hand it back when he saw what was on the paper. It was a bit of code, obviously jotted down in a hurry. But it was a code that only Lamb and I knew, not another soul in the world. For years he and I have been working on a code that can't possibly be broken down by any of the experts. We thought we had found it. Kept our papers on it in a safe. Only Lamb and I knew the combination—we thought."

"What happened, sir?" Freddy asked eagerly as Colonel Welsh let his voice trail off into silence. "Did Captain Lamb make the dirty beggar confess?"

The chief of U. S. Intelligence shook his head.

"He didn't have time," he said. "Babson realized instantly that he'd never in the world be able to explain his possession of that bit of copied code. His only hope was quick action, and flight. He went for his gun. Lamb didn't give me the details of the fight. He won, and Babson is dead. Then Lamb got busy. He began with the little office Babson used on the ground floor. He—It seems incredible! I thought that Lamb was crazy, or blind drunk, and making it up. But he wasn't, of course. Babson had actually installed a dictograph in our working room. The other end was in his office. The wire led out behind the files, under the corridor boards and down the elevator shaft, and under the lobby floor to his office. He could hear every word we said up there. How he learned that safe combination, we'll probably never find out. In his Washington hotel room Lamb found enough stuff to hang the man a dozen times over. Too bad we won't be able to do it. I feel like going out and shooting myself. I'm the one responsible, of course. One of my own trusted men! That's the worst of it!"

The Colonel gave a bewildered shake of his head, and groaned heavily.

"That's war, I guess," Dave murmured sympathetically. "And the same thing has happened in other countries, sir. It isn't going to help any to take it too hard, you know. Anyway, the rat is dead, and the leak is plugged up. That's something, at least."

"But mighty little!" the Colonel said bitterly. Then, stabbing a finger at the window facing the harbor, he grated, "There's the Indian out there. In an hour she weighs anchor. Aboard her is the most dangerous rat of all. He possesses information that could well mean the difference between victory and defeat if it falls into Jap hands. We can't hold the Indian. She's got to sail. Without her the whole battle plan is mixed up. Yet if she sails and we don't catch that scoundrel, who knows what will happen? I had hoped, but—well, now that's all shot, too."

"What's all shot, sir?" Dave asked quickly.

"The job I had planned for you and Farmer aboard the Indian," the Colonel replied. "It was a wild hope even at best, but now it isn't even that. The rats know why I wanted you two aboard her. True, maybe the man you're after doesn't know. I've a feeling, though, he does. The way things have gone, I feel certain they got word to him somehow. If they did, he'd know exactly why you were there the moment you came over the side. And—well, to put it bluntly, he's killed twice already. Twice more wouldn't bother him if he suspected you were getting close to him. He'd—"

"We can watch our step," Dave cut in grimly.

"Too great a risk," the Colonel replied. "You see, it wouldn't be a matter of your actually getting close, but the matter of his *thinking* that you *were* close. He'd know who you were, and why you were aboard. The advantage would be all his. It would be unfair to ask any man to tackle a job like that."

"I don't fancy so, sir," Freddy Farmer spoke up quietly. "After all, rats usually do have all the advantage until you get them cornered. Supposing he does know why we're there? Let him, I say. It's a job to be done, and somebody's got to tackle it, sir. Good grief! If somebody doesn't go after the blighter, it's like letting the Indian sail with a lighted fuse leading to her powder magazine."

"I check on that, too, sir!" Dave cried eagerly. "Freddy and I aren't trying to toot our horns, Colonel. Maybe we'll fall flat on our faces. But maybe we won't. However, at least we'll be aboard in case something does turn up that gives us a clue."

"Yes, of course," the Colonel grunted, and frowned. "That's quite true. But you could be throwing your lives away—and uselessly, too. You two helped accomplish something almost as big today, perhaps even bigger. I can't say yet. But capturing those two American born rats was a mighty big step toward smashing a lot of the Fifth Column business in this country. I mean that, too. That place was one of their arsenals where they've cached guns to be used when Berlin sends the order to strike at the United States from within. It's one of several arsenals located about the country. Those papers contained names and addresses of key men in their organization. And right now some of my agents, and F.B.I. agents, are waiting in that shack for the so-called big boss. His capture alone will be something mighty big. Yes, you two played a major part today in nipping something big in the bud. So it isn't fair to ask you to—"

"Okay, okay!" Dave suddenly snapped. "If you don't think we rate a crack at it, then have the Indian sail without us. I'm willing to take the chance. So's Freddy. But if you think we'd mess up things, then skip it. Let it slide."

The Colonel blinked and gave Dave a startled look. It wasn't every day that a junior officer flung words into his teeth, and it caught him completely off balance.

"But it's you I'm thinking of!" he blurted out. "I—"

"Oh, quite!" Freddy snapped him off. "We understand perfectly! We bungled it last night, Dave and I, not getting away from that beggar in the Waco. Shouldn't let him hit the engine. Yet, we'd probably make a worse mess of things if you sent us aboard the Indian."

"Now, that's not true!" the Colonel shouted. Then, sucking in his breath: "You two are making me mad. You're taking it the wrong way. I—"

"And how do you think *we* feel?" Dave stepped right in on him. "Last night you had a job for us to tackle. We might click on it, or we might muff it. You didn't have a thing for us to work on. But at least we were going to have a crack at it, and be aboard a ship that's going into action. Well, have you any more for us to work on, now, than you had last night? No. Not a thing more. The only difference is that the rat aboard knows we're coming aboard. At least we think he knows. But we're not even sure of *that*! Yet—well, holy catfish! Now you want to call everything off because the other guy holds more cards than we do; because we might get hurt. Look, Colonel! What do you think Freddy and I have been doing with the enemy ever since we got into the Royal Air Force? Playing snowball with them? We run the risk of being blacked out for keeps. So what? Doggone it! We've seen enough of this war to know it's no tea party."

"Exactly, and absolutely!" Freddy Farmer echoed vigorously as Dave ran out of breath.

Colonel Welsh glared at them for a full ten seconds. Then his stern face slowly broke into a grin, and he gave a little baffled shake of his head.

"Wild men!" he grunted. "I don't believe either of you knows even how to spell common sense. But maybe that's been the secret of your war success. That, and cold courage. All right, you win. You sail with the Indian. I'll see that you're put aboard the tender and taken out to her. The least I can do is spare your lives as long as I can."

"You mean because of what happened to your two agents last night?" Dave asked with a grin.

Colonel Welsh stood up and shook his head.

"No," he said. "The tender will leave in secret from a point up the shore, and the Indian's Captain will be informed of your coming. No, I mean sparing your lives for a while by sending you out officially. Otherwise, you two would probably try to swim out to her and be shot in the water by the deck watch. So I'll send you officially, and—well, God bless both of you—and keep you in His shadow. Amen!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Invisible Walls

Her engines turning over at close to top speed, the Aircraft Carrier Indian sliced her bow through the sky blue waters of the Pacific on a southwesterly course. To port and to starboard her destroyer escort scooted and twisted about like little smoke-belching water bugs having a field day. High in the air and several miles out in front, the advance scouting section winged along with all eyes on the watch for the first sign of possible enemy interference.

For eight days, now, the Indian had been racing across the vast Pacific for her rendezvous with the cruiser squadron and other navy craft that were to make the surprise attack on the Jap-occupied Marshall Islands. For eight days, and eight nights, racing westward and southward toward a well planned blow, and victory. Yet it might not be victory but disaster and death. For eight days and eight nights Freddy Farmer and Dave Dawson had played an active part in the life aboard that mighty ship of eagle's wings. They had made new friends, they had thrilled to the thunder and the power of their Douglas Devastator torpedo bomber as they went ripping off the carrier's flight deck and up into the blue Pacific sky for their daily practice patrol trick. They had felt once again the tingling excitement of the alert alarm, and the hunt for possible enemy craft in adjacent waters.

It had been eight days and nights of new things, a new routine, new orders, new faces, almost a new language in a new world. They were a part of what would be in not so many months to come the mightiest fighting force in all the world's history. It was perfect, it was tops—but it was not enough. Not enough, because with each passing hour, each passing day, their own personal defeat drew closer and closer. Eight days, and eight nights, and they were no nearer to accomplishing their special mission than they had been the very first moment they heard details of it fall from Colonel Welsh's lips way back in Washington, D. C.

"It really is an invisible wall this time, Dave," Freddy Farmer muttered bitterly as he and Dawson sunned themselves in the flight deck crash nets on the starboard side. "We might as well admit it. We haven't the faintest idea who the blighter might be. For all we know, he's already passed on his blasted information to the Japs; tossed it over the side at night, with a delayed flare bomb, for some trailing Jap submarine to sight and pick up. Blast it all! For all we know, the blighter may not be aboard at all."

"You're telling me?" Dave groaned, and rolled over on his stomach. "For all we know he's been watching us every minute, and laughing his darned head off. When I let fly at Colonel Welsh back there in San Diego—and it's a wonder he didn't knock me kicking for my lip—I felt sort of cocky. I

had a hunch that we'd be sure to trip over a break. What, I had no idea. But we've gone into things before with our heads down, and nothing else but a prayer. And somehow we managed to barge or stumble into something that paid off. But this? We're just a couple of guys without a prayer. Doggone it, Freddy! I haven't even met a guy aboard this ship I didn't like at once. And that goes for the ratings, as well as the officers. Nuts! I guess I must have expected to see some ugly-faced bird with dark glasses and a fake mustache sneaking around the flight deck at night. It's got me stopped cold."

"Me too!" Freddy said with a heavy sigh. "I heard a story once of something that happened in the last war. It was in a camp in England, an infantry training camp. A spy was sabotaging things, causing gun accidents, and several chaps were hurt. Well, they hunted high and low for the lad, but no go. Then one of the chaps working on the case got an idea. One evening when all the men were in barracks, and lights were out, he went from barracks to barracks, popped open the door, switched on the lights and yelled, 'Attention!' in German. In the third barracks a chap leaped out of his bed and sprang to attention. He was the blighter they wanted. German Army training drilled into him, you know. He reacted to the German command automatically."

"I get it!" Dave snorted. "So we should go all over the ship yelling 'Attention!' in German? Nice, but I've got a better idea. We dress up to look like Hitler and cover the ship. The first bird who gives us the Nazi salute we throw to the deck and nail him down. Then we search his quarters and find the stolen plans. It would be a cinch, but I guess there aren't any Hitler uniforms aboard. Too bad! We'll have to think up something else."

"Well, I certainly didn't offer it as a suggestion!" Freddy Farmer muttered. "Frankly, the best thing we could do would be to throw ourselves overboard. It would at least put an end to *our* worries."

"Nope, that's out," Dave grunted. "The darn thing would still haunt me wherever I went. And no crack, now, about *where* I'd go! Nope! We're stuck. Our only hope is a break, some kind of a break—any kind. Heck! I wonder if I'd be able to recognize a break even if it stepped up and kicked me in the face. Oh-oh! Something's going to happen, maybe!"

As Dave spoke the last he sat up and watched the young watch officer come striding across the deck toward him. The youth was about their age, and held an ensign's rank. He grinned as he approached and jerked a thumb aft.

"All pilots wanted in the Ready Room, Lieutenants," he announced. "Executive Flight Officer's orders."

"Something up?" Dave asked eagerly.

"Could be," the Ensign said with a shrug. "But maybe the flying's been sloppy, too. You never can tell when the Exec gets in the mood to crack down. Luck, anyway."

Dave and Freddy thanked him and went scurrying aft and down the steps to 'tween decks and the Ready Room. The place was already half filled, and other pilots came hurrying in after them. There was an air of eager expectancy about the room that seemed to charge it with high voltage electricity. The Executive Flight Officer, and the Senior Section Leader, stood waiting on the little raised platform at the far end of the room. Behind them hung a huge detailed chart of that section of the Pacific west and south of the Hawaiian Islands. Colored pins dotted its surface, and the bright light hung above it made the little pins glitter and sparkle like so many precious stones. Five minutes after Dave and Freddy arrived the room was packed, the doors were closed, and a hushed silence had settled down. The Executive Flight Officer cleared his throat, stepped to the edge of the platform, and grinned faintly.

"Don't get in too much of a sweat," he said. "This doesn't mean that Battle Stations is going to sound in the next hour or so. However, we're getting close to the rendezvous point, and there's some work for us to do. In short, we're steaming into Jap waters now, more or less, and we don't want to be caught with our wings folded. In fact, if we are to run into unexpected action, we want to be ready to throw the first punch, and make it count."

The senior officer paused, walked back to the map and touched a little gold-headed pin.

"That's the Indian," he said. "That's our position right now. We're a day's run from the cruiser squadron we are to meet, but we're plenty near some of the Pacific islands that the Japs may be using for submarine fuel bases. In the air, or on deck, we've got to be on our toes every minute from now on. A torpedo or two in us now, and the whole operation would be in danger of complete collapse. Also, we've got to watch out for any Jap surface ships that may be on the hunt for us. That's where you fellows come in. You've got to find any such ships, and give them the works, before they can get the chance to spot the Indian and her escort. In short, you fellows have got to see to it that *nothing* gets near the Indian from here on in."

The Executive Flight Officer paused again, and shrugged.

"Of course it's quite possible that we won't run into any trouble at all," he said presently. "Maybe we'll just waste gas and oil maintaining a constant patrol. That's unimportant, though. The point is, we can't run any risks of getting snarled up in any kind of an engagement before we make the rendezvous. So from now on every one of you is on constant twenty-four-hour duty. The section patrols are all plotted. Your own Section Leader will give you your chart copy each time you take the air. Stick to the course plotted for you, and don't worry about what the other fellow is doing. Just tend to your own knitting. Now, here's one thing to remember every second of the time you're away from the carrier."

The Executive Flight Officer stopped talking again, and took time out to rake the room full of pilots with his steel grey eyes.

"Keep your radios silent all the time!" he finally said. "If you are shot down, or forced down on the water, then it'll be just too bad for you. Somebody else will have to pick you up. Neither the Indian nor any of its escorting destroyers are turning back for anybody. So don't expect help if you go down. You won't get it. The chance of meeting enemy ships in these waters, particularly submarines, is too great to warrant risking any rescue work. So keep your radios silent, and—well, keep your wings up out of the wet stuff. That's all, except that Commander Brattle, here, has rearranged the sections, and made up a new flight board. He'll give you all the dope on the patrol schedules. Thumbs up, to all of you!"

Half an hour later Commander Brattle had had his say and the patrol schedules were perfectly clear to all concerned. Dave and Freddy were to fly the Number Two plane in Section Eight. Their first patrol trick was due in three hours. They were to fly a patrol course due north of the steaming carrier, cover an area of several hundred square miles, and be back on the flight deck just before darkness. It was the toughest patrol trick of any, for the simple reason that it was the last one before darkness set in, and flying was washed-out until early dawn. If by any chance they got lost and were forced to spend precious time locating the Indian, they would be out of luck. They wouldn't be able to land after dark. And if by any chance they went down in the water, they would first have to survive many hours of darkness floating about on the water before they could even begin to hope for rescue.

It was a tough patrol trick to fly, but the very fact that it was tough set Dave's heart thumping in eager expectation. Luck alone had placed them in that section, because the section members and patrol schedules had been arranged by drawing lots. In that way every man stood an equal chance to get a tough assignment or an easy one. And all possibility of favoritism went completely out the porthole. Luck, yes, but it made Dave and Freddy feel good just the same to be handed one of the tough patrols.

As they trooped out of the Ready Room along with the others, they winked happily at each other, and for the moment forgot the real reason for their presence aboard the Indian. The Executive Flight Officer had not said much about the possibility of meeting action, but he didn't have to. Every pilot knew that the constant patrol schedule wouldn't have been set up if it weren't pretty certain that enemy sea and air forces were lurking about in the immediate vicinity of the Indian and her destroyers, if not directly in her path ahead. Come nightfall and at least some of Uncle Sam's Navy eagles would have gone into action.

"And I sure hope it means us!" Dave echoed the thought aloud, as he and Freddy walked forward along the flight deck. "And how, I do!"

"Do what?" Freddy asked. "What's buzzing in that brain of yours now?"

"That we see some action," Dave replied, and jerked his thumb toward the north. "You know, Freddy, I've got a hunch. I've got a hunch, sure as shooting."

"You usually have," the English youth sighed. "What is it this time?"

Dave stopped walking, half turned, and faced his pal.

"The break we've been hoping for, praying for," he said in a low voice that was tight and full of excitement. "I have a hunch we're going to get that break. Wait, now! As the Exec said, we're in enemy waters now. From now until tomorrow night when we make the rendezvous, that unknown skunk aboard this Carrier is going to try and make contact with the Japs. I feel dead certain that he hasn't made any effort yet. He's been lying doggo until the Indian got into enemy waters. Beginning with now, though, he's going to try and make that contact."

"Well," Freddy muttered with a scowl, "as you would say, so what? How's he going to make contact? How are we going to know it? How are we going to be able to spot him? We haven't the faintest idea who he is, one of the officers, or one of the men. Maybe he's just an engine wiper buried down deep below decks. Maybe—"

"No, you're wrong there," Dave interrupted. "I've figured it out that he is either one of the pilots, or one of the mechanics. Nobody but pilots and mechanics have access to the flight hangar, you know. And that's where Commander Jackson and Lieutenant Commander Pollard were killed. No, I've figured all along that the man we're after is connected with the actual flying end aboard ship."

"Again, so what?" Freddy grunted. "Even suppose that he's one of the pilots? And I personally have the feeling that he is. What help is that? We're flying in only one section, one patrol trick. He could be in one of the other sections. He could take off, make his contact when out of sight of the Indian, and return on schedule, and neither you nor I be one bit the wiser."

"You're such a help!" Dave growled. "I know. Heck! Maybe I'm talking just to make myself feel good. I don't know. Just the same, I've got a hunch that that break is going to pop for us, and soon. A mighty strong hunch, too."

Freddy Farmer pursed his lips, and then let a little sigh slip between them.

"Well, I'm certainly not pulling against you," he murmured. "You have more hunches than a stray dog has fleas. But if I ever hoped and prayed that one of them would come true, it's certainly this one. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart."

"Then keep praying!" Dave said grimly as an eerie chill suddenly rippled through him. "And

meantime, it might be a good idea for us to watch our step. I've got another hunch somebody's been watching *us!*"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Battle Stations

It lacked twenty minutes to take-off time, and Dave was hurrying through the hangar deck to go top side and report to his Section Leader, when suddenly a groan off to his left slowed him up. He heard the groan again, and stopped in his tracks and stared hard into the shadows beyond some parked bombers. An instant later he saw two feet sticking out from under a wing. He bent over and scrambled under the wing. A man lay stretched out on the deck. His eyes were closed, there was a blood-smear cut on the left side of his head, and he was groaning as he struggled weakly to force himself up to a sitting position.

Dave cried out in sharp alarm and gave the man a helping hand. The man was Freddy Farmer, and he was acting as though a building had just dropped down on top of him.

"Easy, Freddy, old pal!" Dave soothed, and put his arm about his chum. "Take it easy. Lean on me. It's Dave. Gosh! What happened, Freddy? Are you okay?"

The sound of Dawson's voice pried open the English youth's eyes. It was a few seconds before he could focus his eyes on Dave's face, and even then they held a blank, befuddled look.

"I don't know," he mumbled, and gingerly touched his fingers to the cut on his head. "Ouch! My blasted head feels in six different pieces. I don't know what happened, Dave. Some chap bashed me, but I don't know who. I didn't see him. I—"

Freddy paused and glanced about as though to make sure where he was. His eyes opened wide in surprise.

"But I was way over there on the port side!" he gasped. "Just about to go up that companion ladder to the flight deck when suddenly I got a terrific bash on the head. I didn't hear anything, or see—Wait, Dave! I didn't see his face, but I remember seeing his legs as I fell down. He was wearing pilot's jumpers, so it must have been one of the pilots. It—Good grief, Dave!"

"Check!" Dave breathed excitedly. "Our rat friend has made himself known. This is the break, Freddy! This is the break!"

"Break, my hat!" the English youth growled, and slowly got up onto his feet. "You call having my head practically bashed in, a break? The beggar probably thought he'd killed me, and didn't bother to make sure. Just dragged me over here and left me to be found a corpse."

"And what a lucky corpse you turned out to be!" Dave said with a tight chuckle. "Hold everything, pal. Don't take things too fast. You got a nasty crack. A clean one, though. The ship's surgeon will fix you up in no time. Here, hang on me, and we'll go hunt him up."

"I'm all right!" Freddy protested, and hung back. "Stick to the subject. How do you figure my coming a cropper was a break? I certainly don't follow you there!"

"Sure it's a break," Dave said excitedly. "The luckiest break you and I ever bumped into. And it was certainly luck, all of it. Don't you see, Freddy? Our little rat friend is worried. He's not sure whether we've got him spotted or not. He's got a job to do, see? He wants to be sure he'll be able to do the job, so he tries to remove us from the picture by crowning you. Get it?"

"Of course I don't get it!" Freddy Farmer snapped. "You're talking in blasted riddles, Dave. Make sense!"

"Look, pal!" Dave said slowly. "We know darn well now that he's a pilot, don't we?"

"Well, the lad who bashed me was, and is, a pilot," the English youth admitted with a nod that made him wince.

"Okay, he's a pilot," Dave continued. "That means he plans to make contact with the Japs by air, when out on patrol. He doesn't know if we are keeping an eye on him, so he slugs you so that we won't go on patrol this trick. See?"

"But what if we don't make the patrol?" Freddy cried. "What's that—?"

"For cat's sake, get it, Freddy!" Dave almost shouted. "It means that *he is in our section!* It means that he is in our section and tried to make sure that we wouldn't be aloft to keep our eye on what he did. Don't you see? It *has* to be that. If he were flying with some other section, it wouldn't matter to him whether we flew our patrol trick or not. But we're in the same section. So he lays you out just before take-off time, figuring that before I can be assigned somebody else to fly with me our section will be off and on its way. And I'll have to wait over, or go off with the next section."

"Good grief, yes, of course!" Freddy Farmer breathed fiercely as his eyes got as big as dinner plates. "For once, you're absolutely right, Dave. The beggar is in our section. He has to be."

"Doggone right!" Dave echoed, and took hold of Freddy's arm. "Now you come on aft to the sick bay, and get fixed up. I've got to work fast and get the Exec to assign me somebody else to take your place. Perhaps—"

"Somebody to take *my* place!" Freddy Farmer cried angrily. "Over my dead body! That's rot. I'm making the patrol with you. I—"

"But, Freddy, you got slammed pretty—"

"You can shut your trap, Dave Dawson!" the English youth snapped viciously. "After all this waiting, if you think I'm going to go on waiting while you make this patrol and perhaps get yourself into no end of trouble, then you're completely balmy. Now, let go of my arm, and stand aside, or you'll be the one to get bashed. And I mean it, Dave. I'd still make this patrol even if the blighter had broken both my arms and both my legs."

Dave hesitated a fraction of a second, then shrugged and sighed.

"You always were a hard-headed cuss," he grunted. "So I guess maybe he didn't do so much damage as that. Okay, you old war horse. No sense our breaking up the furniture. Come along. But let's both keep our eyes skinned as we go topside. Look for a show of surprise on anybody's face. Do you suppose he's two guys? The pilot and the rear gunner?"

"I don't care if he's a whole blasted squadron!" Freddy Farmer growled as he pulled his helmet over his wounded head. "All I want is to see the beggar make a slip, and be able to get at him. Nobody can bash my head, and least of all some skunk Axis spy. Let's go."

Keeping step, the pair hurried across the hangar deck and went topside. Six Douglas Devastator torpedo bombers had been rolled into take-off position, and were waiting with props ticking over. There was a pilot and gunner in each of five of the planes, and as Dave and Freddy trotted toward their plane they cast keen glances at the flying members of their section. But it didn't gain them a thing. As a matter of fact, not a helmeted and goggled head was turned as they loped across the flight deck and legged into their Devastator that was parked in number four take-off position.

Two minutes later they were all set and ready to go. A minute after that a flight officer came along the line of planes and handed each pilot a copy of his patrol chart. And five minutes after that the Flight Operations officer on the flight bridge pointed his finger at the Number One plane, and nodded. The engine of that Devastator roared up in full throated song, the deck mechanics stepped back from the wing tips, and the plane rolled forward, picking up speed with every revolution of its propeller. In less than nothing flat it was a moving battle grey streak that finally let go of the deck and went curving upward over the bow of the Indian toward the blue heavens above.

Hardly had the Number One plane cleared its wheels before the Flight Operations officer stabbed his finger at the Number Two plane. It streaked off in a thunderous roar, and the finger was pointed at the Number Three plane. Then Four, then Five, and then Six, and the patrol was in the air climbing for altitude before taking up formation for the flight far out over the reaches of the Pacific.

Flying with the nonchalant ease, yet constant alertness, that comes with experience, Dave held the Devastator steady and twisted around to glance back at Freddy Farmer. The English youth was just a wee bit pale about the gills, but there was a bright look in his eyes, and a tight grin on his lips. Dave winked and nodded down at the Indian.

"Want to change your mind, pal?" he called out. "I can take you down with no trouble at all. How do you feel?"

"Never better!" Freddy shouted. "Just take me down, and it'll be the last landing you'll ever make. I'm up here to stay, my little man!"

Dave laughed, but there was just a little tightness to it.

"And do I hope that's the truth!" he cried. "Didn't see anything as we went to the plane, did you?"

"Not a sign," Freddy replied. "I don't think any of them even looked at us. Maybe he figured he'd done the job good on me, and that only five planes would take the air."

"Well, the rat knows different now!" Dave grated, and turned front. "He knows there are six ships up here, and that we're in one of them."

As Dave spoke the words he let his gaze wander from plane to plane in the formation. Oddly enough, a lump formed in his chest, and there was an empty feeling in his stomach. He had met and talked with every member of that patrol in the air. Kidded with them, played cards, and done all of the things one does with one's shipmates. It was hard, terribly hard to believe that one of them, possibly two, were earning blood money from Berlin or Tokio. Every one of them had struck him as being a swell guy. A swell guy, or one of the best actors that ever stepped on a stage. It didn't seem possible that savage hatred for the United States, for the whole civilized world, was flying along in the formation. It just didn't seem possible. Could he be wrong? Could both Freddy and he be all wet in their deductions? Had Freddy actually been slugged by accident, perhaps by a blundering mechanic carrying something heavy? Had he got scared at what he'd done, and dragged Freddy under that wing and taken to his heels? And had Freddy made a mistake about his wearing pilot's garb? Could it have been simply that?

Those and countless other questions churned around in Dave's head as he stared at the other planes in the formation droning northward over the seemingly endless sky blue waters of the Pacific. Whether the answers that came to mind were right or wrong, he had no way of telling. Only time would tell that. In a short while the formation would spread out so as to cover as great an area as possible. Then would be the time for the murderer of Commander Jackson and

Lieutenant Commander Pollard to make his move, whatever it was going to be.

However, when the Indian and her destroyer escort disappeared from view down over the lip of the southern horizon, and the patrol planes were spread out in wide line formation, nothing happened. Each plane continued droning along its prescribed course, its pilot and gunner keeping a constant lookout for telltale shadows under the water below them that might be Japanese submarines. And as the minutes piled up on one another, nothing continued to happen. Fresh doubts and fresh worries tugged at Dave's brain. Then, as a sudden thought came to him, he turned his head and stared thoughtfully at Freddy Farmer.

The English youth grinned, opened his mouth to say something smart, but checked himself as he saw the little lines of worry on Dave's forehead.

"What now?" he asked. "Did you forget something back on the ship? Or is this another hunch? Know what I've been thinking?"

"I think I have an idea what it is," Dave said. "The same thing I've been thinking, maybe. That he's suddenly called things off. He realizes that he didn't stop us from making this patrol, so he's decided not to take a chance yet. That it?"

"Something like that," the English youth replied with a grave nod. Then with a puzzled twist of his head, he added, "But maybe a little more than that. I mean that perhaps something else hasn't turned out as he planned. Perhaps he was sure that we'd sight enemy craft, but we haven't, so there isn't anything he can do but stay with the formation."

"Yeah, I get what you mean," Dave grunted. "If he should break formation cold, now, and go tearing off on his own, it might make the Section Leader go tearing after him to herd him back into place."

"Yes," Freddy said. Then, with a startled look: "Unless *he* happens to be the Section Leader!"

"Boy, the things you can think up!" Dave cried. Then, with a curt shake of his head: "No, that's out, I'm positive. Our Section Leader wears the Navy Cross and the Navy Medal of Valor. If he won those and then turned Axis spy and killer, then I give up. That would be too much for even me to believe. No, Freddy, our Section Leader is the one bird in this bunch who's okay in my book."

"Quite, and in mine, too," Freddy said. "It was just a sudden thought that hit me. I spoke it without thinking. No, it has to be somebody else. But I wish the blighter would tip his hand and do something. We're getting near the end of the patrol, and we haven't sighted a thing. We'll soon be turning back, and then it will be too late for him to try anything. He'll—I say!"

"What's up?" Dave cried as a look of horror flashed over the English youth's face for an instant.

"Listen!" Freddy cried. "If the beggar has decided to pass it up this time and try later, it'll be up to *you* to get your head bashed, see? I've had my share of it. Next time it's you."

"There's not going to be any next time!" Dave growled. "There just can't be. Whatever's going to happen has got to happen on this patrol. Any more of this nerve slicing waiting, and I'll go bats."

"You won't be alone, I fancy," Freddy murmured, and returned to studying the rolling blue swells of the Pacific below.

Dave turned front and gave his attention to his flying. And for the next twenty-five minutes the Devastator droned along on its job of flying, with neither of the two youths saying a word. At the end of that time the Section Leader fired a brace of very-light signals into the air to signify that the patrol had reached its farthest point north. Then he banked around toward the south again. The five other planes banked around, and as the turn was made Dave glued his eyes on the other planes and half held his breath in expectation. But he was doomed to disappointment. No plane refused to turn and went streaking away on its own. All of them swung about gracefully in formation and started drilling back toward the south and the Carrier Indian far down over the edge of the horizon.

"Well, so that's that!" Dave muttered bitterly. "I was either all wet, or he decided not to take the chance this trip. Or maybe it was because we didn't sight any—"

He didn't finish the rest. At that moment Freddy Farmer's fist came down on his shoulder, and the English youth's voice cried out in wild excitement.

"Look at Number Two plane way over there, Dave! It seems to be having engine trouble. It's spouting smoke from the exhaust, and is nosing down!"

"A forced landing!" Dave cried without thinking as he watched the Number Two plane start to lose altitude. "What a tough break for those two guys! They'll have to sit down and float until—Hey! What am I talking about? I must be nuts! Freddy!"

"Absolutely!" the English youth cried, and nodded his head vigorously. "It's easy to give your engine a bad mixture feed and make the exhaust smoke. An easy trick when you want to break away from a formation, and make it look as though you have to. Dave! I'll bet you anything you want that that engine hasn't got anything more wrong with it than ours has!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Water Rats

"No bet, no bet!" Dave cried, and clenched and unclenched his free fist in his excitement. "I think, too, that bird is pulling a trick. He's going down, and he knows that none of us will follow him down, because there's nothing we could do to help. We're land planes, not seaplanes. It would be up to the rest of us to get back to the Indian in a hurry and report that he had to sit down, and where."

"But I wonder, Dave," Freddy Farmer grunted as a sudden frown creased his brows. "Look. It stands to reason that he couldn't *know* he was to make this exact patrol at this exact time. So it couldn't very well be that he planned to land in the water and have a waiting Jap submarine pick him up. That would be silly. He might float for days before a submarine came along to pick him up. And—well, how in the world could he plan to meet one at this spot? Maybe it is the real thing, Dave. Maybe it is a forced landing that couldn't be helped. See what I mean?"

Dave didn't make any reply. He stared hard at the Number Two plane as it spat smoke from its exhausts, and slowly lost altitude. Freddy was quite right. It could be that what he was watching was very genuine; that tough luck had dropped down out of the blue Pacific sky to smack a couple of Uncle Sam's Navy eagles. Yet he couldn't believe that was true. Something inside of him—he didn't know what—refused to let him believe that it was all open and aboveboard.

"Could be, could be," he muttered over and over again to himself as the patrol started leaving the crippled plane to its rear. "Could be, yes. But, doggone it, we're going to make sure. We've got plenty of gas, Freddy. We can find our way back to the Indian alone. I'm turning back and going down to have a good look at those guys. I have a feeling that maybe they won't actually land in the water. They may—Hey! They did! Look at them, Freddy! That pilot is swinging around toward the north and trying to put as much distance as possible between his plane and the rest of us."

"Yes, he's doing just that!" Freddy shouted in return. "And if I were force landing I'd try to glide as long as I could in the direction of possible help. But he's banking around and gliding away from the Indian's position."

"Gliding nothing!" Dave howled, and dropped the Devastator's wing and started swinging it around. "That engine of his is not cooked. He's using it just enough to keep him almost level. Hang on, Freddy! We're going to take a look at that bird, and no kidding. A close look, too. I think it will make him mad. So keep on your toes, pal. 'Most anything can happen now. And maybe it will!"

Freddy didn't say anything to that. He simply hung on hard and sat tight as Dave whipped the Devastator around and stuck the nose down. The other plane was a good ten miles away by now, and fast becoming not much more than a small smudge of black silhouetted against the blue water. Holding the plane steady, Dave took time out to twist his head around and stare back at the rest of the patrol. He wondered if the Section Leader, seeing two planes dropping out of formation, would get curious himself. But whether or not the Section Leader was curious, he made no attempt to quit his other planes and turn back also. The patrol kept on drilling southward.

Turning front again, Dave instantly picked up the other Devastator. And as he did so his heart leaped in his chest, and the blood began to pound through his veins. Smoke had stopped spewing from the engine exhaust. The plane had even stopped gliding. As a matter of fact, it was on even keel, and racing northward at full throttle not more than three or four thousand feet above the surface of the Pacific. That fact alone told Dave that after eight days and eight nights the gods of war had decided to give Freddy and him a real break. He knew, just as though a voice were shouting it in his ears, that the pilot of that Devastator thundering northward was in the pay of the Axis. And for some reason he felt equally sure that the Devastator's gunner was of the same breed.

One thing that had puzzled him ever since Colonel Welsh had told of the double murder aboard the Aircraft Carrier Indian was whether one man or two had taken part in that gruesome affair. He had believed it was two for the reason that if there had been just one man, he would have been unable to kill both of the Indian's officers before one of them jumped him, or tried to, at least. And both had been shot right between the eyes. That fact, and other bits of reasoning, had led him to believe all along—though he had not spoken of it to Freddy Farmer—that they were after two Axis spies, not just one.

And as he sent the Devastator rocketing downward and to the north, he felt more convinced than ever that such was the truth.

"I could be wrong," he grunted softly as he kept his eyes fixed steadfastly on the other plane, "but I don't think so. Nope, I don't think so."

"Dave!" Freddy's voice suddenly screamed in his ear again. "Look to starboard and ahead, on the horizon line. I think I spot smoke from the funnel of some surface ship. Can you see it, too?"

Dave tore his gaze from the plane ahead and stared hard in the direction of the English youth's pointed finger. But all he could see was an endless expanse of blue water across which the shadows of coming night were beginning to steal. Where the water met the sky was little more than a blurred line to him. If there was smoke from a surface ship on that horizon line, he couldn't see it. However, many times had Freddy Farmer's eagle, X-ray eyes picked up things before he did. And so his heart began to dance about in his chest with wild excitement. And for the umpty-umpth millionth time he experienced that familiar eerie sensation at the back of his

neck that seemed always to come to him when trouble and danger were in the offing.

"You sure, Freddy?" he called out. "I can't see a darn thing. It's all just horizon line to me."

"I'm not dead sure, but pretty sure," his pal replied. "It looks to me like—Yes, I *am* dead sure, Dave. That is smoke, a lot of it, from some craft that's traveling at top speed. Eastward, I think. And look at that Devastator, Dave! He's seen it, now. Look! He's banking northeast to intercept it. Dave! If that's smoke from a Jap warship, then we'll know we're right!"

"I know it now!" Dave cried. "Doggone well I do. Look at that rat tear! His engine is hitting top revs. Ten to one he's spotted us and is trying to give us the shake. Well, he won't. Not while we've got the altitude and can gain extra speed in a dive. Hold your hat, Freddy. I'm going to give this power plant all she can take. And be ready with those rear guns. He may start to get tough."

As Dave shouted the last, he jerked his head around and took a quick sweeping glance back toward the south. There was nothing there but darkening blue sky. Not a sign of the rest of the patrol. It had passed on out of sight on its journey back to the Indian. Dave swallowed impulsively and turned front again. His heart had stopped bouncing around. It had become a cold lump that hung suspended in his chest.

Any faint hope that he might have help with whatever was ahead had passed out of the picture. Just Freddy and he were left. It was up to them to finish the job they had started so long ago. How long ago, anyway? A week, a month, or ten years? It seemed even longer than that since that man reading the book in the room with the pails and mops had told them to go on into Colonel Welsh's secret offices. But how long ago it was didn't matter now. Freddy and he had come to the end of the trail. Luck, blind luck mostly, had brought them to the end of their manhunt. But blind luck, or very clever brainwork, what difference? Down there and ahead was a Navy torpedo bomber streaking north and east to cut across the bow of some surface vessel. An American vessel? Not a chance. It had to be Jap. And Dave was ready to bet his life that it was.

He could see the trail of smoke now. And Freddy had been right. It was coming from a surface ship with engines turning over at top speed. Perhaps it was a Jap destroyer, or a cruiser, or even possibly one of Nippon's big battle wagons. He didn't know. The ship was still down below the horizon line. But she was traveling, and traveling plenty fast.

"There go his torpedo and bombs!" Freddy Farmer suddenly shouted. "That means he has spotted us and dumped his load to pick up all the speed he could. He's our man, Dave. He's our man. And I'll bet you all the pounds Sterling in England that that's a Jap ship he's trying to reach. Blast the dirty beggars. We can't let him get away with it, Dave. We just can't. Not now."

"Shut up and sit tight!" Dave snapped, and jammed the palm of his free hand against the already wide open throttle, as though in so doing he might get even more speed out of the thundering engine in the Devastator's nose. "He won't if we can possibly prevent it. We're gaining on him, and I think he knows it. Look! See the pilot turning around and looking back? And, Freddy, that bird in the rear pit is unlimbering his guns! Get set, but be sure they fire the first shots. We've got to make sure, Freddy, right up until there's no doubt about it at all."

Even as Dave shouted the words, he slid his hand up the control stick and snapped off the safety guard over the little red button he pressed to fire his guns. The first tingling thrill and heart chilling excitement was gone now. He felt perfectly cool, and calm, and collected. No, it wasn't because he was any superman with nerves of steel that no power on earth could break. It was simply that he had flown straight into danger too many times to go all haywire and jittery. This, you might say, was old stuff to Freddy and him. They had been through it in France, and in England, and in Libya, and over the broad Atlantic, and out in the Far East. A thousand times they had gone hurtling into sky battle. And after that many times you get used to taking it in stride.

And so with measured movements he prepared himself for battle, if battle was to come. And that battle was to come seemed just as certain as that night was to come. And soon.... Soon? Just about four split seconds later he knew definitely that engines were going to whine under strain of violent aerial combat maneuvers, and that machine guns were going to crackle and yammer all over that Pacific sky. He knew it because the plane ahead and still below his altitude suddenly veered sharply to the left, and pulled its nose up and around in a wing screaming power zoom. And almost at the same instant Freddy's shouting voice told Dave that he, too, knew the battle was about to begin.

"The blighter knows he can't shake us off!" the English youth cried. "Realizes we have the altitude, and can come down for a cold meat shot, if we want to. And he knows we will if that ship turns out to be Jap. And it is a cinch it is. Right-o, Dave! As I recall, that chap's a pukka pilot. Name's Miller, isn't it?"

"That's what we called him!" Dave replied as he tried in vain to remember the face of the Devastator's pilot. "And his gunner is named Kaufman, I think. Miller and Kaufman! I wonder how they spell their real German names. I—Here he comes. And shooting! That tears it, Freddy! He's opened fire. So it's for keep, now."

"Get after him, Dave!" Freddy screamed. "Get in close and let me at the beggar. Bash me, will he? I fancy not again he won't!"

Like a battle grey comet gone completely haywire, the other Devastator came tearing up and around, guns blazing as its pilot tried to cut in under Dave and drill the belly of his ship. But he didn't even come close. Dave held his plane in its roaring dive just long enough to let fly with a single withering blast at the zooming ship; then he flung over hard on one wing, and went

curving around and up himself to hold the advantage of his altitude. As he swung around, he heard Freddy Farmer's rear pit guns chatter. He jerked his head and took a quick look, and laughed out loud. Freddy's burst had obviously been too close for comfort, for the other pilot was kicking out of his zoom and off to the other side in a hurry.

"Atta boy, Freddy!" Dave yelled, and hauled his Devastator about in the opposite direction. "Shoot his pants off, but save the coat and vest for me. Let him—"

Dave cut the rest off short as he happened to glance back at Freddy. The English youth had dropped hold of his guns and was staring wide-eyed toward the north. Dave checked the question on his lips and shot a quick look in that direction himself. What he saw made his heart zoom up to bang hard against his back teeth, and stick there!

The smoke belching surface craft had come up over the northern horizon into full view. It was a man of war, a heavy cruiser, and Dave did not need a second look to recognize it as a Japanese cruiser. But that was not what caused his heart to zoom up his throat and lock the air in his lungs. Right behind the cruiser was another of the same class. Both ships were slamming along through the water, and even as Dave stared at them they changed course and veered around to the south.

On they came at top speed, and for a crazy instant Dave thought they had sighted his Devastator and were steaming southward to blast him out of the air with anti-aircraft fire. It was, of course, an absolutely crazy idea, and it was gone almost as it was born. And then an inkling of the truth cut through his brain. Cold chills rippled down his spine, and the inside of his mouth went bone dry. He impulsively glanced at his radio panel, and gave a savage nod of his head.

"That must be it!" he grated through clenched teeth. "The rats in that other Devastator *did* use their radio! They must have sent out the Indian's position, and those cruisers heard it. Now they're racing south to get the Indian under cover of darkness. That's it, sure as shooting. The rats figure that if they can't deliver the stolen plans of the battle operation in time, they can at least do some damage. Yeah! Give away the Indian's position and have her blown out of the water with her planes helpless in the dark. Good grief! Why are such vermin ever born?"

Dave didn't add anything to that. He didn't because there was even more pressing business at hand. During the precious seconds he had gazed pop-eyed at the two onrushing Japanese cruisers, the pilot of the other Devastator had taken full advantage of the opportunity offered. He had brought his plane wing screaming up and around, and was tearing in at Dave and Freddy from the side. As a matter of fact, it was the savage yammer of the English youth's guns that snapped Dave out of his trance. He jerked his head around, felt a tiny sting on one cheek, and saw a section of the right side of his glass hatch seem to melt away into nothing. Had he not turned his face just at that moment, he probably would have lost a good part of his jaw.

He didn't take time out to pat himself on the back for being so fortunate. Fact is, he didn't take time out to do anything but concentrate on slamming and booting the Devastator out of range of that withering blast of fire. The instant he was in the clear he whipped out his free hand to the release toggle that would drop the deadly torpedo slung in the rack under the plane's belly. Even as his fingers touched it he jerked his hand away and shook his head. No, he had to save that steel fish until later. Freddy and he would have to risk having it exploded by the fire from the other plane. And that went for the Devastator's wing bombs, too. Freddy and he would need those in the big battle to come, the battle against two heavy Jap cruisers.

"We've got to get the blighter in a hurry, Dave!" Freddy's voice of confirmation suddenly cut his thoughts. "We've got to get him and not let either of those cruisers pick him up—pick *them* up. If they do, everything is lost, Dave. They're bound to have those stolen plans of battle operations with them, or at least stamped in their heads. If they once get aboard either of those cruisers, everything will become a terrible mess. It mustn't happen, Dave!"

"You're telling me?" Dave roared, and hauled the Devastator around in a dime turn that virtually made the wings groan in protest, and the threatening wave of a blackout rise up before his eyes. "You're doggone right we can't let them make contact. Hang on, Freddy! And let go with your guns the instant you get the chance. I'm going to charge them. It's either them or us, Freddy!"

"All set!" the English youth howled back. "Let her rip, and blast their dirty hearts!"

For a couple of split seconds Dave held the Devastator in its tight turn, and kept his eyes glued on the other plane. It was banking around to get underneath him and come thundering up for an all gun blast at the belly of his plane. So he deliberately held his Devastator in the tight turn until he saw the nose of the other ship start to come up. The instant it started up, Dave slammed farther over on wing, kicked rudder hard and dropped the nose down to the vertical.

Like a battle grey streak of lightning, Dave's plane rocketed downward. He leaned far forward, straining against his safety harness, and kept his mouth open to relieve the pressure in his pounding ears. It was as though a thousand fingers of steel were curled about his insides and striving to rip and tear in all directions at the same time. White balls of fire leaped and bounced around in his brain as the Devastator went down at a terrific rate of speed. It was agony to try to breathe, for the walls of his lungs seemed pressed flat against each other.

For perhaps three seconds the agony lasted, or maybe it was three years. Then he was practically right on top of the other Devastator, so close that he could actually see the whites of the pilot's fear-glazed eyes staring up at him. The pilot was trying desperately to kick off to the side and cut out from under Dave's diving plane. But there wasn't time, and the terror in his eyes seemed to indicate that he realized it.

Three seconds, and then Dave jabbed his electric firing trigger. His guns hammered and pounded out nickel-jacketed destruction, and a hail of doom tore into the other Devastator like red hot pokers slashing into snow. The plane actually leaped off to one side like a bird nailed in full flight. It rolled over twice, and its right wing started to tear away in shreds. As Dave went thundering on past it he heard Freddy Farmer's gun taking up where he had left off. A moment or so later he was able to ease his plane out of its wing straining dive and circle up and around and back.

Almost reluctantly he slid his finger off the trigger button. There wasn't any need to continue drilling the crippled plane. It was shy one wing, and was slip sliding about in the air like a dead leaf in a raging gale. Its propeller was still spinning over, but even as Dave looked at it black smoke belched out from under the engine cowling, and licking tongues of flame went darting backward.

"Poor devils, just the same," Dave heard his own voice mutter. "But they're probably stone dead now, anyway, so the fire won't add to their—"

He never finished the rest. Rather, he finished it with a wild shout of anger and maddening defeat. The pilot and gunner of the other Devastator were not dead. By a miracle the withering fire from Dave's guns and from Freddy's guns had passed them by. On the contrary, they were very much alive. Out of anger-filmed eyes, Dave saw both of them push up out of their bullet-shattered greenhouse and leap out into space and down toward the rolling blue waters of the Pacific.

Both the pilot and gunner were alive! Both had bailed out with their parachutes! Both would land in the water—and both could very easily be picked up by either of the onrushing Japanese cruisers. The gods of war were screaming with glee. A valiant effort by two valiant war eagles serving Uncle Sam was going for a complete loss, would completely fail in its purpose.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eagle Madness

A thousand little demons seemed to be screaming their mocking laughter in Dave's ears as he watched the two parachute envelopes billow out and catch in the wind. Seething white rage boiled up within him, and he impulsively started to kick his Devastator around and down toward those two flying garbed figures swaying like clock pendulums at the ends of their parachute shroud lines. But even as he started to drop down, he made strangling noises in his throat and pulled the Devastator up onto even keel.

"I can't do it!" he cried hoarsely. "I can't shoot them like a couple of helpless dogs. That's murder. That's the Nazi way. That's not our way. I just can't do it."

"But we've got to do something, Dave!" Freddy Farmer screamed in his ear. "Satan himself must have saved them. And look, Dave! That leading cruiser! She's shot one of her scouting planes off the forward catapult. A seaplane! They're going to land and try to pick them up, sure as you're born. That means they know perfectly well who those two beggars are, and what they've got."

Dave nodded grimly, but didn't bother to make any reply for the moment. Icy fingers were once again coiling about his heart. He knew that Freddy Farmer had spoken the truth, if the truth had ever been spoken by anyone. Yes, it was certain that the commanders of those two Jap cruisers knew that the two U. S. Naval Aviation clad figures floating slowly down toward the water possessed the information that the entire Jap Navy had been waiting to receive.

Word of what had happened aboard the Indian in San Diego harbor a few weeks before had of course leaked ashore. Axis Fifth Columnists had gathered up that news and passed it on higher up. It was a dead certainty that the instant the Indian had weighed anchor and sailed out of San Diego harbor, word had been flashed to the Japanese Navy command, and from there to all of the Nipponese sea units on patrol. True, they probably didn't know where the Indian was bound, or what she would do when she reached her destination. Dave felt very sure that the secret of the surprise attack on the Marshall Island group was something the Japs still didn't know, or even suspect. However, it was equally certain that they knew that two of their spies were aboard the Indian. And, also, that they possessed information that was worth a major naval victory to the Japanese. For that reason every unit of the Jap Navy was on the lookout for the Indian. And every one of its brown-skinned rats, from the admirals down, had been waiting with savage expectancy for the spies to make some kind of contact.

That contact was now close to being made. It was unquestionably luck that had sent the bogus Miller and Kaufman off on this particular patrol. And it was undoubtedly luck that had placed these two Jap cruisers just a little north of the end of the plotted patrol course. However, war without luck, and miracles happening left and right, just isn't war. And now there were the two Axis spies floating down toward the water, and there were the two Nipponese cruisers. And one of them had already catapulted one of its scouting seaplanes to land and pick up the two airmen.

All that, and more, whizzed through Dave's brain in nothing flat. Then he tore his eyes off the two men going down by parachute and fastened them on the Jap cruiser's seaplane skimming along the surface of the water. One look, and then he went into action again.

"That's their mistake!" he shouted, and slammed the Devastator's nose down. "Like picking off

clay ducks in a shooting gallery. But those rat Japs are asking for it. So they get it!"

Dave emphasized the last with a savage nod of his head and slid his finger over the trigger button. By then the Jap seaplane pilot saw what was going to happen. He hauled the nose of his plane up as though to give battle. Almost immediately, though, he got cold feet and went cartwheeling around toward the east. But it didn't do him any good. He might just as well have tried to zoom up and hide behind the setting sun. Dave had him cold in his sights, and the Jap was caught like a rat in a trap.

One long burst from Dave's wing guns. Another long burst from Freddy Farmer's guns, as Dave banked off and gave his pal an aim, and that was that. The slow Jap seaplane came apart as though it had flown full tilt into a brick wall. It seemed to explode all over the place and hit the water in a shower of small pieces. Dave instantly nosed up and twisted around for another look at the steaming cruisers still a considerable distance away. Even as he spotted them, he saw tongues of flame stab out from their forward decks, and the air about him was filled with a roar akin to that of an express train racing into the yawning mouth of a tunnel. A blood-chilling roar, and then the Pacific sky was splashed with bursting anti-aircraft shells that glowed red and orange and yellow all at the same time.

Dave grinned, tight-lipped, and instantly nosed down. It had been a pretty rotten bit of shooting, even for Jap gunners. But maybe they weren't to blame. Dave's Devastator was too low for their angle of fire, and the shells exploded well above the Devastator. Just the same it was no cause for great joy. On the contrary it was an advanced warning of what the Jap cruiser commanders intended to do. A ten-year-old child could guess what it was, too.

Realizing that it was useless to pick up the two parachutists by seaplane, the Japs were going to hold Dave and Freddy at bay by the sheer power of their concentrated fire, and steam alongside the two spies, who were no longer floating down through the air, but had hit the water and were floating around in their orange-colored life jackets. Dave cast a quick glance down at those two gobs of orange in the water, and groaned in bitter exasperation. How simple if Freddy and he were fighting on Adolf Hitler's and Hirohito's side! All he would have to do would be to stick the nose down at those two orange spots in the water and no more than brush his finger across the trigger button of his guns. Just a short burst and two rats would be dead, never to reveal what they knew. How simple, how easy it would be to do it that way!

But he couldn't. And he knew that deep in his heart, and in his soul. No matter how much he hated the Nazis and the Japs, and all the ruthless, rotten things they stood for, it wasn't a hate that could make him murder in cold blood. He and Freddy would have to accomplish their purpose some other way.

Some other way? Those three words exploded in his brain like bombs. As more shells from the cruisers' guns exploded well overhead, he twisted around in the seat and stared at Freddy Farmer. The English youth was gripping his guns with white knuckles and staring down at the floating spies. But stamped on Freddy's face was the very same thing that was in Dave's brain. It would be so very, very simple. Yet it couldn't be done. It wasn't the way of the civilized white man.

"We've got to try it, Freddy!" Dave shouted, and was conscious of the dry tightness in his throat. "It's our only hope—our only one. If either cruiser gets alongside those two rats in the water—"

Dave stopped and let a shrug speak the rest. Freddy turned his eyes from the surface of the water, looked at him, and nodded grimly.

"Quite!" he said, tight-lipped. "Us against those two blasted cruisers. We're mad even to try it. If a single one of their shells gets close before we've got rid of our torpedo and bombs, why then—"

It was Freddy's turn to cut off his words, and let a gesture of his hand finish the sentence.

"Yeah, we'd probably come down on the moon, or on a star!" Dave shouted, and banked the Devastator around toward the north. "We can get one with our torpedo, and go after the other with our bombs. Darn it, anything to stop them from picking up those two rats, finding out things, and getting busy on the radio. It's a job that can't be done, Freddy. But, heck! We've got to *do* it!"

"Then get on with it!" the English youth cried. "They may try to catapult more planes, and we certainly can't do a million different things at once."

"Here we go!" Dave roared, and pushed the Devastator's nose down. "Good luck to us both, Freddy. And it's been nice knowing you, pal!"

If Freddy Farmer made any reply, Dave didn't hear it. The engine in the nose was roaring out full blast, and the gunners aboard the two Jap cruisers, realizing what was happening, were opening up with everything they had. The din that hammered and pounded through that section of the Pacific sky was akin to that of worlds colliding. Hunched tight-lipped over the stick, Dave sent the torpedo bomber all the way down until its belly was almost slapping the water. There he leveled off, banked around to the left and headed directly for a broadside shot at the leading Japanese cruiser.

Squinting ahead was like looking into the mouth of an exploding blast furnace. Every gun, from small machine guns and pom-poms to the big stuff, was hurling roaring steel in his direction. Everything else seemed to fade out of his vision. He could see nothing but that moving wall of spouting flame and smoke directly ahead. Split seconds seemed to take years in passing. A hundred times he was tempted to release the torpedo and zoom up for safe altitude. But each time he killed the desire.

The Devastator carried one torpedo, and he had to make it good. He couldn't take any chances of missing the sleek side of that steaming cruiser. He had to get in close, real close, and then slam home the steel fish. A bow hit or a stern hit wouldn't count. It had to be square amidships, where the explosion would tear the heart out of the Jap craft and sink it like a rock. He had to—

The Devastator suddenly seemed to half stop and lurch crazily to the side as a furious blast of fire from the enemy cruiser's guns crashed into it. Dave had the feeling that he had been slapped in the face with a barn door. He went dumb and stiff from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Everything turned into spinning red light before his eyes. He knew that he was lashed to the seat, and that both hands gripped the controls with fingers of steel. But he wasn't sure.

He wasn't sure of anything any more! Was Freddy Farmer still with him in the Devastator? Was the plane still with him, for that matter? Or had the withering blast of gunfire from the Japanese cruiser sent him sailing off into thin air and death?

He mustn't die now. Not yet! The suicide mission had only begun. The aerial torpedo was still in its rack under the Devastator's belly. Or was it? Had the cruiser's gunfire touched it off—and had Freddy and he failed?

"Freddy! Freddy Farmer! Are you with me, fellow? Are you still there, pal?"

Was that his own voice he heard—that faint little squeak that sounded in his ears? If only he could see something besides the darned dancing balls of light. If only he could get his muscles to move. But they wouldn't move. His whole body had been turned to stone, and he was falling straight down through a world of blazing flame. He was—

Suddenly it was as though a gigantic invisible hand had reached out and wiped away all the dancing colored light from in front of his eyes. Like a man waking up from a heavy sleep, he found himself staring at the instrument panel of the Douglas Devastator. He lifted his gaze, stared through the bullet-shattered front of his glass hatch, at the nose of the plane with its whirling prop—and at the shadow-filled Pacific sky beyond!

"You're nuts, you're completely cockeyed. You should be falling down, not zooming *up*!"

The sound of his own voice seemed to come to him from a great distance. He tried to shake his head, and found that he could. The movement dashed some of the cobwebs and the fog from his brain. He started to turn around in the seat when something hit him a terrific clip on the shoulder. It was Freddy Farmer's fist, and the English youth was yelling his head off.

"Bull's-eye, Dave! A perfect bull's-eye! But I thought for fair you were going to ram us straight into the cruiser's fighting top. Look at her! Look at her! Goodbye, you dirty brown rats! I only wish your big-toothed Emperor was with you. Make war on decent people, will you, you rotten beggars!"

"Hey! What gives?" Dave cried, as his still slightly benumbed brain refused to grasp the true meaning of Freddy Farmer's half screamed words. "What in thunder are you raving about?"

"What's *that*?" Freddy cried, and peered at him in dumbfounded amazement. "You don't—"

The English youth choked himself off, and the amazement in his eyes changed to a look of alarm. At almost the same instant Dave began to feel a dull ache on the left side of his head. He impulsively reached up his hand and touched strips of his torn helmet. The strips were wet and sticky, and when he lowered his hand it was to see his fingers stained with his own blood.

"Well, knock me for a loop!" he gulped foolishly. "Somebody, or something, must have slugged me!"

"I'll say!" Freddy cried. "A piece of shrapnel, I guess. A lot of it hit us. But are you all right, Dave? Does it hurt much? Had I better take over the controls? The other cruiser is—"

"*Cruiser*?" Dave boomed. And then like a curtain snapping up to flood his brain with light, he suddenly remembered where he was, why, and what had happened. He *had* actually fired the torpedo at the cruiser.

Ignoring another question that spilled off Freddy's lips, he twisted in the seat, automatically shoved the Devastator down onto even keel and stared down over the side. What he saw made his breath catch in his throat, and his heart stand still in awe and gruesome horror.

One of the cruisers was way over on its side and well down by the stern—that is, what little he could see of her. Mostly it was a boiling patch of red flame in the water that fountained upward and outward to hurl licking tongues of fire out in all directions. In a crazy sort of way he knew that the cruiser's powder magazine had probably exploded. At any rate, the craft was being ripped to shreds as though her steel plates were so much paper.

Then, suddenly, as he moved his gaze across the water, he saw a sight that made him cry out in terror, and shudder violently. He saw two tiny spots of orange almost directly in the path of the keeled over cruiser. And then he didn't see them any more. A tongue of boiling flame, perhaps an oil drum or something on fire, came slashing straight out of the smoke-filled air and down on that spot. The flames splashed out like drops of molten metal, and white spray rose up like a cloud. The two spots of orange that were the life jackets worn by the two spies disappeared from view as though by magic. When the flames and the spray melted away, the two spots of orange weren't there any more. There was nothing but a smoking slick of oil.

"Poor devils!" Dave muttered shakily. "What a horrible way to die. They were rats, but—but that was a terrible way for even rats to die. They—"

The last was cut off as though by a knife. A section of the sky seemed to drop down and explode right on the nose of the Devastator. For a brief instant Dave found himself in a world of utter darkness. Then the plane went tearing out into clear light again. It was shuddering and trembling like a spent race horse. He knew without looking that the right wing had been blasted by bits of shrapnel, and that the tip was beginning to flutter. Instinct and instinct alone caused him to shove the nose down and lose altitude fast. But even as he went down he knew that losing altitude wasn't going to help much. The second of the Japanese cruisers was just ahead and below. And every gun aboard her was thundering away at the Devastator at practically point blank range.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Death Hates To Lose

"Our bombs, Dave! Can you get us down lower and right over the blasted thing?"

Above the thundering roar of bursting anti-aircraft shells, Freddy Farmer's voice came to Dave as little more than a whisper. He heard it nevertheless, and nodded his head vigorously to let the English youth know that he had heard. They were right in the middle of the cruiser's fire now. It was just as safe to keep on going down on her as it was to try and break away. So long as he was able to dive, the Devastator presented a difficult target for the Jap gunners. But should he pull out of the dive, and arc off to either side, the Devastator would then instantly become a target tripled in size.

No, there was but one thing to do: to go on down on her and then let go with their wing bombs in the last instant allowed. That their bombs might put the cruiser out of action, to say nothing about sinking her, was completely out of the question. It was plain silly even to hope that such a miracle as that would come to pass. But it would be possible to put some of her guns out of action. And it was just barely possible, too, that the bombs might damage the craft enough to force the Jap commander to reduce her speed. That at least would be something.

Yes, indeed. If the cruiser was forced to reduce speed, she would at least have to give up the search for the Carrier Indian. And now that the two spies were gone, it was only logical that the Jap commander would go steaming southward in a desperate effort to find the Indian and pounce upon her in the dark.

"Sure, give her all you can!" Dave muttered as he hunched forward over the stick of the diving plane. "But don't kid yourself why. You know why, and *how* you do! Her fire has you bracketed. You'll catch it cold no matter which way you turn. So there's only one thing you *can* do. Slam down and give her all you've got left before your number and Freddy's number go up. Down—and give her all you can, while you can."

A wild desire to twist his head around and see how Freddy Farmer was taking it possessed Dave for a moment—but only for a moment. Just as suddenly he didn't want to see Freddy's face. Because of the look of certain death he felt sure he would see there? He didn't know. Because he was afraid that Freddy might read the truth in his own eyes? He didn't know. Only one thing seemed certain. Freddy Farmer and Dave Dawson had at long last come to the end of the trail. Their luck, if luck it was, had run out.

He wasn't afraid to die, though. Perhaps that was because he had faced death so many, many other times and managed to skin through. Anyway, he did not feel fear inside of him. Funny, but the sensation that rippled through him was one of fierce satisfaction. Satisfaction at completing a job that had seemed utterly impossible right from the very start. Bull luck? Blind luck? Okay, call it anything you wanted to, but the fact remained that two murdering Axis agents had failed to win through at the very last moment. They were dead, and all they knew was dead with them. Their corpses were but two of the hundreds the exploding cruiser had scattered all over that section of the Pacific. Yes, they were dead. Their information was lost to the Japs. And Freddy Farmer and he had paid back a little bit on the Pearl Harbor account. They had blasted a Jap cruiser out of the war and the world for keeps. That was something, anyway—little something extra for the Old Man with the whiskers, Uncle Sam.

Too bad the Devastator didn't carry a couple of torpedoes, so that they could slam a death blow into the second cruiser as they went down the long trail that has no end. Too bad, but no sense crying about it. The plane had carried only one torpedo, and they had made full use of that one. There were only the bombs left—bombs that might spill a lot of Jap blood over the cruiser's decks, but would never go through her deck plates to do real damage below. And so—

"So here goes!" Dave whispered softly as the gun-spitting cruiser seemed to come sweeping up toward his spinning propeller. "Here goes Freddy—and here I go. Something to remember us by!"

A sob rose up in Dave's throat and stuck. He winked his eyes that had suddenly begun to sting. Then he grinned, and the grin grew into a harsh, defiant laugh. The last split second had arrived. He had to pull out and give Freddy a chance to release their wing bombs, or dive on straight into the cruiser. He was tempted to do that last thing: to slam straight in and go out in a roaring blaze of glory. But cold fighting sense refused to permit him to do it.

He braced himself, hauled back on the stick, brought the nose up and shot straight forward not

twenty feet above the cruiser's fighting top. One second more and he would streak right over the up-tilted muzzles of the forward anti-aircraft guns. A target a blind man couldn't miss. A target you could hit with rocks. One second more. Two at the most. Dump the bombs, Freddy! Slam them down and blast some of those dirty brown devils to the place where they and all their filthy back-stabbing breed belong. Give it to them, Freddy. Give them all we've got left!

Dave didn't know whether he was roaring out the words, or whether they were simply echoing around in his brain. He simply knew that the Devastator was perched on the very brink of all eternity, and that he was banging out the last of his bullets as a sort of final touch. He only knew that—

But he didn't. He didn't know anything any more. He was completely lost in a huge black cloud that pressed in on him from all sides. He was right in the middle of it, and sailing away and away. The light of day was gone, and night was all about him. Was it night, or was this what death was like? Darkness. Thick darkness with a faint roaring in the distance, and drifting to him from all sides.

"I can't be dead—my head hurts too darned much!"

The sound of his own voice in that cloud of darkness startled him so that he cried out in fear. Then suddenly he felt himself sink down; felt water in his mouth, his nose, his eyes, and in his ears. He gasped, and water poured down his throat—salty, smoky tasting water. And his lungs seemed to burst right out between his ribs. His brain refused point blank to function, but the instinct of self-preservation came to his rescue. Without realizing it, he kicked with his feet and struck out blindly with his hands. He couldn't move his right hand, though. There was something hanging onto it, a dead weight that made it impossible for him to move his arm.

Then suddenly he was sucking and gurgling air into his lungs. Just as suddenly the film over his eyes passed away, and he found himself looking at a world of brilliant stars over his head. And just as suddenly he realized that he was in the water, keeping himself afloat with one hand, and clutching hold of Freddy Farmer's helmeted head with the other, striving to keep the English youth's face out of water.

It was dark as pitch all about him. Yet when he winked the water from his eyes a weird glow of light seemed to filter down from the stars. He saw dark objects floating about him. There were pieces of wreckage, but for the moment he could not summon the strength to swim toward them. In a dulled sort of way he knew that something was wrong, that something wasn't right. Then he knew what it was. His life jacket was gone, at least half of it. The other half was in strips and wasn't of any use. Freddy Farmer's life jacket was gone completely. In fact, he had on nothing but his shirt. Dave could tell that when a swell lifted the English youth's shoulder up out of the water.

Bit by bit Dave's brain began to click over at increased speed. Presently it gave him the sense to take a good look at Freddy. He pulled his pal closer, and as he did so held his breath in terror. But God had been kind. Freddy Farmer was not dead. He was unconscious, but he was breathing. A mighty sob of joy shook Dave's body. He clenched his teeth, and summoned every ounce of strength in his half numb body. He saw a large sized object floating by a few yards away. It looked like the top side of a crate, or perhaps it was a bunk. He struck out for it with one hand and two feet. Only a few yards away, but every foot was a mile to Dave's straining efforts. His head pounded, and all the colors of the rainbow flashed and whizzed around before his eyes.

Then finally his outstretched hand clutched hold of something. It felt like a loop of rope, and it was fastened to the floating object. He didn't bother to find out what the object was. He was quite content to cling to the looped rope for several minutes and fight for his breath and his strength. Eventually, though, he shifted his position in the water, thrust up his hand and hooked it over the side of the object. And it was then he made the joyful discovery. It was not a crate, or a bunk. The object was a ship's raft—a life raft constructed something like a rubber life raft. Airtight circular drums formed the sides, and stout planks lashed together three thick formed the bottom of the raft.

Dave laughed and cried in the same breath, and then almost spent the last of his strength in a mad effort to scramble onto the raft and haul Freddy Farmer up with him. Three times he tried it, only to lose his grip and slide back into the water, and under. He didn't try it that way a fourth time. He forced himself to spend a good ten minutes still clinging to the looped rope. Then, when renewed strength began to seep slowly through his body, he worked Freddy Farmer's unconscious body close to the raft, got one of the English youth's arms flung up over the side, and then the other. Then inch by inch he worked the dead weight up until Freddy went tumbling over and down onto the floor of the raft.

It required another rest period of some ten minutes for Dave to dig up some more strength. Then, grabbing hold with both of his hands, he worked his body upward, muscles straining, strength ebbing away like a punctured balloon spilling air, and all the firecrackers in the world going off in his brain. It took years, it seemed, but he finally made it. He got all the way in and fell sprawling down on top of Freddy Farmer. He tried to push himself up and crawl off his pal, but that was the moment when all the glittering stars in the heavens fell down and hit him on top of the head.

His next sensation was that his whole body was on fire. He opened his eyes, but it was like looking straight in through the opened door of a blast furnace going full force. He closed his eyes, groaned, and tried to move. It was then that water hit him smack in the face, and hands took hold of him.

"Dave! Speak to me, Dave! It's Freddy. Dave! Please speak! Can you hear me? Steady, lad, steady! Relax and let me hold you. Praise be to Allah! I've been terrified for hours that you were a goner!"

With a tremendous effort Dave forced his eyes open. The glare of the blast furnace was gone, but he could still feel the heat. For a few seconds he didn't try to think. He didn't try to do anything except relax, and let somebody hold him up, and keep the glare of that blast furnace out of his eyes. He knew it must be Freddy Farmer. He recognized the voice, and the voice had said so. Good old Freddy. Always there at the right time. Never failed. One in a million. The very best. The tops.

"Hold it, Dave!" Freddy's voice cried in his ears again. "Don't let go, pal. Hold it. Buck up. Come on, now. There's a lad for you. Cheeri-o, Dave!"

He found that his eyes were opened again, and that Freddy Farmer's grinning face was but a foot from his own. He stared at it, grinned himself, and suddenly strength and vitality began coursing through his veins. He took his eyes off Freddy's face, looked about him, and gulped. As far as he could see in any direction was nothing but a limitless expanse of sky blue water—sky blue water filmed over with golden light from the blazing sun hanging high in the heavens. He and Freddy Farmer were alone in the life raft, completely alone. There wasn't a drop of water, nor a package of food, or anything. The raft was bare of all things that help to sustain life. Startling realization brought sudden and violent hunger to his stomach, and a craving thirst to his lips. He looked back to meet Freddy's eyes, and forced another grin to his lips.

"Guess they don't want us up at the Pearly Gates yet, pal," he said slowly. "But maybe this is all a dream, or something."

"It isn't!" Freddy said grimly. "I've been hoping so ever since yesterday afternoon. But it's real, Dave. It's too blasted real, I say."

"Easy, Freddy!" Dave cried. "*Yesterday afternoon?* Where do you get that stuff? Why, it can't—!"

"It is!" Freddy interrupted. "I came to just before sundown. You were sprawled over me. Phew! I thought you were stone dead. I managed to wiggle out from under you, and prop you up. Bit too much for me, though. I spent most of the night coming to and passing out again. I felt better when dawn came. Took stock of things and saw there was nothing to do but wait. Kept your face out of the sun, as much as I could. And—well, I guess I prayed most of the time. Nothing has happened, though. Nothing's passed by except some dead Japs, with some sharks after them. They—"

The English youth paused and shuddered. Dave reached out a hand and pressed his arm.

"Steady does it, Freddy," he said gently. "We're still alive. And we're together. That's a lot in my book. And, heck! This is a whole lot better than if that darned Jap cruiser had picked us up. I don't think they'd have been very nice to us."

Freddy Farmer's jaw dropped, and his eyes went wide.

"Jap cruiser pick us up?" he gasped. "Are you balmy, Dave? It went down like a rock. The blasted thing practically broke in two! You just barely got us clear of the flying pieces before our wing came off and we crashed in. Why—!"

"Whoa, hold her!" Dave shouted, and jerked himself up straight despite the pain and aches it caused. "You mean we got that second cruiser? You're nuts! Our bombs wouldn't even dent her plates. They—"

"They didn't!" Freddy cried. "A lucky hit. One went right down one of her funnels. It must have, because I just had time to see the great cloud of flame and smoke that belched up out of her funnel before concussion was tossing us around like a leaf. It's the truth, Dave! Didn't you see it? Worse than the one we'd torpedoed. She broke right clean through. Then we crashed into the water. You yelled to me to duck, and—well, that's the last I remember until I came to late yesterday afternoon. How did you get us out of the wreck and aboard this raft, anyway?"

"The first part of that we'll never know, Freddy," Dave said in an awed voice. "Maybe it was two other guys, or something. I don't remember a thing from the time I leveled out of the dive until I woke up in the water, and had you by the helmet. It was night, and all sorts of things were floating by. I saw this raft, but thought it was a crate, and got us over to it. I got us both inside, and then went out like a light. Sweet tripe, Freddy! We've been floating around in this thing for at least two days and two nights. No wonder I could eat a horse, whole, and drink a well dry. You've—you've seen nothing, Freddy? No ship, no plane?"

Freddy shook his head.

"Nothing, Dave," the English youth said in a low voice. "The Pacific's a pretty big place, you know. It's—*Dave!* What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

Dave shook his head, put out a hand and touched Freddy.

"Don't move, Freddy!" he said hoarsely. "Don't even look. It—it might not be true. But—but, it is, *it is!* Look, Freddy! To the east. A ship! It's a destroyer. She's heading this way. Look at her spill smoke. She's heading this way. And it's Yank. I can tell from her lines, and stacks. *Look,* Freddy! Lady Luck was just waiting until we both woke up, that's all. She wanted us both to be surprised. She—"

Freddy's eyes turned to the east.

Dave raved on like a man gone delirious with joy, and he was. Words, all kinds of crazy words babbled off his lips. And words, all kinds of crazy words also spilled from Freddy Farmer's tongue as together they watched one of Uncle Sam's destroyers come tearing down on them. She swept up on them like a thing alive, slowed down just long enough to cast off one of her boats, and then started circling about them. In ten minutes grinning Navy gobs helped Dave and Freddy into the boat. And about twenty minutes after that they were in sick bay aboard the USS Paul Jones, and receiving the very best of medical treatment. It was all they could do to keep awake, despite their gnawing hunger. The wild excitement of rescue had been too much for either of them. It had sapped their strength down to almost the last drop. But they managed to keep awake long enough to ask questions, and receive astonishing answers from the youthful lieutenant in command of the destroyer.

They learned that the attack on the Marshall Islands had been carried out successfully. That a whole lot of what had happened at Pearl Harbor had been paid back to the Sons of Nippon. They learned that they had been afloat in the raft for three whole days and nights. They learned that one Colonel Welsh had requested that special permission be given Navy units in that section of the Pacific to search for them when it was reported by scouting planes that cruiser wreckage had been seen floating on the water. They learned that a searching plane had sighted them from the air that very morning, although Freddy had not seen nor heard it. The scouting plane had directed the Paul Jones to the spot. They learned also that Jap sailors picked up from the area where the cruisers had gone down had told of what they had done with one lone Douglas Devastator.

"It was that report that set this Colonel Welsh to moving Heaven, earth, and the Navy Department, to get a search going," the destroyer's commander finished up. "He must have had the President with him, because darned near the whole Pacific Fleet hopped right to it. Who is this Colonel Welsh, anyway? Can't say I ever heard of him. He must be quite a man when it comes to getting things done."

"Yeah," Dave mumbled drowsily. "Quite a man. Swell to work under. Got a nice technique. Gets you so doggone mad you'd go out and fly without wings, just to prove you could do it. Yeah, the Colonel knows his stuff. Right, Freddy?"

Freddy Farmer didn't agree or disagree. He was already sound asleep!

—THE END—

[1] *Dave Dawson At Singapore.*

[2] *Dave Dawson With the R.A.F.*

A Page from **DAVE DAWSON WITH THE AIR CORPS**

Throttling the Wright powered Vultee V-12C attack bomber to cruising speed, Dave licked his dry lips, twisted around in the seat, and winked at Freddy Farmer in the gunner's pit.

"How's it going, pal?" he called out. "Not nervous, or anything like that, are you?"

"Certainly not!" the English youth shouted back. "I stopped being nervous hours ago. Now I'm only scared stiff! How do you feel?"

Dave shrugged and made a little gesture with his free hand.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I think it's something like the way a clay pigeon must feel. You know, hoping the guy with the trap gun will miss? Oh well, this may be just a waste of time."

"Not any more!" Freddy shouted, and pointed to the left. "Look!"

Dave turned his head and felt his heart zoom up to crack against his back teeth. About seven miles off his left wing and hugging the under side of a towering cloud bank, he spotted no

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON WITH THE PACIFIC FLEET

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