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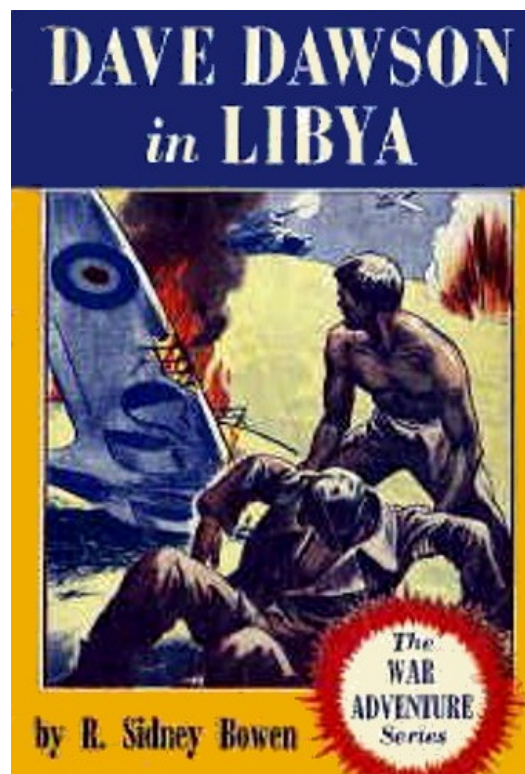
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**DAVE DAWSON  
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*by* R. SIDNEY BOWEN

*Author of*  
"DAVE DAWSON AT DUNKIRK"  
"DAVE DAWSON WITH THE R.A.F."

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Mediterranean Patrol*

It was high noon and the Mediterranean sky was like a vast expanse of blue silk with a golden ball pasted exactly in the middle. Far below, the placid waters of the Mediterranean seemed to catch the blue of the sky, keep some of it and fling the rest up heavenward again. Between the blue sky and the blue water, at eighteen thousand feet to be exact, a lone Blackburn "Skua" of the Royal Air Force, Fleet Air Arm, coasted slowly about in a series of unending circles. At the controls of the combination fighter and dive bomber, powered with a 830 hp. Bristol Pegasus XII sleeve valve engine, sat Pilot Officer Dave Dawson, R.A.F. Behind him, in the gunner-observer's pit, sat his pal and flying comrade, Pilot Officer Freddy Farmer, R.A.F.

For the last two hours they had been aloft doing their trick as advance air scout for the H.M. Aircraft Carrier "Victory" and her four escorting destroyers, steaming eastward for a rendezvous with the main unit of the British Mediterranean fleet. Two hours of coasting around high in the air far out in front of the Victory, and keeping their eyes constantly peeled for the first sign of approaching enemy air attackers. Thus far, however, they had seen nothing save the blue sky, the blue water, and the golden ball that was the sun. At regular fifteen minute intervals Dave had made his radio check in code with the flight operations officer aboard the Victory. Each time there had been nothing to report. And each time there had been no special orders from the Victory.

Two solid hours of flying, looking, and reporting nothing. And still another whole hour to go before another Skua would be sent aloft to relieve them and they could slide down to a landing on the long flat deck of the Victory. Dave sighed, shifted to a more comfortable position and looked back at Freddy Farmer.

"My legs feel like they'll stay bent at the knees for the rest of my life," he said, after removing the "flap-mike" from in front of his lips. "How about you, my little man? How do you like active duty with the Fleet Air Arm, huh?"

The English youth shrugged and made a face.

"Not even a little bit, so far," he replied. "And, by the by, my lad, let me remind you it was your idea we put in for duty with the Fleet Air Arm. Frankly, I wish we'd stayed with the Fighter Command in England. It's been so long since I've had an air scrap I'm wondering if I still know how to fire my guns."

"Stop fishing for compliments," Dave said with a chuckle. "Just do what you always do. Close your eyes, pray, and press the trigger button. If there are enough Jerry or Muzzy ships about, one of them is bound to fly into your bullets."

Freddy Farmer scowled darkly and lifted a warning finger.

"You seem to have forgotten something, my little American friend," he said in mock reprimand.

"Who, me?" Dave echoed. "Impossible! For even suggesting that I'd forget anything, I think I'll challenge you to a duel with cup-cakes at ten paces. But what have I forgotten, anyway?"

Freddy Farmer tapped his own chest and closed one eye.

"That I happen to be a pilot, too, though I'm serving as your observer on this show," he said. "In other words, one more insulting remark about my shooting ability and I shall be forced to dump you overboard, parachute and all, and finish this patrol alone. You think I can't?"

Dave shivered and shook in mock alarm.

"Please, kind sir, spare me such a fate!" he cried. "It's a long way down. Besides, you wouldn't want me to be court-martialed, would you, and perhaps be kicked out of the Service?"

"I fancy it would jolly well be a good thing for the Service," Freddy came right back at him. "But I'll bite. Why would you be court-martialed?"

"For losing one perfectly good Blackburn Skua monoplane fighter," Dave said gravely.

"For losing one?" Freddy echoed before he could stop himself.

"Sure." Dave nodded and widened his grin. "You'd be at the controls. Same thing, isn't it?"

Freddy's eyes snapped fire and the blood rushed into his cheeks. He glared at Dave for a few seconds, and then slowly grinned sheepishly.

"Okay, okay," he finally said. "To use your terrible American slang, I walked into that one. But beginning with now, my lad, watch your step. A Farmer always has the last laugh."

"You bet, of course!" Dave hooted at him. "After everybody else has got the point of the joke. Kidding aside, though, Freddy, I feel like you do. I mean, it's nice to be down here where it's warm, and the sun shines every day. And a boat ride on an aircraft carrier isn't tough to take, either. But I sure could do with some more war. I feel—well, I sort of feel as if I were cheating."

"Cheating?" Freddy murmured. "What do you mean? Or is this another wise-crack of yours? You seem full of them today, for some reason. Was it what you had for breakfast?"

"No, I'm talking seriously now," Dave replied. "I feel as though I were cheating the lads we left back in England. You know, sort of running out on them. The Jerries have been giving London and Liverpool, and Manchester, and those other places, a pretty good pasting. It makes me feel pretty punk to think I put in for a transfer to the Fleet Air Arm down here in the Mediterranean, and—well, nothing's happened. See what I mean?"

"Yes, I do," Freddy said, and nodded gravely. "Feel a bit that way, myself. However, when we put in for transfer, General Wavell's troops were knocking the Italians forty ways from Sunday in Libya. It's not really our fault we got down here after the show was all over."

"No, I suppose not," Dave grunted. Then, frowning slightly, "I've been wondering about that, Freddy."

"About what?"

"Whether the Libya show really is all over," Dave replied. "Heaven spare me from trying to be a military expert, like those crystal ball gazers you hear on the radio, but I've got a hunch Hitler will do something before he lets General Wavell kick the Italians completely out of Africa. And he sure seems to be doing it."

"Quite," Freddy nodded. "And once again I agree with you. If you want my opinion, I think British Middle East Command is jolly well *sure* that Hitler *is* going to do something about it. In fact, he already has."

"Yeah?" Dave breathed and widened his eyes in interest. "What? And how did you know, or do you?"

"As you would say," Freddy replied with a grin, "I get around, pal. I was talking with Group Captain Spencer on the Victory yesterday. He said that there were reports the Germans were flying troops and supplies from Sicily across to the main Italian base at Tripoli. He also said he was sure that there would be an Axis drive against Wavell's troops very shortly."

"Flying stuff from Sicily to Tripoli?" Dave exclaimed. "Then what are we doing way over toward the eastern end of the Mediterranean? We should be off Sicily knocking them down as they start over."

"That's the way I feel," Freddy said with a shrug. "However, I fancy Admiral Cunningham, of the Mediterranean Fleet, knows what he's doing. There's probably a bigger job to do first. Don't worry, if things get hot in Libya, I fancy the Fleet Air Arm will be called on to do double duty. The first job, though, is to find the rest of Mussolini's navy and put it out of action for keeps."

"There's a guy for you!" Dave snorted disgustedly. "Mussolini! Will he give our grandchildren a lot of laughs! What a big bag of wind."

"And I'd rather like to puncture it," Freddy added. "I feel sorry for the Italian people. I've always liked them. But Mussolini! What a rotter!"

"What a dope!" Dave echoed. "He and that Ciano are a couple of first class—"

Dave didn't have a chance to say what Mussolini and Count Ciano were, for at that moment he heard the brisk voice of the operations officer aboard the Victory in his earphones.

"Crimson to Patrol! Crimson to Patrol! Over!"

Crimson was the code word meaning that the Victory was calling the advance scouting patrol. And "Over" meant for Dave to reply that he was receiving the signals. He quickly turned front

and slid his flap-mike up into place.

"Patrol to Crimson!" he called. "Patrol to Crimson! Signals clear. Over!"

"Crimson to Patrol!" said the voice in the earphones. "Crimson to Patrol. Relief patrol is off. Return to your base at once. Crimson to Patrol! Return to your base at once. Over."

Dave impulsively glanced at his instrument board clock and saw that it still lacked forty-two minutes before the patrol trick would ordinarily be through.

"Patrol to Crimson!" he spoke into his flap-mike. "Orders received. Coming in, Crimson. Over."

"Okay, Patrol!" the earphones said. And then the radio went silent.

Dave turned to see if Freddy had had his radio switched on. The English youth had, of course, and he gave Dave a wide-eyed stare of wonder.

"What's up, do you think, Dave?" he asked.

"Search me," Dave replied with a shrug. "But orders are orders, and so down we go. Hang onto your hats, children."

As Dave spoke the last he eased back the throttle and sent the Skua seaward in a long three quarter throttle power dive. He had dropped some five or six thousand feet before he saw the relief patrol climbing up into the blue. He waved a hand in greeting and continued on down. At ten thousand feet he leveled off and banked west. A couple of seconds later he picked up the aircraft carrier Victory. In the golden glare of the sun it reminded him a little of a long narrow flatiron floating upside down in the water. He headed straight for it, then suddenly grinned and turned around to Freddy.

"Figured it out yet?" he asked.

"Naturally not," Freddy replied. "Have you?"

Dave struggled to keep his face straight.

"Of course I don't know for sure," he said, "but I think I've got a pretty good hunch. It's Group Captain Spencer. He's a very considerate officer, you know."

"Group Captain Spencer?" Freddy echoed unsuspecting. "What has being a considerate officer got to do with it?"

"Well, I've got a hunch he likes me," Dave said. "So I suppose he figured that being aloft with a guy named Farmer for three whole hours was just too much to take. Ouch! Hey, lay off! Want me to dive us down into the drink?"

The last was because Freddy had moved swiftly forward, unsnapped Dave's helmet strap and tilted the helmet down over his face. He held it there as Dave struggled with his free hand.

"Apologize?" Freddy demanded.

"Okay, okay!" Dave cried. "I take it all back. Boy! Am I glad I didn't make that crack just as we were sliding in to land."

"Oh, I'd have waited a bit, I fancy," Freddy said, and grinned at him. "No sense cracking up a nice airplane just to teach you a bit of manners. Now, my lad, close that pretty mouth of yours and get us down safely."

"For two cents," Dave growled as he adjusted his helmet, "I'd—No, let it go. Okay, my fine feathered friend. Watch, and learn."

The Victory was now just ahead and steaming straight into the wind. Dave roared by on the port side and took a look at the landing officer (or flag officer) standing in a box-like structure that jutted out to the right of the bridge. The officer held a yellow flag in each hand, and as Dave and Freddy thundered by he signaled with the flags that the deck was clear for a landing.

After continuing on a certain distance astern of the carrier, Dave then banked around and headed straight back, one hand on the stick, the other on the throttle, and his eyes fixed steadfastly on the landing officer. Landing on a carrier is not the same as landing on a ground airdrome. When landing on a ground airdrome, the pilot does the whole job. Not so on a carrier, however. There the landing officer tells the incoming pilot exactly what to do. He does this with his signal flags. He signals whether the pilot is too high, or too low; whether he is too much to the left, or to the right; or if his plane is not trimmed correctly. The pilot (if he is a wise pilot) does exactly as the landing officer signals, and does not rely on his own judgment at all. It has been proved time and time again that the incoming pilot who does not obey the landing officer's signals implicitly winds up in a whole lot of trouble, if not in the ship's Sick Bay.

And so Dave kept his eyes fixed on that officer with the yellow flags and brought the Blackburn Skua down closer and closer to the Victory's polished flight deck. Finally he caught the signal to cut his throttle way back. He did so, and the plane sank down onto the deck. Almost before the secret arresting gear had pulled it to a full stop, mechanics were rushing out to take over.

As Dave and Freddy climbed out and stretched their cramped legs, the deck duty officer came over.

"Get out of your duds and get polished up, you two," he said with a grin. "All pilots are to report in the Ready Room in twenty minutes. So hop to it."

The deck duty officer was no more than a couple of years older than Dave and Freddy, and his

flying rank was the same. His name was Talbert, and he ate at the same mess table as the boys. Dave gave him a searching look, then spoke in a low voice.

"You wouldn't know, would you, Tal?" he asked. "I mean, what it's all about?"

"Not a blessed thing, Dawson," the other replied with a shake of his head. "Big doings, though, I shouldn't wonder. Group Captain Spencer looks quite hot and bothered. I fancy he isn't collecting us to serve tea. Now off with you. Mustn't clutter up the flight deck, you know."

---

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Orders from G.H.Q.*

Group Captain Spencer was a big man with iron grey hair and a face that made you think of chiseled granite. He had served as a fighting pilot in World War No. 1, and the double row of decoration ribbons under his wings were proof enough that he had served his country well. A bullet scar just over his right eye was a constant reminder of a very close shave with Death. It added to the striking appearance of his broad, square-jawed face. As a matter of fact, Group Captain Spencer had yet to see forty-five years of age, but war had left its stamp on him so that he actually looked well over fifty.

He stood straddle-legged on the small platform at one end of the Ready Room while the Victory's fighter pilots, an even thirty-four of them, filed into the room and found seats. When finally they were all seated and silent, Group Captain Spencer cleared his throat and took a step closer to the edge of the platform.

"No doubt you lads are pretty fed up with patrolling around and not getting much of a chance to do any shooting," he said, and grinned faintly. "Well, that's because the fleet has been trying to smoke out the Italian navy—that is, what's left of it."

The senior officer paused, and a ripple of laughter spread from lip to lip.

"It's now pretty plain that Mussolini's sea chaps don't fancy a fight," Group Captain Spencer continued. "They've bottled themselves up in port, and won't come out. In time we'll have to go after them like we did at the Taranto Naval Base last November Twelfth. That kind of fun will have to wait a bit, though. More important things to do first. In short, Hitler is sticking his finger in the African pie—the Libyan pie, to be exact."

A murmur of suppressed excitement spread about the room. The pilots sat up a bit straighter and waited expectantly. Freddy looked at Dave and winked. Dave winked back and nodded his head.



"I'll give you a picture of what has happened," Group Captain Spencer said abruptly. "Last fall General Wavell, commander in chief of His Majesty's Middle East Armies, had two jobs to tackle, two rather tough nuts to crack. One was the job of pushing Marshal Graziani's Italian forces out of western Egypt and back into Libya. The other was to drive the Italians out of Eritrea and Ethiopia to the south of Egypt. I say they were two tough nuts to crack because General Wavell didn't have the troops, mechanized divisions or the planes he really needed for the jobs. However, as the world knows now, he did what he could with what he had, and did a very fine job, too."

The senior officer paused and made a little gesture with his hand that said the pilots could smoke

if they wished. As a matter of fact, he lighted up a cigarette himself.

"On December Ninth, last year," the group captain went on, "General Wavell started a surprise offensive against Graziani's most advanced forces at Matruh, in Egypt. He caught the Italians completely off guard and they started one of the wildest retreats in military history. By February of this year General Wavell's British, Australian, New Zealand, and South African troops were in possession of Bengazi, in Libya, some eight hundred miles from the starting point of the drive. And what was left of the Italian army was fleeing for its life along the desert shoreline to Tripoli, the main Italian base in Libya, and its capital. That offensive by Wavell will go down in war history as one of the most brilliant ever accomplished.

"Now, as soon as the Italians had been thrown back, General Wavell took all the troops, tanks, and planes that he could spare and sent them against the Italians in Eritrea and Ethiopia. In short, he left but a skeleton force occupying the captured Italian positions in Libya. He had to do that because he didn't have enough troops for both jobs. As we know, he did another fine job down to the south. It won't be long now before the whole of Eritrea and Ethiopia will be in British hands. However—"

Group Captain Spencer paused, and his face became grim and set.

"However," he began again, "while General Wavell has been busy down in Eritrea and Ethiopia, Hitler has stepped in to lend a hand to the Italians in Libya. In short, during the last two weeks or so, German transport planes have been transporting German troops across the Mediterranean from Sicily to Tripoli in Libya. Tanks, guns, and supplies have been sneaked across in Italian ships that race for French Tunisia and then hug the coast of that French African colony and get safely to Tripoli. The British Mediterranean Naval Command has known what was going on, at least to a certain degree. Anyway, steps have now been taken to put a stop to it. However, the naval job out here is a big one, and the first job was to knock out the Italian navy."

The senior officer took time out to clear his throat and have a glass of water.

"Well, the Italian navy isn't very much, now," he continued presently, "so the next job is to do something about this business of Hitler helping the Italians in Libya. We know that German planes, tanks, and troops are in Libya. We know, also, that a German-Italian, or Axis, drive is soon to be launched against Wavell's forces in Libya. But when, and at what points, and the real strength of the German-Italian forces are three things we do *not* know. Those three things must be found out, and as soon as possible. To put it bluntly, the Fleet Air Arm is going to try to find the answers for the British Middle East High Command. And to put it even more bluntly, you chaps are going to have first crack at the job."

Group Captain Spencer stopped abruptly and turned to a huge map on the wall behind him. Picking up a red crayon, he marked an X on a spot in the Mediterranean. Dave saw that it was a point halfway between the island of Crete and the Libya-Egyptian frontier line.

"That is the Victory's position now," the group captain said. "Between now and sundown we will change course several times. When darkness settles down, we will change course again and head for this spot, here—a position about thirty miles off Misurata on the Libyan coast, and some two hundred miles east of Tripoli. We will arrive there at a certain time before dawn tomorrow. At that time one plane, with pilot and observer, will take off and, under the cover of darkness, head inland. The plane will be fitted with extra gas tanks, allowing for a good eight hour flight. It will also be fitted with a special fast action aerial camera.

"Now, the job of that pilot and observer will be to patrol the areas east and southeast of Tripoli and make notes, and photos, of everything of interest. And let me say right here, don't pass up a single thing just because it interests you only a little. Get a good look at everything, and a picture of it, if possible. When it is time to return to the Victory, the pilot will head for a certain point that will be made known to him just before he takes off. The Victory will be there to take him aboard. Now, before I carry on, any questions?"

Nobody moved for a moment; then Dave Dawson slowly stood up.

"Yes, Dawson?" Group Captain Spencer asked briskly.

"Why one plane, sir?" Dave asked. "If two planes went out, and there were trouble, perhaps at least one of them would return?"

"A good question," Group Captain Spencer said. "And in a way, you're absolutely right, Dawson. However, I'm sending out just one plane for a special reason. First, though, let me explain why the Fleet Air Arm is tackling this job instead of an R.A.F. fighter or reconnaissance unit already based in occupied Libya. It's for this reason: distance! We can get in close under the cover of darkness, and save a good two or three hundred mile flight a plane would have to make from an R.A.F. drome at Bengazi. Also, by going straight south from the coast, we can be over our objectives before they realize we're there. Planes, or even one plane, from the R.A.F. drome at Bengazi would be heard and spotted long before it reached the area we want to study.

"We are sending out one plane for this reason. And it's very simple. The enemy spotters might not pay much attention to a single plane wandering about high above them. We're hoping they'll think it some ship that has lost its bearings. There will be no marking at all on the plane. Two planes, however, would definitely arouse the suspicions of enemy spotters. They would know at once that two planes were there for a special reason, and not just lost. Therefore they would open fire, and send up defending aircraft, and the time would be taken up with fighting instead of observing. Does that explain it, Dawson?"

"Yes, sir," Dave replied. "You're quite right, sir. It's a one plane job. But it's to be one plane *at a time*, isn't it, sir?"

The group captain nodded and looked very grave.

"I hope it won't be," he said quietly, "but for the present we are planning it that way. In short, if the first plane does not return, or if the information it brings back is not of much value, then a second plane will be sent out, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on, until we find out what we want to know. Frankly, it is a ticklish job the British Middle East High Command has asked the Fleet Air Arm to perform. And the Fleet Air Arm Command has turned the job over to us. Now, any more questions?"

Dave felt Freddy Farmer stiffen at his side, then saw his flying pal stand up.

"Yes, Farmer?" Group Captain Spencer asked.

Freddy hesitated a brief instant, and then spoke.

"It is not a question, sir," he said in a low but clear voice.

"Then what is it?" the group captain demanded gruffly.

"A request, sir," Freddy replied promptly. "I should like to volunteer to go in the first plane."

Freddy's words opened the floodgates of a reservoir of sound. Instantly every other pilot in the room leaped to his feet and shouted the request to be selected for that first plane. Group Captain Spencer grinned happily, then held up both his hands, and shook his head.

"Just a minute, you chaps!" he roared. Then, when he had obtained silence, "Just waiting for one of you lads to start it off. And I knew perfectly well that every one of you would fight for the job. That's the kind of spirit that has made the Fleet Air Arm the two-fisted, do-or-die unit that it is. However, we're not going to do it that way. I'm not going to select anybody. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, I don't fancy to be dumped overboard some dark night by some lad I didn't select. I like to wear just trunks when I go swimming, you know, not full dress service uniform."

The pilots roared with laughter, and then Group Captain Spencer continued.

"No, the way we'll decide that is by drawing lots," he said. "There are thirty-four of you lads here, and in this cap of mine are thirty-four folded slips of paper."

The group captain picked up his service cap that had been resting top side down on a table on his right.

"Thirty-four folded slips of paper," he said, and put the cap down on the table again. "Thirty-three of them are blank. The thirty-fourth has an X marked on it. Now, you will line up, and each will draw a folded slip of paper from the cap. The one who draws the paper with the X on it will be the pilot of the first plane. Now, to make sure the flight will go off smoothly, so that there'll be no possible chance of friction, the man who draws the marked slip can choose the chap he would like to have along as his observer. Of course you are all pilots, so if anything happens to the lad at the controls the other chap can take over at once. Naturally, I hope nothing will happen. You never can tell, though. As I said, this is a ticklish job, and a mighty important one. It may well prove to be the most important job you've tackled since entering the service. Now, line up and—"

Group Captain Spencer cut himself off short and shook his head.

"No, half a minute," he said. "There's one other thing I'd better say, though it's probably unnecessary. It is a volunteer job. I mean, the chap who draws the marked slip can decline if he wishes, and that will be that. Also, the chum he chooses to go along with him can decline, too."

"Not likely, sir, I fancy!" some pilot at the back of the Ready Room called out.

"Not likely at all!" the rest shouted in the same breath.

Group Captain Spencer grinned broadly, and the glow of affection and admiration was in his dark eyes.

"So be it," he said, and picked up the service cap filled with folded slips of paper. "Right-o, lads, line up. And don't fight for places. Maybe the last chap in line will draw the lucky slip. Anyway, hop to it."

The pilots bounded from their seats and hastened to form a line. After a bit of good-natured pushing and shoving they were all in line. Freddy and Dave were together about a quarter of the way down the line. Dave was in front of Freddy, and he turned and grinned at his pal.

"If I get that slip it will sure be a problem," he said.

"Why a problem?" Freddy asked. "I'll jolly well be tickled pink, I can tell you."

Dave nodded and shrugged.

"Oh sure, me too," he retorted. "But all these fellows on the Victory are swell. It will be quite a problem to decide whom to take along with me. See what I mean?"

Freddy's jaw dropped in amazement, and a faint hurt look came into his eyes. Then suddenly, as he saw the grin on Dave's lips, the blood rushed into his cheeks, and anger took the place of the hurt look in his eyes.

"You—you!" he fumed, and stumbled. "You wait, my lad. I'll fix you for that one later. Look! Parks is drawing the first slip!"

The two boys snapped their gaze to the front end of the line. So did everybody else, for that



matter. A tall, lean-jawed pilot by the name of Parks was on the point of dipping his hand into the service cap. He didn't make it, however. His hand suddenly froze in midair as the inter-ship communication speaker fitted into the Ready Room wall started barking out words.

"All out, Fighter Unit! Enemy aircraft sighted! All out, Fighter Unit. Snappy, now! All out, Fighter Unit!"

For one brief instant not a man in the Ready Room moved a muscle. Then the place was turned into a whirlwind of action. It was a whirlwind of orderly action, however. Those boys of the Victory's fighter unit were well trained. This was not the first air alarm they had received, nor would it be the last. Each pilot knew just what he was supposed to do, when he was to do it, and where. Group Captain Spencer didn't sing out one word of command. He didn't have to. He knew his boys well. He just tossed his cap full of folded slips back on the table and dived out of the room. The pilots dived out at his heels.

In less time than it takes to tell about it the whole group was up on the flight deck and hastening to their planes as they strapped on helmets and Mae West life jackets, and wiggled into parachute harness held out by mechanics. Other mechanics had sprung for the planes at the first word of alarm, and the flight deck shook from the thunder of whirring engines. Group Captain Spencer had received information of the position, types and number of enemy aircraft. He started talking the instant he leaped into his leading ship and plugged in the radio jack of his headphones.

"Twenty thousand feet over Zone CK!" he shouted into all listening ears. "About thirty of them, advance scout patrol reports. Junkers Ju. Eighty-Eights, and some Heinkel One-Elevens. Take off by sections of three and get up there fast. Right-o, lads!"

Dave's and Freddy's plane was in the fourth section of planes lined up at the stern end of the flight deck. Faces bright with excitement, they sat motionless while Group Captain Spencer led the first section off. As it went ripping along the smooth deck, mechanics guided the second section into place and sent it off. Then the third. Then Dave's plane and the two other ships in the section moved forward into position. The operations officer on the bridge dropped his flag down and away they went.

Holding the ship steady in its take-off run, and keeping well clear of his two companion planes, Dave gave the Blackburn Skua's Bristol Pegasus engine full throttle. The plane seemed fairly to skip along the deck for a very short distance, then it was off and prop climbing toward the clear blue of the Mediterranean sky.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### *Action Aloft!*

As the deck of the Victory fell away from him Dave cranked up the Skua's wheels to add to its perfect streamline design and thus gain additional climbing speed. Sections One, Two, and Three were well above him and heading westward and slightly to the north. For a second he turned his head and glanced down back at the carrier. Every plane was off and in the air. The escort destroyers were circling the Victory and laying a thick smoke screen into which the carrier could plunge and make herself difficult to see in case the approaching enemy aircraft did break through. As a matter of fact, even as Dave stared downward, the Victory seemed to merge right in with a thick layer of soot black smoke.

"Quick work, eh?" he heard Freddy's shout. "Those destroyer chaps are a little bit of all right, eh?"

"They're tops, what I mean!" Dave shouted back. "How're you doing, Freddy?"

"Right enough!" the English youth said with a grin. "Get some more speed out of her, won't you? Wouldn't like to be left behind, you know."

"You old fire horse!" Dave said with a laugh, and turned front.

The altimeter now showed fifteen thousand feet of air under the wings, and the Skua was still going up like a skyrocket, keeping perfect pace with the two other planes of its section. Dave's blood danced with excitement, and he hoped hard that the leading sections would not meet and drive the enemy aircraft away before he could get there. It had been some time since he and Freddy had tangled with enemy craft. A little practice in gunnery and combat flying wouldn't do either of them any harm.

"Doggone right!" he echoed the thought aloud. "Feel like a bandit taking this last month's pay for doing practically nothing. And I—"

He cut himself off short as he suddenly heard Group Captain Spencer's voice in his earphones.

"Well, jolly well hurry up, Dawson, and earn some of that pay today!"

Dave sat up straight, and gasped. Then as he heard the chuckle in the earphones he blushed to the roots of his hair and grinned sheepishly. For a second he had clean forgotten that every word he spoke into the radio mike went into the earphones of every other Victory pilot in the air, as well as into the earphones of every man at the operations station aboard the carrier.

"Sorry, sir," he mumbled. "Just talking rot to myself, and not thinking."

"Quite all right, Dawson!" came the cheery reply in his phone. "Get six or seven of these beggars and I'll forgive you. I'll—There they are, Crimson pilots! Dead ahead at twenty-one thousand. Well, well! Quite a mess of them. Spread out and let them go down. Right-o, Crimson pilots. Tally-ho!"

Dave gripped the stick tighter and peered hard upward and ahead at the Mediterranean sky. At first he saw nothing but blue streaked by the brassy glare of the sun. Then suddenly he saw the swarm of dots—tiny dots, like a horde of gnats streaking along high up in the heavens. A moment or so later, however, they ceased to be dots that looked like gnats. The leading group nosed down and in almost no time they took on the definite shape and outline of Junker Ju. 88s, the huge long range Luftwaffe bombers powered by twin Daimler-Benz engines, which since tryouts during the winter over England had been changed some so that instead of being confined to level flight bombing they could perform Stuka or dive bombing work as well. Behind them in the second group were Heinkel 111 Ks, medium-sized bombers powered by two Junkers Juno radial engines.

Slipping the safety guard off the trigger button of his guns, Dave studied the enemy planes intently. That the Junkers 88s were heading down while the Heinkels stayed at altitude—in fact, were even starting to climb higher—seemed proof enough that a savage Stuka attack was to be made on the Victory while the main body of raiding aircraft swept onward to attack the principal unit of the British fleet a hundred miles or so ahead.

At that moment he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to find Freddy's grinning face close to his.

"Almost like a test, isn't it?" Freddy said, and held a hand over his flap-mike.

"Test?" Dave echoed and looked blank. "What do you mean, test?"

"As if the Fleet Air Arm Command had asked Goering to send some of his lads out from Italy or Sicily to see if we are still in shape," Freddy said. "Those are enemy planes, aren't they? It's been so long, you know."

"I think so." Dave grinned. "Tell you what, though, I'll find out for sure. Just sit tight while I fly across in front of one of them. If they shoot that funny look off your face, then we can be sure they're Nazis."

"Thank you, no!" Freddy said with a scowl. "Just you get us close, that's all. I can perfectly well find out for myself whether they're my friends or my foes!"

"Just wanted to help out a pal, that's all," Dave said, and turned front.

In another couple of moments the time for horse play and kidding was all over. The first of the diving Junkers had reached the level of the First and Second sections of the Victory's fighter planes. And those fighter planes tore in like so many steel-clawed eagles gone completely haywire. The air suddenly shook from the yammer and chatter of British and German aerial machine guns. And punctuating the rattle of the machine guns was the deeper and louder note of the air cannon mounted on the German craft.

Cannon or not, it made no difference to the pilots of the First and Second sections. As Dave fixed his gaze on them, and jammed his free hand hard against the throttle as if he could get more speed, he saw three of the 88s lose their wings and go cartwheeling off to the side, leaving behind great globs of oily black smoke hanging suspended in the blue sky. Another couple of minutes and two more 88s trying to wheel clear of the Victory's defending planes locked wings by mistake and blew up in a roar of sound that must have been heard all the way back to their home drome, wherever it was located.

A couple of more Junkers started running into trouble, but Dave didn't bother to watch how they made out. His section was now within gun range, and each pilot was picking out his Nazi plane to attack. Dave cut off and up toward the belly of an 88 that had zoomed and was trying frantically to get altitude. Dave steadied himself and the ship, got the Junkers square in his sights and then let drive with his four guns. He saw his gleaming tracers smoke up into the under side of the 88 like so many metal fireflies. At the same time four jetting tongues of flame stabbed down at him, and he knew that the Junkers' gunners were not being caught napping. He knew, too, an instant later, when his Skua shook and trembled slightly, that those gunners were not exactly blind men when it came to marksmanship.

His bursts, however, were the ones that counted. The firing from the Junkers suddenly ceased, and the craft lunged drunkenly off to the right. Dave held his ship in its zoom until the last moment, and then flung it over on its side. The maneuver left a perfect target for Freddy Farmer in the rear pit. And the young English youth was ready and set. His twin guns spat flame and sound, and even as Dave jerked his head around for a look, he saw a ribbon of flame dribble out from the port engine of the 88, and then sweep back over the wing and along the fuselage to the tail. The Nazi bomber became a roaring ball of flame in an instant, and as Dave cartwheeled away he caught the flash of its bombs falling away. The German pilot had released them so that they would not explode before he and members of his crew could bail out of the blazing plane.

It so happened, though, that the Nazi pilot forgot about one bomb, or perhaps the release toggle stuck. At any rate, that section of the sky was suddenly filled with flashing light and a blast of sound that seemed virtually to drive Dave's eardrums deep into his head. He could even feel the concussion of the explosion slap against the Blackburn Skua like a soggy wet blanket, and try to whip it over on its back. It was all Dave could do to hold the plane in its speed gaining dive and

prevent it from flopping into a tight power spin.

"Nice going, Freddy!" he shouted back over his shoulder. "But next time tell the guys to shake their bombs off first. Boy! Is my head ringing!"

"So's mine!" Freddy shouted back. "Right-o, Dave! Let's get another of the beggars. Attack our fleet, will they! Up at the rotters, Dave!"

Even as Freddy was shouting the words, Dave had cut the Skua off to the right, then whipped it over and down in a lightning-like half roll. There, directly below his diving nose, was another 88. He opened fire at once, then curved up and away so that Freddy could rake the plane from nose to tail as they raced past. The Nazi craft didn't burst into flame. Instead, it rolled over in the air like a tired bird. For a moment or so it hovered on its back. Then it fell off on one wing, and down. White puffs began to appear off to the side, well below the crippled plane slowly slip-sliding downward to its final end in the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean. The white puffs were the parachute envelopes of the pilots and crew members who had bailed out of the helpless craft.

Neither Dave nor Freddy, however, gave them so much as a second glance. The first group of the dive-bombing Junkers had been broken up. At least ten of them had been put out of the war for keeps, and the others were beating a hasty retreat to the west. The Heinkels, however, had not come down. They had gone up for more altitude instead, and had tried to race beyond the defending Victory fighters and reach their objectives far to the east.

They had tried, yes, but they had not succeeded. The sections in back of Dave's section had climbed swiftly up to meet those Heinkels and by sheer fighting power had forced them to turn off toward the north—that is, all but two of them. Two Heinkels had somehow broken through the barrier of defending Skuas and were now thundering down to level bomb the Victory far below.

Nazi though they might be, Dave could not help but feel a certain amount of admiration for the pilots and crews. It was a suicide attack they were about to make, and they obviously knew it. With all hope of reaching the British fleet blasted by the furious defense of the Victory's planes, two of those Heinkel pilots had decided to do what they could against the Victory below. To have continued on eastward would simply have meant a short passing of time before the speedy Skuas caught up with them and shot them out of the air. And so they had elected to do what damage they could to the Victory, and unquestionably they would pay for it with their lives.

"You've got to hand it to them," Dave muttered somewhat reluctantly as he sent his Skua hurtling downward. "At least that's two of Goering's guys who have what it takes. Too bad they signed up to play on the wrong team!"

A moment later, however, all feeling of sympathy and admiration was gone. The Victory was down there, and the enemy was wing howling down to blow it out of the water, if such a miracle could be performed. There were pals of Dave's down there on that carrier, pals who would risk their lives any day to save him. It was up to him to risk his, now, to save them. The diving Heinkels ceased to be airplanes manned by human beings like himself. They became in his mind two winged machines of death and destruction hurtling down to snuff out the lives of his pals and fellow officers.

And so he braced himself in the seat and dropped the Skua's nose down to the vertical. The Bristol engine in the nose screamed out its song of power, and the air rushing past set up a shrill constant whistle. Hunching forward, Dave pressed hard against his safety belt harness, tightened the muscles of his stomach, kept his mouth open and continually swallowed to reduce the air pressure in his ears. But all the time he kept his eyes riveted on the nearest diving Heinkel.

It all took up but a few brief seconds, and then he was streaking down on top of the German bomber. Its gunners opened up with everything they had, and the air in front of Dave's nose was filled with the wavy streams of tracer smoke. He did not veer to the left or right for an instant. He held his ship steady until a vital part of the bomber was square in his sights. Then he let out a yell and jabbed his trigger button. The four Vickers guns cowed into the leading edge of the wing, two on each side of the nose, and yammered out their song of destruction.

For what seemed an hour to Dave's tightly knotted nerves, the Heinkel continued on down in its dive. In reality it was not longer than it would take you to snap your fingers before smoke and flame belched out from the bomber to envelop it completely. It continued on down in its dive, however. But it slammed straight down into the water a good five miles astern of the zigzagging Victory.

The instant Dave saw the smoke and flame spew upward, he cut his fire, started to ease his ship up out of its thundering dive, and cast his eyes about for a glimpse of the second diving Heinkel. He spotted it almost at once off to his left, and as soon as he saw it he realized he didn't have to worry about it at all. Two of the Victory's planes, one of them piloted by Group Captain Spencer, had caught the bomber in a deadly crossfire. Three seconds later and that Heinkel was out of the war and on a one way flight down to a watery grave in the Mediterranean.

Dave relaxed in the seat a bit, pulled his plane up onto an even keel and glanced around at the heavens above him. The heavens were filled with flashing wings, but they were all wings made in England. There wasn't the sign of a single German plane. Those ships that had escaped the Victory pilots were by now so far away they couldn't be seen by the naked eye. A moment later Group Captain Spencer's voice came over the radio.

"Reform sections, Crimson pilots! Going aboard. Reform your sections, Crimson pilots. I want to count noses!"

The last caused Dave's heart to skip a beat. It wasn't until that moment he had realized the possibility that perhaps English as well as German pilots had gone down into the Mediterranean. While he hunted out the two planes of his section and dropped into formation, he tried to count noses himself. But before he had time to make sure of his count, he heard welcome words in his earphones.

"Good lads, all of you!" called Group Captain Spencer. "All present and accounted for. Fine! Fancy those beggars can't say the same. Right-o! Aboard you go in sections as you took off. Land by sections in line astern."

The last meant that as each section of three planes slid down to be taken aboard the carrier, the left and right planes would drop into line behind the center plane. In other words, instead of three abreast, or in V formation, they would be three in line behind each other, or in line astern.

By the time the first section had dropped down to a low altitude, the Victory had moved out of its protective smoke screen and was steaming into the wind. Dave glanced downward to see the escort destroyers circling back and around to pick up all surviving German airmen who might be in the water. Reaction hit him for a second and he shivered impulsively. Lady Luck had flown with him again, else he too might be down there floating around—or perhaps going down for the third time!

And then as he switched his attention back to his flying, Lady Luck did desert him, and old man Tough Luck laughed in his face. He yanked the release level that worked the mechanism that lowered his wheels—only the little red light on the instrument board did not wink out. The little red light was the pilot's guide as to whether his wheels were up or down. And the fact that it was on told him that his wheels were still up.

He worked the release lever gently a couple of times, but the light did not go out. He banged it hard with his fist, and whipped the nose of the plane up and down in an effort to jar the wheels down. The little red light, however, stayed on. At that moment Freddy leaned forward and rapped him on the shoulder.

"The right wheel, Dave!" he cried. "I can just see it from back here. It's stuck a quarter of the way down. I guess a Junkers or Heinkel gunner gave us a souvenir to take home. Cut a retracting gear cable, probably. I think I see the end of one whipping about in our prop-wash."

"Okay, thanks," Dave shouted back. "I'll try some more and then radio Operations."

Feeding high test gas to his engine, he pulled quickly upward and out of formation. Then, when he was well clear of the other sections drifting down to be taken aboard the carrier, he started kicking the Skua around in a desperate effort to get the right wheel to go all the way down. But it was no use. He could get both wheels back up into the wing sockets, but he could not get the right wheel more than a quarter of the way down. He finally gave up, gave Freddy an apologetic grin and called Operations aboard the carrier. He had been watched all the time, of course, and the orders were given to him at once.

"Get your wheels up, and keep them there, Dawson. Come down for a water landing. A crash boat will stand by to take you aboard at once. Land half a mile ahead of us. Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir," Dave replied in a voice that shook with emotion.

Of course it would be too dangerous for all concerned to attempt what is known as a "belly landing" aboard the carrier—a landing on the belly of the plane with both wheels up in the wings. The slightest skid could end up in a bad crash and quite possibly fire. And fire by accident aboard a carrier at sea is bad enough without asking for it, or tempting it. With that plan of action being out of the question, there were two other things that could be ordered done. One was to land in the water. The other was for Freddy and himself to bail out and let the ship crash. That he had not been given the last order was an unspoken compliment to his flying ability. Operations had faith he could sit down in the water without doing damage to Freddy or himself, or serious damage to the plane. Operations wanted to salvage the plane and repair it aboard, and Operations was counting on him to make it possible to save the ship.

For a moment he sat perfectly motionless at the controls, as though afraid that movement would end the thrilling spell through which he was passing. Then Freddy did break it by banging him on the shoulder.

"Get to it, my lad!" Freddy shouted. "The blasted water isn't coming up here to us, you know. You can do it in pukka style. We both know that."

Dave shook himself out of his trance, got his wheels back up into the wings, and then headed for a point half a mile ahead of the Victory. As he winged past the carrier, he saw one of the crash boats being lowered over the side. Then all that was behind him and there was just the expanse of the Mediterranean ahead. At the right moment he hauled the throttle back, and tilted the nose downward. Every muscle and nerve in him was drawn bow string tight as the blue water rose up toward him.

It was not the first time he had put a land plane down in the water, but on those other occasions it had not mattered if he cracked up the plane a bit. This time was different. The Victory needed this Blackburn Skua. The Fleet Air Arm in the Mediterranean had too few planes as it was. Every ship it could salvage was as good as two brand-new planes on the long way out from the factory in Britain. He had to make this the best landing of his flying career. He owed it to Freddy, he owed it to the rest of the boys aboard the Victory—and he owed it to himself.

One second ticked past. Two seconds—three. And then the blue water was right underneath him.

He whipped out his free hand and cut the ignition. With his other hand he eased back the stick and brought the nose up a few inches. Flying speed fell off instantly. The plane seemed to hang motionless just off the surface of the water. The round crest of a gentle blue swell rolled by and whispered up against the belly of the plane. As though a thousand glue-covered fingers had touched the bottom of the plane, the Skua stuck to the water. It lurched just slightly and plowed up a faint spray. Then it settled a bit by the nose, steadied, and floated as nicely as a duck on a millpond.

Dave let the clamped air out of his lungs in a rush of sound. It was not until then he realized that his face was dripping with sweat. He gulped and turned around to look at Freddy. The blood was coming back into the English youth's face. He was smiling, and his eyes were bright with something that was far more than just friendly affection. Then he seemed to catch himself showing his inner emotions. He gave a little nod of his head and broadened his grin.

"Well done, my lad!" he shouted. "My sincerest congratulations. It was so beautiful, that for a minute I thought—Oh, let it go."

"You thought what?" Dave demanded, and tried to get his heart to ease up from thumping so hard against his ribs.

Freddy arched his eyebrows and gestured with one hand.

"Why, it was so perfect," he said, "that for a moment I thought I was flying the blasted thing."

The crazy remark snapped the tension in Dave. He relaxed completely, and laughed and made a pass at Freddy. They were still kidding and horsing around when the crash boat slid up alongside, took them aboard, and began towing the floating plane back to the hoisting crane aboard the Victory. When they reached the carrier, the cheer that came down to Dave's ears sounded like the sweetest music he had ever heard in his life.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Pilot's Luck*

For the second time that day the fighter pilots of the Carrier Victory filed into the Ready Room and found seats. Group Captain Spencer grinned and nodded to each youth as he entered. To Dave Dawson he gave a broad grin and a wink that made the Yank R.A.F. pilot feel as good as though the Distinguished Flying Cross Medal had been pinned on his tunic. Finally all were seated and every eye was fixed on the group captain standing on the little platform.

"Sorry about that little interruption," he presently said with a chuckle. "I give you my word, it wasn't something I arranged just to see if you lads were up on your toes. I knew that all the time. And I fancy the Jerries know it *now*, too. A good job, and I'm jolly well proud of you. Well, on with the unfinished business."

The senior officer picked up the service cap filled with folded slips of paper and stepped forward to the edge of the platform.

"Right-o, line up again," he said. Then, with a grin, "If there's another blasted raid alarm, we'll just pretend that we didn't hear it. Mustn't keep you fire eaters in suspense forever, you know. Right-o! Line forms on the left."

The pilots formed a line again. By mutual consent they gave Pilot Officer Parks the number one position, but they didn't bother figuring out who else had had what position in line the first time. They just all sifted into places in back of Parks, and let it go at that. As a matter of fact, Dave found that he was four men in front of Freddy. The pair had become separated during the shuffling into line.

Eventually everything was set. A hushed stillness settled over the Ready Room as Parks dipped his hand into the cap and pulled out a folded slip. He took a step to the side and opened it with trembling fingers. Every other pilot watched his face, and waited expectantly. They saw hope fade into bitter disappointment. The pilot crumbled the slip into a little ball and threw it disgustedly on the deck.

"That's Parks luck for you!" he growled. "A blasted blank!"

"Chin up, old fellow," Group Captain Spencer smiled at him. "Maybe your best pal will draw it. Right you are. Next chap!"

One by one the pilots drew slips from the cap and examined them, full of hope and eagerness. And one by one they were laughed at by Lady Luck just as she had laughed at Pilot Officer Parks. Finally it was Dave Dawson's turn. He reached up his hand, then hesitated and looked down at his other hand to make sure that his fingers were crossed. Group Captain Spencer followed his look, and chuckled softly.

"Did doing that help you in that close shave upstairs, Dawson?" he asked. "If so, I must do it myself from now on. Blessed if I didn't see one of those Jerries stick his machine gun right square in your face, and still he missed you. Oh well, go ahead and draw."

Dave dipped his fingers into the cap, fingered a couple of the folded slips, and then drew one out. His head was singing faintly, and the blood was surging, through his veins as he stepped to the

side and unfolded the slip. What he saw, gave him the sensation of a bucket of ice water spilling down over him. The slip was blank on both sides! He grinned weakly, wadded up the slip of paper and flipped it away in disappointed disgust just as the others had done. Then he walked over to a chair and sat down to watch the rest of the drawing.

He stopped watching, and so did everybody else, when Freddy Farmer unfolded the slip he had drawn. The English youth's eager face suddenly lighted up like a Christmas tree, and his hands trembled so much with excitement that the slip fluttered down onto the deck.

"Got it!" he shouted, and bent down to retrieve the slip. "I really have. See?"

He jumped around on first one foot and then the other and wildly waved the little slip about over his head.

"I say, land, will you, Farmer?" Group Captain Spencer shouted at him good-naturedly. "I'm sure you're not pulling our leg, but let's have a look at the thing, anyway."

Freddy stopped jumping around and held out the slip so that all could see the X marked on one side.

"That's it, right enough," Group Captain Spencer said, and tossed the cap with the remaining folded slips back on the table. "Well, congratulations, Farmer. And I guess we don't have to guess whom you want to take along with you, eh?"

Dave's disappointment at not having drawn the slip blew away into nothing when he saw the X on Freddy's slip. He looked at his pal and grinned, and waited to hear Freddy ask him to go along on the dangerous venture. A couple of moments later, though, a cold wave seemed to spread through him, and his heart became a hard lump in his chest. Freddy had passed his eyes right over him and was studying the faces of the other pilots. Could it be that Freddy—? Was Freddy going to choose somebody—?

"I don't know, sir," he heard Freddy say through a dull rumbling in his ears. "It's a very important job, and a chap must be sure of the fellow he takes along with him. Yes, sir. Must give it a bit of serious thought, you know. Now—let me see. Blessed if it isn't a hard job to choose the right man."

Dave could hardly believe his ears as he heard the words that fell from Freddy Farmer's lips. And he could hardly believe his eyes as he saw the English youth almost deliberately turn his back on him and look at the other pilots. He was conscious, too, of the general air of stunned amazement that pervaded the Ready Room. It was obvious that everybody else had expected Freddy to ask Dave at once.

"As difficult as that, Farmer?" Group Captain Spencer presently asked with a puzzled frown on his face.

"Oh yes, sir, quite difficult," Freddy said, turning to him. Then, with a wink at the group captain that everybody saw, he turned to look at Dave, and asked, "Would you like to go along, my little man?"

Dave blinked, gulped, and then realized in a flash that Freddy hadn't actually given a single thought to anybody else. He had simply been paying him back for those wise-cracks while on advance scout patrol, just as he had promised; paying him back by keeping him hanging on tenterhooks. Dave's first impulse was to leap forward and turn Freddy over his knee. He beat back the urge, however. Instead he let loose a loud sigh of relief that snapped the tension in the room and caused everybody to burst out laughing. He looked at the impish I-told-you-so expression on Freddy's face and nodded gravely.

"I accept, Pilot Officer Farmer," he said in solemn tones. "However, on one condition."

"Condition?" Freddy echoed, and his grin faded.

"Yes," Dave said with a very straight face. "On Group Captain Spencer's guarantee."

"My guarantee?" gasped the group captain. "What in thunder do you mean, Dawson?"

Dave hesitated and acted as though he were reluctant to speak.

"You're sure it would be safe, sir?" he asked gravely. "I mean, with this officer along? He wouldn't get in my way, or anything?"

There was pin-dropping silence for a second, and then the Ready Room rocked with the roar of laughter that went up. Freddy went beet red to the roots of his hair and glared at Dave.

"Safe?" he shouted. "I'm jolly well the one who has to worry about being safe. Oh well, I've made my choice. I'll act the gentleman and stick by it."

"All right, all right, you two!" Group Captain Spencer called out as Dave opened his mouth to reply to that one. "Do the rest of your leg pulling in the plane. Man, how I pity the Jerry who takes you two prisoners. You'd drive the poor devil clean off his topper with your crazy talk. Well, anyway, that's that. You two, of course, are relieved of all other duties beginning with now. Meet me in my quarters right after evening mess. We'll do a little bit of plotting and planning, in case it should come in handy. Right-o, chaps, that's all. Dismissed!"

Three hours later Dave and Freddy were stretching their legs up on the flight deck. They had had mess and in a short time they would report to Group Captain Spencer in his quarters. First, though they felt they would like a stroll and a few words together. Since the drawing, they had not had much of a chance to be alone. Though they had been relieved of all duties, they had not

merely sat back and taken things easy. They were real pilots, right to the core, and as soon as Group Captain Spencer had dismissed them they had gone below decks to the repair station to have a look at the Skua that had been hoisted aboard. An inspection of the plane, as the Victory's mechanics worked on it, had brought to light the true reason for the retractable landing gear's failure to function. As Freddy had guessed, bullets had parted one of the cables, and a free end of the cable had been whipped up by the propeller wash to catch in the retracting gear and jam it so that the right wheel couldn't go more than a quarter of the way down.

That, however, was not the most important thing they found out. Inspection also showed that both of them had come within three inches or less of becoming dead pilots. Bullet holes in the fuselage and cockpit cowling (or hood) showed clearly how narrow had been the margin by which death had passed them by. Two or three inches one way or the other and they would most certainly have joined their Junkers and Heinkel victims down in the gentle blue swells of the Mediterranean.

And now they were walking down their dinner along the long narrow flight deck of the Victory.

"In case you didn't get the idea," Dave said, breaking a moment's silence, "you sure gave me a sweet case of heart failure in the Ready Room this afternoon. No fooling, I thought sure you were honestly giving me the cold shoulder. Gosh! I didn't know what to think."

"Let it be a lesson to you," Freddy replied with a grin. Then, in a serious tone, "But I should be sore at you for even thinking I'd pick anybody else but you. After that landing you made? I should say not."

"Thanks," Dave said. "But I was scared stiff bringing that ship down. And between you, me, and the stern of this deck, there was an awful lot of luck mixed up in that landing. A couple of times I thought she was getting away from me. I'd sure hate to have to do it every day."

"Well, it was perfect," Freddy said. "A hundred times better than a landing I recall you once made in the English Channel."<sup>[1]</sup>

"*You* recall?" Dave scoffed at him. "How could you? You were out cold that time, and you know it. And, boy, when I turned around and saw you—!"

Dave left the sentence hanging in midair and shook his head as though to drive away the heart-chilling memory.

"Gee, it sure is different down here, isn't it?" he said, changing the subject.

"Meaning what?" Freddy asked.

Dave pointed a finger toward the east.

"The way day becomes night," he said. "Up north you have a couple of hours of twilight. But down this way you have only a couple of minutes of it. The sun goes down and then, bang, it's dark in nothing flat. I never realized that before about this section of the world."

"Well, it's a good thing when a pack of Jerries are on your tail, I fancy," Freddy grunted. "You can dive and lose them in the dark. And speaking of the dark, watch your take-off just before dawn tomorrow. Wouldn't be nice to crack us up before we get started, you know."

Dave turned his head and stared in amazement.

"*Me* watch the take-off?" he ejaculated. "Where do you get that stuff? You drew the marked slip. That makes you the pilot of the plane. Me, I'm the back seat driver."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Freddy argued. "I'm a very bright lad, I'll have you know. I know a pukka pilot when I see one. And I'm looking at you, see? Besides, I guess I never told you, but I'm a regular camera fiend. And the passenger works the camera. No, Dave, you do the flying. I'll take the pictures and try to bother you with back seat talk as much as I can."

"You really mean that, Freddy?" Dave asked. "You want me to take the controls?"

"That's right," the English youth nodded. Then, with a quick frown, "But don't take it as a compliment, my lad. I'm simply the lazy type, that's all. I like to have other people work for me."

"Aw, nuts!" Dave breathed in mock disappointment. "Just when I thought the guy was admitting I was good."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Enemy Maneuvers*

Night had dropped down over the Mediterranean, and the H.M. Aircraft Carrier Victory was running without lights in a southwesterly direction. There was plenty of light below decks, however, but whenever an outside door was opened the bright lights immediately winked out and the pale blue "battle lights" glowed. Thus it was impossible for any telltale glow of light to reveal the Victory's presence to any nearby enemy craft of the sea, or to any enemy aircraft that might be patrolling the air above. True, the pale glow of the battle lights escaped into the night, but it was so dim as not to be noticed even at close range.

In Group Captain Spencer's quarters, Dave and Freddy bent over a huge map spread out on the

desk, and listened closely to their senior officer's words.

"Here we are, now," the group captain said, touching the map with the point of his finger. "We have changed course for the last time, and it's pretty certain that the enemy has no idea what we're up to. It was lucky we were still steaming along at the rear of the main fleet unit when those Jerries showed up this afternoon. Had we been in the act of cutting away then, those lads who did get back to their base would certainly have reported us up to something. As it is, though, they probably think we're still tagging along with the fleet."

"And probably hoping we hit a couple of mines," Dave added with a chuckle.

"Probably," Group Captain Spencer agreed with a grin. "I don't believe those lads feel very kindly toward the Victory right now. We certainly gave them something to think about this afternoon. But, as I was saying, here we are right at this moment. In six hours, that'll be two o'clock tomorrow morning, we will be about fifty miles off the Libyan coastal town of Misurata. That is, of course, unless a couple of our destroyers that are way out in front of us sight something to make us change our plans."

"I sure hope not," Freddy said with a frown. "I'm all for this scouting show, and want to get on with it."

"Me, too!" Dave chimed in. "I've got a hunch I'm going to get a big kick out of it."

"I hope that's all you get out of it, except the much needed information," Group Captain Spencer said softly. "I don't want to sound like a phonograph record, but this is a mighty dangerous mission. You see, we haven't the faintest idea what you may or may not run into. Before you've hardly flown in from the coast you may run slap bang into a swarm of Axis planes on patrol. Then, too, much of your flying will have to be done blind. I mean, Libya isn't like England or France where there are towns, and rivers, and lakes, and all that sort of thing to serve as landmarks. It's a blasted expanse of sand, once you get in a way from the coast. And your only landmarks to fly by will be a tiny oasis village here and there that you can miss very easily because they blend in so perfectly with the cursed sand. I've done quite a bit of flying out that way, and I can tell you that it certainly isn't any pleasure hop."

"We'll jolly well be praying that the engine keeps ticking over," Freddy murmured.

"Right you are, and pray hard," Group Captain Spencer said with an abrupt nod of his head. "That's another of the several dangers attached to this show—a forced landing. Behind our own lines, a forced landing in the blasted desert is bad enough. But a forced landing behind the Axis outposts will be doubly unpleasant. And that brings up something I might just as well mention now as later. I said that this show is to be a secret. I meant it! It's to be just that. There will be no Fleet Air Arm markings on your plane. And you will not wear anything or even carry anything that would connect you in any way with the Fleet Air Arm, or the Victory. You'll not even take along your Mae West life jackets. And in case you are forced down in the desert, you will set fire to your ship at once. You understand that perfectly?"

The two boys nodded together.

"And if you are forced down, don't expect planes to be sent out to look for you," Group Captain Spencer continued grimly. "You will be strictly on your own. You can't expect any rescue help from us. That sounds pretty grim, and it is. But we've got to work it out that way. To let the enemy even suspect that the Victory had slipped in close to shore, and that the Fleet Air Arm was taking an active hand in the Libya problem, might result in no end of trouble. For one thing, it would have every German and Italian plane within range out hunting for the Victory. And that would put us in a pretty bad spot, if we were caught so far away from the main body of the fleet. And—By the way, what I've just said doesn't change your desire to tackle the job, does it?"

Neither of the boys said anything. They just sat there looking at him quietly. The group captain flushed faintly and smiled.

"Sorry, lads," he said. "Just thought it was up to me to ask, you know. But, back to the job. The minute you leave the flight deck you will be on your own. You will have extra tanks that should last you about eight hours. You will have your guns, and such, in case you do bump into Axis winged trouble. You will have a camera and plenty of plates. You won't have a radio, though, because to use it might give your position away, and the Victory's, too. There must be no radio contact between you chaps and the Victory. Another part of your equipment consists of items I hope you will not be called upon to use. Briefly, they are water flasks, emergency rations, pocket compass, sun helmets, service automatics, and one or two other things."

"Say, could I make a suggestion, sir?" Dave suddenly spoke up as the senior officer paused. "It might help in case we did run into trouble and went down."

"Certainly you may make suggestions," Group Captain Spencer said with a broad smile. "My word, you chaps are doing the show, you know. What is it, Dawson?"

"The clothes we wear, sir," Dave said. "Why not go all the way in fooling them about a connection with the Fleet Air Arm and the Victory? Why couldn't Freddy and I wear regulation desert infantry or machine gun company uniforms? Say, British, or Australian, or New Zealand? Uniforms from one of General Wavell's outfits?"

Group Captain Spencer looked impressed, but Freddy frowned slightly.

"But what about the plane, Dave?" he objected.

"Well, what about it?" Dave wanted to know. "If we can't set it afire in the air before we bail out—"



if we have to—we'll certainly destroy it as soon as we're on the ground. Later, if we are picked up, we're just a couple of infantrymen who got lost from a desert scouting patrol. See what I mean? What plane? Sure we saw a plane land and burn up, but it looked to us as if the poor devils in it burned up, too. See what I mean, Freddy?"

The English youth's face suddenly lighted up and he became all smiles.

"Sure, of course!" he cried. "Am I stupid! Not a chance in the world of them connecting us up with the plane and perhaps trying to force a story out of us."

"Right!" Dave echoed. "And as a couple of captured infantrymen, we won't be so important to them as a couple of captured airmen. They might not watch us so closely, and if we should get a break, why—Well, figure it from there."

"I say, hold it up a bit!" Group Captain Spencer cried. "I've half a mind not to let you tackle the show. My word, you've practically failed and got yourselves taken prisoners already. However, that's a good suggestion of yours, Dawson. I'll see Ship's Stores after we finish talking and have them fix up a couple of infantry uniforms for you. Now, get your eyes on this map again."

All three of them bent closer to the map, and the group captain continued speaking.

"Here's Wavell's most advanced outpost," he said, and pointed his finger, "here at El Aghelia, in the curve of the Gulf of Sidra. Eight hours after you take off the Victory will be at this point off the Libyan coast. See, I've written down the exact latitude and longitude. Take a good look, both of you, and get that location reading stamped in your brain."

Dave and Freddy repeated the figures several times to themselves until they were sure they would not possibly forget them. Then Dave looked at Group Captain Spencer.

"That point's only some thirty miles off Bengazi," he said, "and some three hundred miles east of the point where we'll take off. The Victory will have to do a lot of steaming to get there in eight hours."

"Yes," the group captain nodded. "But she can do it, with a bit to spare. I know what's in your mind, though. You're wondering why the Victory doesn't just put out to sea a bit, and then come in again to take you aboard?"

"I was wondering about that, sir," Dave admitted.

"Well, she's not going to do that for two reasons," the senior officer said. "First, because it will be daylight and it would be too much of a risk to cruise around so far to the west. We might be sighted by Axis planes crossing over from Sicily. The other reason is for your protection as well as ours. As you can see by looking at this map, your return flight will take you from El Aghelia up the eastern coast of the Gulf of Sidra to Bengazi and then on out to sea to our rendezvous point. That way you'll have less of an overwater flight to make to reach us. Also, if you are chased by enemy aircraft and get into trouble, you'll be in a position to make a run for a safe landing on British-occupied ground. The Victory will have an advance scouting plane aloft all the time, and if its pilot sees you in trouble the Victory will be notified at once so that she can make tracks away from the rendezvous area."

The group captain paused for breath and to light a cigarette.

"And that is another thing I want to warn you about," he said presently. "If you are chased by enemy aircraft, make *no attempt to reach the Victory until you have completely shaken off and lost all such aircraft*. In short, and to sum it all up very bluntly, you have about two chances of making the scouting patrol a success as against ninety-eight chances of failing."

"One chance in forty-nine," Freddy murmured, and then shrugged. "Well, I fancy that's better than one chance in a hundred."

"Tell us this, sir," Dave said. "Supposing we have to land at Bengazi, or some other British held point, what then? I mean, how do we make contact with the Victory?"

"You don't," Group Captain Spencer said bluntly. "Not unless you have information of vital value to the Fleet Air Arm, or the fleet itself. Any information, and all pictures you obtain of Axis positions and so forth, you will turn over to the commandant of the Bengazi post for immediate transfer to General Wavell's headquarters. If your plane is in a condition to permit you to fly on to H.Q., then do so. The main thing, though, is to get the information and pictures to General Wavell's headquarters the fastest way possible."

"And if we have information of value to the Air Arm or the fleet?" Freddy prompted.

"In that event," the group captain said with a frown, "we'll have to take a chance on the Bengazi radio informing us so that we can arrange for some other point of rendezvous, or some way of your getting the information to us. But I repeat once again: the Victory is playing a sort of lone wolf game in this thing, and she cannot run any risk of being caught and sunk by Axis planes, or even seriously damaged. You don't build an aircraft carrier in a day, you know. And we all know we have all too few of them as it is. The loss, or a long lay-up, of the Victory would be a serious blow to the Air Arm as well as to the fleet. Naturally, I'm counting on you two—and all other pilots we may have to send out on this job—not to put the safety of the Victory in jeopardy at any time, no matter what the cost may be to yourselves. In fact—"

The senior officer paused and made a face.

"In fact, she may even play a dirty trick on you," he continued after a moment. "I mean, she may find it too dangerous to make a rendezvous contact with you—and won't be there when you show

up. However, there is a very slim chance of that. If it does happen, you will try to make land if you possibly can."

Dave nodded, then looked at Freddy and chuckled.

"What's funny about that?" the English youth wanted to know.

"Not a thing," Dave replied, but kept a grin on his face. "It was just a crazy thought I had. The way this thing stacks up, you'd think the Victory doesn't want to see us any more. But we'll fool her, eh, Freddy? She can't toss us out into the cold, cruel world like that, can she?"

"I should say not!" Freddy said with a short laugh. "I like the Victory very much. The old girl can't give me the cold shoulder. No, not a bit of it."

"Now I'm sure of it!" Group Captain Spencer exclaimed with an abrupt nod.

The two pilots stared at him.

"What's that, sir?" Freddy murmured.

"That you'll jolly well come through this with flying colors," Group Captain Spencer said. "I've met a lot of chaps who right now would be worrying themselves sick and biting their nails over the danger possibilities of this venture. But the way you two—well, to use a bit of your American slang, Dawson—the way you two take it all in stride, and fun around, makes me feel sure that you'll come out on top. Chaps like you two worry about the dangers afterward, not before. You take care of things as they pop up, and I suppose that's the way it should be."

"Well, don't worry, sir," Dave said. "Freddy and I'll both be in there pitching."

"Eh, pitching?" Group Captain Spencer murmured with a frown.

"More American slang, sir," Dave explained. "It means, we'll be swinging all the time, right from the bell. We'll be right on the old beam—in the groove, and—Well, you know what I mean, sir."

"Er—er, yes, of course," the senior officer said a bit dubiously. "Oh, quite! Well, I guess that ends this session, unless either of you chaps have anything to ask?"

"Not me, sir," Dave said with a shake of his head. "I reckon I've got it all down pat."

"Me, too, sir," Freddy echoed with a nod.

"Right-o," Group Captain Spencer said, and crushed out his cigarette. "Go rest up a bit, now, and relax. I'll see about those infantry uniforms from Ship's Stores. Afterward we'll check over everything you're taking along. Right now, though, relax and try to get your thoughts on other things. That's all."

After the two boys had left, the group captain stared silently at the closed door of his quarters for a long moment. Then presently he smiled and nodded his head.

"Just youngsters," he murmured softly, "but, by George, they've got the fighting hearts and courage of a dozen men!"

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## CHAPTER SIX

### *Desert Mystery*

A billion or so stars winked down on the long black shadow that was the Aircraft Carrier Victory sliding through the even blacker waters of the Mediterranean. A row of tiny pin points of light stretched the entire length of the starboard side of the flight deck, and at the stern end was a lone Blackburn Skua fighter-dive bomber with its prop slowly ticking over. In the forward pit sat Dave Dawson, and behind him in the gunner's pit was Freddy Farmer. Off to one side stood a silent, watchful group of flight deck mechanics. And on the stub step of one wing, with his head and shoulders inside the partly opened cockpit hood, stood Group Captain Spencer.

Everything possible that could be done, had been done. The plane, fitted with extra tanks to add to its cruising range and time in the air, had been checked and rechecked from propeller boss to rudder post. Every square inch of wing surface, every wire, every nut, and every cotter pin, had been carefully examined by expert eyes. The plan of flight had been gone over two or three times, and last minute instructions had been delivered. All was ready for the take-off. There was nothing more to be said or done. The success or failure of the highly important mission about to be made was strictly in the hands, the capable hands, of two stout-hearted, fighting Royal Air Force pilots, attached for special duty to His Majesty's Fleet Air Arm.

"Happy landings, you two," Group Captain Spencer said quietly, though his voice trembled with deep emotion. "We're all counting on you, and pulling for you. And—well, good luck."

The group captain quickly squeezed the hand of each and then stepped down and away from the plane. Dave grinned at him, nodded, and then turned his gaze to the instrument board. Every instrument received his intent scrutiny. Then finally he twisted around in the seat and looked at Freddy.

"Ready, little man?" he grunted.

The English youth snorted and shrugged.

"For what?" he demanded. "For tea to be served? You're certainly hanging around long enough for us to have some. Stop making the old girl wait! She wants to be rid of us—well, you, anyway."

Dave grinned, and winked.

"So we both feel the same way, eh?" he grunted.

"What way?" Freddy demanded.

Dave put a hand to the side of his mouth.

"My heart's bumping up against my back teeth, too!" he whispered.

"Aren't you right!" Freddy whispered back. "So hurry up and get us off this blasted carrier before we change our minds. It's the waiting that gets me down."

"But it's your old pal who gets you *up!*" Dave cracked, and turned front.

With a final look and a nod toward Group Captain Spencer standing with the flight deck mechanics, he kicked off the wheel brakes and slowly opened the throttle, or the "gate," as the R.A.F. boys call it. The Bristol Pegasus engine increased the tone of its song and the plane moved forward, picking up speed with every revolution of the engine. Dave pushed the stick forward, got the tail up and sent the plane streaking along the smooth deck on its wheels. A split second later the "Island" (the bridge and superstructure of an aircraft carrier) flashed by on his left. Another few seconds and he pulled the plane clear and the tiny row of pin point take-off guide lights on his right fell away.

He held the ship in a steady climb for a couple of thousand feet or so. Then he leveled off, banked around to the south, and set his plane on the first leg of his compass course. That done with, he pulled back the throttle to cruising speed, shifted to a slightly more comfortable position in the seat and put his lips to the flap-mike.

"Calling Crimson!" he said. "Plane off. Calling—"

He cut himself off short as Freddy's hand banged down on his shoulder. Right afterward he heard the English youth's words in his ears.

"A beautiful start of things, I must say!" Freddy shouted. "The lad is balmy, and talking to himself so soon. I say, Dave, save that until they put you in a padded cell, eh?"

"What the—?" Dave shouted, and then stopped short. "My gosh!" he then blurted out. "I'll never live this down with you around. Boy! Am I bright!"

Dave shook his head in a sheepish gesture and kept his face front so that Freddy couldn't see its bright color even in the faint pale glow of the instrument board light. He had started to radio check with Operations aboard the Victory only to have Freddy's descending hand and wise-crack wake him up to the fact that the Skua's radio had been taken out, and that he had actually just been talking into thin air. The flap-mike was fastened to the lower part of his helmet, but it wasn't hooked up to anything.

He mentally kicked himself all over the plane for being so stupid, and finally turned around to grin at Freddy.

"You want to change seats after that one?" he asked.

The English youth grinned, but shook his head.

"No, I think not," he said. "If that's the worst you do before we're back, everything will come out all right."

"It will come out all right!" Dave echoed in a rush of words. "This job means a lot, Freddy. We can't let the Fleet Air Arm down."

"We won't," Freddy said, and the look in his eyes said that he meant just that.

"Atta boy!" Dave chuckled. "That's the old fight. And don't worry, pal, I won't let you down, either. Gosh! I'd cut my throat if I did."

"Oh no, you wouldn't!" Freddy said firmly.

"No?"

"No, Dave, my lad," Freddy said, "because I'd jolly well cut it for you, see? Well, there's the first thread of dawn."

As Freddy spoke, he pointed toward the east off the left wing. Dave looked in that direction and saw the thin grey line low down on the horizon. It was the very first signal that the sun was on its way up for a new day. Like night, day comes fast in the Middle East. The first telltale grey line mounts and brightens, and then while you watch a blaze of color streams up over the horizon and starts racing after the shadows of night you can actually see if you turn to the west and look. It is something like the way thunder clouds look sliding down over the horizon before the slanting rays of the sun that has finally broken through—bright and golden to one horizon, and dark and murky to the other.

Letting the plane more or less fly itself, Dave sat staring toward the east and watched the dawning of a new day. In an abstract sort of way he wondered where Freddy and he would be when that sun coming up had made its journey across the sky and had slid down over the western lip of the world. Would they be safely back on the Victory? Would they be at El Aghelia, or Bengazi, or some other British Libyan outpost? Would they be down on the Libyan sands with

nothing but a charred heap of wreckage for an airplane? Or would they—

He shook his head angrily as though to drive away the thoughts. They came creeping back to him, however. They sneaked up on his brain when he wasn't suspecting them. And little by little the dangerous side of this mission crept in to occupy his mind. Back on the Victory he had simply accepted as a matter of course that the flight would be fraught with danger. All flights made in war skies were that way. That's why wars were wars. So even after Group Captain Spencer's repeated words about the dangers involved, he had refused to give much thought to that angle of the venture.

He was giving considerable thought to it now, though, and much against his will. That there was an eerie trembling at the back of his neck, and that his heart pounded much too hard, made him furious at himself. His fury, however, didn't drive away the tantalizing thoughts. There, just a few miles ahead of him now, was the Libyan coast. Beyond were miles and miles of hot, blazing desert sands, dotted here and there by a native village so small you could drop it down into Times Square, New York, and hardly be able to find it again. And all of those countless miles of desert were held by the enemy, patrolled by them on the ground, and in the air.

The truth of the matter was that he and Freddy were heading straight into a world where neither man nor nature was their friend. The blazing sun, and the burning sands, were just as much their foes as a Nazi tank, or a Nazi plane, or a squad of desert troops. Their only friend, their only ally, was the Blackburn Skua and its 830 hp. Bristol Pegasus engine. The plane, the engine, and their own will and ability to survive.

"Hey, what are you shaking your head about? Something wrong?"

He turned at the sound of Freddy's voice and grinned reassuringly.

"Just thinking things over, and adding up the points on our side," he said. "You know me! Old Man Cold Feet, once I get started off on something."

"Stop fishing for compliments!" Freddy laughed at him. "Your feet aren't half as cold as mine. And—Uh-uh! Get us some altitude, Dave. Looks like some kind of a coastal patrol plane down there and to the right. What do you make of it?"

Dave leaned forward and to the side and stared downward in the direction of Freddy's pointed finger. A few thousand feet below a murky shadow was moving toward the northwest. Though the light was bad, the shadow was moving too swiftly for it to be any kind of a surface ship. It was a plane, no doubt about that. However, Dave didn't waste time to make sure whether it was British or Axis. He pulled the Skua's nose upward, and fed a bit more fuel to the smooth singing Pegasus engine.

"Maybe it's just two other guys!" he called back over his shoulder. "We'll ignore them just the same. Company's something we don't crave. All set with that camera, Freddy? The sun's coming up fast, and you never can tell how soon we might spot something."

"All set, and ready to start clicking!" the English youth replied. "You show me something, and I'll do the rest. I'm a whiz at this sort of thing, you'll understand."

"Let you know about that after I see some of the results!" Dave chuckled, and held the Skua in its long climb up over the coastline of Libya.

An hour later they were deep over the desert and the sun was a brassy ball that touched the sweeping sands below with fingers of fire. Dave's eyes ached and smarted from the constant glare, despite the sun lenses he had slipped on over the glass of his goggles. They had long since shoved open the cockpit hood, because, though it was uncomfortable in the steady beat of the sun's rays, it was like flying along inside a baker's oven when the hood was shut.

An hour's flight over the desert, and nothing but sand, sand, and more sand. Here and there dark streaks had marked rocky strips that pushed up through the burning sands. And a few tiny dots from their altitude were clumps of desert bush, and a dried up oasis or two. But they didn't sight a single village, though they strained their eyes until they ached almost unbearably. And as far as troops, tanks, and other motorized equipment went, they might just as well have been coasting around over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

There just wasn't anything below them but sand during the first hour of patrol. And the scene was not one bit changed at the end of the second hour. As a matter of fact, the scene was so much the same Dave had the crazy feeling they had been hovering motionless in the same spot of air for time on end. For the last twenty minutes neither of them had spoken a word. To talk was an effort and, besides, there was so little to talk about save the one thought that each kept to himself, the one gnawing fear within each. It was the mounting realization that failure of the mission was beginning to hover in the offing.

For two solid hours, during which time they had covered countless square miles of enemy territory, they hadn't sighted a single thing worth remembering. No troop depots, no desert outposts, no roving tank patrols, and not even any enemy aircraft. That last, the fact they had not sighted a single Italian or Nazi plane in the air, plagued Dave and caused the fingers of worry to play upon his tightly drawn nerves. True, they had not flown close to Tripoli, or anywhere near it. Perhaps Tripoli was overflowing with Axis planes and mechanized desert units. That wasn't the point. That wasn't the reason Freddy and he had been sent out on this scouting patrol.

The British High Command knew that troops and equipment had been assembled at Tripoli. What the High Command didn't know was *if* any of those units had moved out into the desert, and where, and in what numbers. It stood to reason that the Axis High Command in Libya hadn't kept

them bottled up in the Tripoli area for fear of surprise attack by Wavell's forces. That was foolish, if for no other reason than the fact that over four hundred miles of desert lay between the most advanced British outpost and the Tripoli garrison.

It was a dead sure thing that parts of the Axis forces had moved out into the desert, and had established communication lines with the main base. Yet—

"Yet there's not a single sign of them!" Dave spoke the thought aloud. "Not a gosh darn sign—unless we're stone blind, and can't see beyond our noses!"

"What did you say, Dave?" he heard Freddy ask.

He turned in the seat and shrugged.

"Just talking aloud," he said. "This business is getting me down. Why haven't we seen anything? Even a village would help. But it's all as blank as a sheet of paper—yeah, a sheet of sand paper. Look, Freddy, I'm just about making up my mind to something."

"To go back?" Freddy asked, and a worried look stole into his eyes.

"Back, nothing!" Dave snorted. "We've still got gas. We're not licked by a darn sight. No, that isn't the idea. Look, we've covered a lot of ground. If we've passed over Axis forces in any of the areas we've checked, then they must have tunneled out from Tripoli, by gosh, and are still underground. That's crazy, of course, so it leaves us one more thing to try."

"Well?" Freddy grunted as Dave paused. "I'm waiting. Let's have it."

"The Tripoli area," Dave said promptly. "Let's get us some more altitude and sneak up on Tripoli as closely as we can without being spotted. If we don't spot anything there, then we can be pretty sure that the Tripoli rumors are so much hog-wash."

"I doubt that last," Freddy said gravely. "The High Command must be pretty sure, rather, dead sure, that something's up, else Fleet Air Arm Command wouldn't have agreed for the Victory to pull out of line and go steaming off on its own."

"Yes, I guess that's true," Dave nodded, and scowled. "But I'm still in favor of sneaking up on the Tripoli area if we can. And for a couple of reasons, too."

"Such as?" the English youth prompted as Dave hesitated.

"Well, first for a look-see at the area," Dave explained presently. "Second because it will take us back toward the coast. It was still pretty dark when we flew in over the coast, and—well, it's just a guess that the Nazis *may* be sneaking along the coastline. Maybe they're not circling down toward the south and up to flank Wavell's advance forces. Get what I mean?"

"Instantly!" Freddy exclaimed, and his tired eyes lighted up. "I'm tipping my topper to you, my lad. Yes, I believe you're right. They may be sneaking along the coast, just far enough inland to prevent observation from the sea. Yes, let's head back that way, by all means. Good grief, anything would be better than this tooting around over the blasted desert down there. It's like standing in front of a blast furnace with the door open!"

"Ten times worse!" Dave muttered, and started banking the Skua around and up in a climb for altitude. "Boy! I'd sure like to pick the next spot for Hitler and his big bums to invade. I'd get me a transfer to duty there so fast it would make your head swim."

"And where would that be?" Freddy asked.

"The North Pole," Dave said. "Gee! Nice cool air spilling into the cockpit. And a—Hey! *Freddy!*"

Dave bellowed the last and sat up straight in the seat. The English youth jumped in alarm and banged his head on one of the cowling braces.

"Good grief, what?" he choked out. "What's the matter?"

"Plenty!" Dave snapped back over his shoulder, and at the same time wheeled the Skua around in a quick turn. "Trouble in six different packages. To your right and up! Take a look! Busting down out of the sun. And they aren't sea gulls, either. Buckle your safety strap and get set, Freddy!"

The English youth did just that as he jerked his head around and squinted up toward the sun. He was blinded for a second or so by the brassy glare, but he performed the well known war pilot's trick that makes it possible to spot planes sliding down out of the sun. You close one eye and then hold the thumb of your free hand four or five inches in front of the eye you keep open. The ball of your thumb covers the sun and permits you to see planes diving down in its glare. You can't do it for very long because there is still enough glare to get into your eyes. However, you can stare in the direction of the sun long enough to spot what you want to see.

Anyway, Freddy pulled that sun "eclipsing" stunt and saw the six planes streaking down toward the Skua. They were just moving blurs at first, but in a second or so they took on definite shapes and outlines. He lowered his thumb and eyes and swung to man his rear guns.

"Three Nazi Henschel reconnaissance jobs!" he shouted at Dave. "And three Italian Breda Sixty-Fives. How in thunder did they get up there in the sun?"

"Don't ask me!" Dave called out, and slid the safety catch off his gun trigger button. "Maybe they've been up there all the time, and just now spotted us. I don't know. But, brother, I'm not going to bother about asking them. Hang on, Freddy! I'm first going to try and give them the slip. Gee! Running away from Muzzy pilots and Jerry pilots. But there'll come another day."

"That's what you think!" Freddy shouted. "It's already here, my lad!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Fate Laughs Last*

Freddy Farmer had not shouted a lie, nor had it been an attempt at a kidding wise-crack. Even as his words became lost in the roar of the Pegasus engine, the yammer of *Rheinmettal-Borsigs*, the German aerial machine gun, and *Breda-Safats*, the Italian aerial machine gun, filled the desert air. Out of the corner of his eye Dave saw tracer bullet smoke weave downward well clear of the Skua, and a tight grin of relief came to his lips.

The attacking planes had had the advantage of surprise, and they had been able to get in the first shots, but even with those two things in their favor the enemy pilots has missed badly. That made it instantly obvious that they were not seasoned air fighters.

"That's a small break for us, anyway," Dave grunted, and hauled the Skua up and around in a prop clawing climbing turn. "But there's still six of them, so this isn't going to be any waltz. Okay, Jerry, let this give you an idea you weren't invited!"

As the last left Dave's lips, he ruddered slightly to the left and pressed his trigger release button. His four Vickers guns cowed into the wing spat flame and sound, and a German Henschel, in the act of banking off to twist back and charge downward, was caught square in the burst of bullets. The Nazi craft seemed to jerk sideways for a split second. Then almost instantly it continued around and down—and kept right on going down, leaving behind a long trail of oily black smoke.

"And then there were five!" Freddy sang out. "Well done, Dave. Uh-uh! No you don't, my little Italian bambino! I've been waiting for you. Oh, very much so!"

Freddy Farmer's rear guns barked out their message of war, and one of the Italian Bredas was smacked on the wing like a clay pigeon. It acted as though it had been hit by a couple of battleship salvos instead of machine gun bullets. Or perhaps it was because the Italian pilot at the controls went a little bit crazy in his frantic efforts to yank his plane out of Freddy's deadly fire. At any rate the 870 hp. Gnome-Rhone fitted Italian Breda went spinning nose over rudder post across the sky. The violent maneuver was too much for the ship. The monoplane wings sheared off as though some invisible giant had slashed them off with a knife. Instantly the wingless fuselage pointed its nose downward and dropped like a bomb.

Freddy didn't wait to see if the pilot and gunner were able to bail out. The two other Henschels had swerved in close by then and were spraying the Skua with a shower of hissing bullets as Dave slammed the plane through a full roll and then took advantage of the British ship's superior speed and power and zoomed straight up at the vertical. The zoom maneuver completely threw the Henschel pilots off guard, and as the Skua rocketed upward Freddy swung his guns around and raked one of the Henschels from prop to tail. The German craft seemed to stop dead in midair. Then the starboard strut between the right bottom and top wings buckled in the middle as though hit with a sharp axe. A second later the two wings folded together. The plane lurched drunkenly off to that side and then slowly rolled over and down into a spin. That's the last either of the boys saw of it. There was still one Nazi and two Italian planes in the air, and the loss of the three other ships seemed to add to the savage fury of the attack of their pilots and gunners.

They slashed up toward the zooming Skua with all guns blazing. Dave and Freddy heard the nickel-jacketed bullets rip and chew their way into their plane. Twice the Skua seemed to falter, but each time it kept on going upward. Finally Dave shook his head and kicked the plane over and down out of its zoom and sent it corkscrewing off to the left.

"Can't shake those guys!" he shouted back at Freddy. "They must have hopped up their engines, or something. Anyway, they've got more speed and power than I figured. We've got to fight it out with them, Freddy. There's no chance to shake them off."

"Okay by me!" the English youth shouted back. "Just beginning to enjoy myself, anyway. Tell you what, Dave! Go after that German beggar. If we put him out of business I fancy those Italian lads won't hang around very long."

"Just the idea I had in mind!" Dave said with a nod. "Mussolini's pilots are tough on pigeons and maybe crows, but that's about all. Okay, there's the little Nazi. I'll smack him and force him to turn off. Then you give him the works as we go by. You know, the old team work!"

"Right you are!" Freddy cried, and crouched over his guns. "The old team work it'll be!"

Stepping hard on rudder, Dave stuck the Skua up on wing and hauled it around in a vertical bank to the right. The terrific speed of the turn caused his eyeballs to start to roll up backwards in their sockets, and for a split second or so he almost went blind, or had a "black-out," as the R.A.F. expression terms it. He eased off the speed of the turn, however, and the pinkish haze that was starting to film his eyes faded away until he could see clearly again.

"Hey, no more of that!" came Freddy's warning shout. "You'll have us blind as bats, maneuvering at such speed. Then we'll be easy pickings for those lads."

"Sorry, Freddy!" Dave sang out, and started to drop the nose. "Forgot for a second I had you along. Won't do it again."

"Be sure you don't!" Freddy cried. "Okay, Dave, let him have it! I'm all set for the finishing touches."

Dave didn't even hear the last. He had hunched forward and was giving every bit of his attention to the last Nazi Henschel biplane reconnaissance ship that was banking over and off the top of a power zoom. The instant it was square in his sights, he jabbed the trigger release button. He saw his tracers slice into the plane just in back of the B.M.W. 132 radial engine. Before he could rudder enough to bring the pilot's cockpit and the observer-gunner's cockpit into his sights, the German had wheeled to the left and down.

At perhaps a thousand other times that would have been the perfect maneuver for the German pilot to make. This time, however, was the exception. In fact, because of the Skua's terrific diving speed, the German pilot actually made the worst maneuver possible. Dave simply held the Skua in its thundering power dive and let Freddy Farmer do the rest. And the English youth was not asleep. He brought his guns to bear on the Henschel as they flashed by and practically cut the Nazi ship in two with his steady, relentless, furious fire. Flame shot out of the Henschel and leaped up toward the sky. A huge ball of smoke completely enveloped the plane. When the wind caught the smoke and blew it away, the Henschel just wasn't there any more. It was simply a shower of smouldering embers slithering down toward the blazing sands.

"I thought so, I thought so!" Freddy's wild cry came to Dave's ears. "There they go! And will you just look at those blasted beggars hop it! Three cheers for Mussolini and the Italian Air Force!"

Dave pulled the Skua out of its dive and twisted around to look in the direction of Freddy's pointed finger. What had been two Italian Breda Sixty-Fives a few moments before were now just two dots against the brassy Libyan sky, and becoming smaller and smaller as they moved swiftly toward the west. Even as Dave watched them, with a scornful grin of his lips, the two dots faded out of view completely.

"So now what?" he presently asked Freddy. "Do we head for the Tripoli area, or do we start drifting northward toward the nearest British outpost?"

The English youth didn't answer at once. He leaned forward and looked over Dave's shoulder at the instrument board. He frowned slightly and absently fingered the high speed aerial camera fitted to the right side of his cockpit and pointing downward through a port opening in the floor of the pit.

"I see that we've still another hour's flight in the petrol tanks," he said, looking at Dave. "Another hour before we have to head north for the Victory rendezvous. If you're asking me, I say let's head for Tripoli. Let's have a look along the coast, anyway. Hey! What the dickens are you chuckling at, you funny-looking ape?"

Dave wiped the grin off his face and looked surprised.

"Who, me?" he asked innocently.

"Yes, you!" Freddy said with a nod. "Out with it! What's so funny?"

Dave chuckled again and pointed at Freddy's hand still fingering the camera.

"You," he said. "What a guy! With maybe the fate of the entire Middle East hanging in the balance, all the lad can think of is taking pictures!"

"Rot!" the English youth exploded, but a faint flush seeped into his cheeks. "But, blast it, that's part of the job we're supposed to do, isn't it? And we both agreed that was our last chance, didn't we?"

"Okay, okay, little man!" Dave said, and raised a hand in token of surrender. "Keep your shirt on, and stop biting my head off. So help me, I'll find something for you to snap with your precious camera. I'll—"

Dave never finished the last. At that moment the Bristol Pegasus engine in the nose coughed and made a rasping sound that sent cold chills slicing up and down Dave's spine despite the burning glare of the desert sun. He locked eyes with Freddy for a brief instant and then twisted his head front and looked at the instrument board. The answer showed on the dial of the oil pressure gauge. The needle was swinging around the dial toward the zero mark like the floor indicator of an express elevator on the way down to street level.

"Well, I guess the blighters were darn good shots, at that," he heard Freddy comment as the engine coughed a couple of times more and then began to die out in a long metallic sigh.

An instant later it was as though an invisible little imp hiding under the engine cowling had stuck the end of a parted oil line through the instrument board into Dave's cockpit. A spurt of hot black liquid went streaming out and down past his legs. He jerked his legs aside in a flash, whipped off the ignition and yanked back the throttle in practically a continuation of the same movement. Then, as the oil ceased spurting back into the pit, he stuck the plane down into a long flat glide and turned to Freddy again.

"Can I let you off any place, sir?" he asked with a tight, forced grin on his lips.

Freddy blinked as though forcing back the tears of bitter defeat and failure that sprang to his eyes. Then he grinned weakly, and nodded.

"Why, yes, if you'll be so kind," he said. "On the deck of an aircraft carrier named Victory. You wouldn't mind?"

"I wouldn't mind a bit," Dave replied. "But these horses we have up front don't want to work any more. Seriously, Freddy, what do you think?"

"About what?" the English youth asked in an innocent tone.

Dave scowled at him.

"Cut it out!" he growled. "You know what I mean. Okay, if you won't talk, then I will. We've got to destroy this ship, haven't we? Okay. I say the heck with bailing out and dropping down with all the stuff we'll need down there in the desert. Also, it may be hard to fire the ship before we go over the side. Let's land the bus and take our time selecting the stuff we want to take on the tramp back to—"

Dave stopped short, swallowed hard, and cast a quick glance down at the vast expanse of desert sand waiting below to receive them.

"Stuff we need on the walk back to the nearest British outpost," he finally finished the sentence. "Well? What do you say?"

"The same thing," Freddy said, and made his lips smile. "Didn't you hear me? Besides, I never did like jumping by parachute. Scares the life out of me, you know."

Dave looked at the cool, calm expression in the English youth's eyes, and at the grim set of his jaws.

"Yeah," he murmured with a chuckle. "I just bet bailing out scares the pants off you. And probably eating an ice cream soda does the same thing, you old soldier. Okay, then, we'll take the bus downstairs and sit down on the sand."

The two boys smiled at each other, but each could see that there was no joy in the other's eyes. Instead there was a look of bitterness and helpless rage that neither could keep from showing through. The one thing they had feared most had come to pass. Their Skua wasn't of any more use to them now. They were on their way down into the middle of a desert wilderness. And after what. Nothing. They had accomplished nothing during the three hours and some odd minutes that had passed since taking off from the flight deck of the Victory. For all the good they had accomplished, for all the enemy information they had obtained, they might just as well have stayed aboard the carrier.

It was no use trying to dodge the truth. They had failed in their mission completely, and now they were on their way down to battle for their lives against the enemy desert and the enemy sun.

"Thumbs up, Freddy!" Dave suddenly said in a steady voice. "We're not admitting defeat yet—no, not by a darn sight."

"Certainly not!" the English youth echoed. "I've always wanted to see what it was like in the middle of a desert, anyway. So take me down, my good man. I want to stretch my legs."

Dave grinned and winked and then turned front and gave his attention to flying. He circled the ship around and headed it due north at a gliding angle that was just a degree or two above the stalling point. Safety lay to the north, and the farther he could stretch the plane's glide in that direction the less the number of miles Freddy and he would have to plod over the desert sands.

Holding the ship steady, he hunched forward in the seat and stared hard and long at the uninviting expanse of desert that stretched out on all sides toward the four horizons. Half a dozen times he thought he saw dark splotches down on the sand—dots and darkish shapes that might possibly mark the location of a village, or perhaps even an Axis (German-Italian) desert outpost. But when he tried to get a better look, the rays of the sun reflecting upward from the shimmering sand made his eyes smart and water, and everything to swim around in his gaze.

Inch by inch he eased the plane downward as slowly as he dared, and used every bit of his flying skill to stretch the glide as far northward as possible. No airplane, however, can remain aloft without the use of its engine, and the Skua's engine was dead for keeps. And so after a certain length of time the desert was only a few hundred feet beneath the wheels he had cranked down out of the wing. At that low altitude the desert ceased to be flat and smooth as a sheet of ice. Dave saw that it was very much ridged by sand dunes built up by desert storms. And he saw also that there actually was considerable shrubbery about. But of course it was desert growth, and so bleached and whitened by the hot rays of the sun and the drifting sand that the stuff blended in perfectly with the sand. Unless you were practically down in it, you could very easily miss it altogether.

"Okay, Freddy, hang onto your hat!" Dave shouted as he eased the plane up out of its gliding angle and prepared to sit down on the sand. "This is it. Here we go!"

"Fire away!" came the English youth's reply. "I'm hanging on!"

For a couple of split seconds the plane hung motionless in the air as though it were suddenly reluctant to settle. Then it sank down the few remaining feet, bounced lightly twice, and rolled forward to a gentle stop. Dave didn't have to bother about applying the wheel brakes. The wheels sank two or three inches into the sand, and that action served enough for brakes.

As soon as the plane came to a full stop, Dave and Freddy started gathering up what few things they had brought in the event of just such an emergency as this. They tossed their helmets onto the cockpit floor and put on the small but very useful army pith helmets. They wiggled out of their parachute harness, and fastened their precious water bottles to their belts. They made sure that they had taken out every bit of the compact emergency rations brought along, and checked to make sure that they had knives, compass, and their automatics.

Finally they had everything they needed. Dave started to leg down onto the sand, but suddenly dropped back in his seat and stared at Freddy out of miserable eyes.



"I once saw a man shoot a horse that had broken its leg," he said in a strained voice. "He was really and truly crying as he pulled the trigger. I was pretty young at the time, and I couldn't figure out why he'd shoot the horse if it made him feel so badly. I thought at the time he must be crazy, and I got scared pink and ran all the way home without stopping. I know now why he shot that horse, and—and I guess I sort of know, too, just how he felt."

Freddy swallowed and nodded silently. Dave impulsively reached out and touched the cockpit rim with his hand.

"Sort of like that horse, old girl," he mumbled in a low voice. "We can't leave you here to fall into enemy hands. So we've got to put you out of the way—yeah, sort of out of your misery, I guess you could call it. The desert, and the Nazis, would only do you harm, if they found you. So—so long."

"Let's get on with it, Dave," Freddy said after a moment's silence, and legged out onto the sand.

Five minutes later the Bristol-powered Blackburn Skua was an inferno of flame and black smoke that towered high up into the brassy desert sky. Dave and Freddy were many yards away, heading northward. Not once did either of them turn their heads to look back at the blazing plane that the fortunes of war had forced them to destroy and abandon.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Blazing Sands*

"Well, I've had my fill!" Freddy gasped. "I can jolly well tell you, I've had my fill."

The two pilots had been tramping across the sand for a little over two hours, and Freddy Farmer had suddenly come to a halt and wiped a bucketful of sand-washed sweat from his face. Dave stopped and looked at him questioningly.

"Fill of what?" he asked. "What do you mean, or is the sun getting you?"

"I said I'd always wanted to see what it was like in the middle of the desert," the English youth replied with a grimace. "Well, I've had a look, and I can tell you I'm fed up with it, no end. How far do you think we'll have to go with this sand walking business, anyway?"

"Oh, not so far!" Dave said in a cheery voice. "Eight or nine hundred miles, I guess. Maybe an even thousand."

Freddy shot him a look of withering scorn.

"Only that far?" he snapped. "I thought it would be at least a couple of thousand miles. If what you say is true, we should be there by sundown, easy. But, no fooling, Dave, I'm done in something awful. I could sit down and rest for a week."

"Me, too, Freddy," Dave agreed. "But if we sit down here on the sand under this sun, we'll be fried to a crisp. Come on, fellow, up and at 'em, huh?"

"Who said anything about sitting down here?" Freddy said indignantly, and pointed. "Look over there. Lots of desert bush, and plenty of shade for both of us. What do you say?"

Dave scowled and looked in the direction of Freddy's pointed hand. He himself was also desperately tired, and he knew that to continue on under the blazing sun would take more out of the two of them than they could spare. Yet some inner force urged him to go on; to keep Freddy moving forward. Why, he had not the slightest idea. There was just some little voice within him that begged, pleaded, and commanded him to keep on moving northward.

"They sure look inviting, Freddy," he said in a weary voice as he eyed the huge clump of thick desert bush about a hundred yards away. "But I've got a hunch that we should keep going."

"You and your hunches!" Freddy groaned. "What difference does half an hour make, I'd like to know? Don't get the idea I'm being a quitter, Dave. Nothing like that, really. Fact is, I'm trying to be sensible. We're not trained for this sort of thing. If we bite off too much at one time, we may pay dearly for our foolishness. Let's rest a bit in the shade of those bushes, such as it is, and then have another go at this blasted tramping."

"Okay," Dave finally relented. "I guess you're right at that. No sense burning ourselves out this early in the game. Okay, we'll—Hold everything, Freddy!"

As Dave shouted the last he put up both hands as a shield for his aching eyes and peered hard toward the northwest.

"What is it, Dave?" Freddy cried eagerly. "What do you see?"

"I don't know," Freddy said slowly. "I'm not sure at all. Take a look in the direction I'm pointing, Freddy. Call it a mile, or so, over there. What do you make of that darkish streak over there? Say! That's a ledge of rock, and covered with desert bushes, or I'm a Chinaman."

Freddy cupped his own hands to his eyes and strained them in that direction.

"You're no Chinaman, Dave!" he cried presently. "That's rock sure enough. Looks like a plateau split right down through the middle, but you can't tell in this blasted sun."

"What do you say we make for it?" Dave said. "If it's what it looks like, it'll give us more shade

than those desert bushes over there. And the sun is getting close to high noon in that darn sky up there. In an hour or so your bushes won't be worth a darn. What do you say? Shall we pull up the old socks and try to reach that place, huh?"

Freddy sighed and shrugged resignedly.

"Right you are," he murmured. "But I certainly wish I could learn to say no now and then to your wild propositions. I'd certainly save a lot of wear and tear on myself. Right-o, my little hero. Lead the way. I'm right at your heels. Phew, if these poor blistered feet of mine were only walking the flight deck of the Victory right now. How wonderful, how delicious that would be!"

"Shut up!" Dave growled at him, and started plodding across the seemingly endless expanse of sand. "You'll have me blubbering like a kid in a minute."

A little under an hour later, the two boys had very definitely learned something else about the Libyan desert, or any other desert, for that matter. It was that, when you think some spot is a certain number of miles away from you, you can just multiply your guess by at least six, and the answer will *still be less* than the actual distance. The glare of the sun, the shimmering heat waves rising up from the sand, plus the flatness of the desert, fool you completely when it comes to judging distances between two points.

"This is sure a long mile!" Freddy broke a five minute silence. "Or have we been walking in circles? My compass says not, but maybe the heat's got it, too."

"You and me both!" Dave groaned, and nodded his head. "It's been looking only a mile away for the last twenty minutes. I'm sorry, Freddy. I guess the desert is a tricky spot. How're you doing? We've got to keep going now, you know. If we stop, we're done for."

Freddy wiped hot hands across his equally hot face. There was not even the comfort of sweating, now. No sooner did a bead of sweat ooze out on their bodies than the heat dried it up. From head to foot every square inch of their skin felt like a piece of bacon in a frying pan that a good housewife forgot all about before she left for the movies. Even though they wore desert sun glasses, their eyes felt as though they were exposed to the direct rays of the brassy ball of fire in the sky. Each step was an effort, for their leg joints seemed sapped of all body lubricants. And every now and then, to add to their torture, a little flurry of wind would spring up as though by magic and hurl a swirling cloud of hot stinging sand directly into their faces. However, each new little discomfort that rose up to torture them only served to feed fuel to the flame of resoluteness and grim determination that burned within them.

"Am I right or wrong, pal?" Dave asked when Freddy did not speak.

"Your turn to shut up!" the English youth grunted. "I'm not quitting until you do, my American friend. Matter of fact, though, I think the blasted spot does seem a bit closer."

"Me, too," Dave cried, and increased the pace. "Come on, Freddy. The old whirlwind finish. Yes, it *is* closer. I'd say only about—"

"Don't say it!" Freddy begged. "Let's stop guessing and not break our hearts. Let's just walk. What's the matter? Can't you go faster than that?"

Dave grinned happily as the English youth increased his stride and went sailing into the lead. Just like old Freddy Farmer. Groans and gripes a bit, and then before you know it he's making you look like the one who's groaning and griping.

"Tough guy, huh?" Dave chuckled, and drew up on a level with Freddy's shoulder. "Maybe you want to sprint the rest of the way? Well, skip it, pal. This pace is fast enough for me. Boy! Only a couple of minutes more. And look, Freddy! It's like a regular cliff. Two cliffs, with a valley in between. Gosh! What do you know! A canyon cut into this darn flat desert."

"Think again, Dave," Freddy said with a smile. "Better still, turn around and take a look. I did. We've really been walking uphill, to the top of a plateau formation of ground. Those cliffs are the two sides of a crack that time has made in the plateau formation of ground. Just as unexplainable as why you suddenly come across an oasis with water and palm trees in the middle of a barren desert."

At Freddy's suggestion Dave turned around and looked back in the direction whence they had come. It was then he realized the truth of the English youth's words. Instead of standing on a flat, almost shapeless desert, they were actually standing near the crest of a long sloping hill. True, the slope was marked by countless sand dunes kicked up by the desert winds, but it was still easy to see that they were a good couple of hundred feet higher than they had been when they'd started out. To make sure it all wasn't just a trick his eyes and the desert sun were playing on him, he turned front again and looked at the brownish slash that marked the split in the plateau and formed the escarpment. The brownish slash in the desert was the highest piece of ground before his eyes. Beyond, he could see only Libyan sky and the brassy glare of the sun. That was so because he was actually looking uphill.

"Well, what do you know!" he exclaimed, and grinned at Freddy. "No wonder my legs feel ready to drop off. We've been plowing uphill and didn't know it."

"The desert is full of tricks," the English youth said with a shrug. "And all of them mean ones, too. Well, let's get on with it. Won't be long now."

It turned out to be longer than that, however. Another twenty minutes passed by into time history before they reached the top of the escarpment and stood looking down its side. The canyon was about seventy-five yards long, perhaps thirty-five feet deep, and a hundred feet wide at the top.

The two sides were formed of jagged rock with treacherous spots of crumpling sand-stone here and there. There was plenty of brush and shrubbery about, however, and it was thick enough to cast patches of shade regardless of the burning rays of the sun. One point struck them at once as being an ideal spot where they could relax and rest until the sun was deep in the west, and the cooling winds of night were beginning to steal across the desert. It was to their left and about halfway down. A shelf of rock jutted outward a bit. As a matter of fact, it was really two shelves of rock that jutted out. The bottom one served as a platform upon which to rest. And the top shelf, rimmed with thick desert bush, served as a roof, a sort of canopy for the shelf lower down. Fortunately the side of the escarpment was not too steep to make it impossible for them to reach the lower shelf.

"That's us, Freddy!" Dave exclaimed, and pointed to it. "We'll get down there and be cliff dwellers until it's cool enough to start getting underway again. I vote that we get down there pronto, and have a bit to eat and a little water. That's our biggest danger—water. We must save every drop we can. Who knows when—"

Dave stopped short, and a horrified look leaped into his eyes. He pointed his finger at Freddy and worked his mouth, but no words came from his lips. The English youth stared at him and impulsively recoiled a step in surprise and amazement.

"Dave, what's the matter?" he gasped out. "Dave! Come out of it! What in the world?"

Dave gulped and shook his head as though to snap himself out of his stunned trance.

"Your water bottle, Freddy!" he blurted out. "Look! It's leaking! The canvas cover is dripping wet at the bottom. When did you do that?"

The English youth didn't bother to reply. He reached down and took hold of the canvas-covered water canteen slung at his belt. The bottom half was dripping wet, though the burning rays of the sun were doing their best to drink up every drop of moisture. As Freddy tilted it bottom side up, both boys saw the tiny slash in the canvas covering and the even smaller crack in the metal underneath.

"I can tell by the weight," Freddy said in a tight, strained voice. "There's no more than a cupful left. Talk about luck! Blast it!"

Dave nodded and said nothing. There was no mystery as to how the canvas had been slashed and the metal canteen split so that the precious water had seeped out a drop at a time as Freddy plodded across the sands. It was obvious that a made-in-Germany bullet, or a made-in-Italy bullet had done the work. A stray bullet, a bullet in a thousand during that air scrap had cut through into the Skua's cockpit and nicked the bottom of Freddy's water canteen. It had creased the metal, but not enough to leave an opening through which the water could escape. No, it hadn't cut all the way through, but later the bumping of the canteen against Freddy's leg as he trudged across the sand had caused the paper thin layer of metal left to part and crack and allow the water to seep through.

"Blast the Jerry or Muzzy gunner who did that!" Freddy grated through clenched teeth.

"I'm hoping it was one of them we got!" Dave grunted. "Well, my water canteen's still okay. We'll just have to go extra easy with the drinking. It's not your fault, anyway. Let's forget it and get down there. I'm beginning to feel more like a grease spot every second. We'll split what's in your canteen for our first drink, and then take turns at mine, later. Come on. And hold that canteen bottom side up as you climb down."

"Have no fear of that!" the English youth said grimly. "It would have to be my *water canteen*, wouldn't it! It couldn't be my leg, or an arm, or maybe my neck."

Dave laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Chin and thumbs up, pal!" he cried. "Forget it! We'll just make believe we're a couple of camels. They go for days without water, you know."

"Oh, quite!" Freddy grunted. "But who wants to be a blinking camel? However, right you are. Let's get out of this sun, anyway."

Ten minutes later the two boys had safely reached the shelter of the lower ledge of rock. It wasn't cool and comfortable, by any manner of means. As a matter of fact, it was something like squatting down on the top of a stove that hasn't been out for very long. Regardless of that, however, it was like an icebox compared to the direct rays of the blistering sun above, and the blistering heat of the shifting sands beneath their feet.

"Boy, oh boy!" Dave sighed wearily. "The first thing I'm going to do is get off these shoes. What I wouldn't give for the Kind Fairy to wave her magic wand and create a nice, cool babbling brook to dip these dogs in. Gosh! I—"

"Hold still, Dave!" Freddy suddenly cried. "Hold still! Don't move a muscle!"

Dave, in the act of putting his hands in back of him to serve as a brace while he arched his body backwards, froze motionless and look wild-eyed at Freddy.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Freddy didn't reply. He simply shook his head, and picked up one of his shoes he had taken off. He gripped it by the toe and leaned slowly around in back of Dave. Then in a sudden movement he cracked the heel of the shoe down on the rock with a resounding smack.

"There!" he breathed, straightening up. "That takes care of that little beggar."

"Hey, what gives, anyway?" Dave gulped and frowned. "You playing games or something?"

"Hardly!" Freddy said dryly. "I was simply saving you a lot of pain, and perhaps something worse than that. Take a look."

Dave twisted around, half expecting to see a squad of Nazi soldiers crouching behind him. What he really saw was the mashed body of a three-inch long lizzard-like creature. It looked like a cross between a lizzard and a grasshopper, and there was a suggestion of a lobster about it, too. The body was long and tapering, like that of a lizzard. At the head two tiny horns with lobster-like claws at the end stuck out in front. And there were four long legs on either side of the body.

"Gosh, what's that?" he asked. "Some kind of a desert bug?"

"The worst you can meet in the desert," Freddy replied. "It's a scorpion. See that barbed point that forms the end of his tail? That's his stinger. You can see it's sort of hook shaped. Well, he strikes with it by whipping it up over his back. Five minutes after a scorpion stings you, you're in horrible pain, and your whole body begins to swell up. It can easily be fatal unless you get medical attention at once. You were about to put your hand right down on top of it, my friend."

Dave's face paled, and he shuddered violently.

"Gee!" he breathed in an awed tone. "Gee whiz! Remind me to remember you in my will, Freddy. Gosh! The enemy is just a small part of what you have to fight in desert warfare, I'll say. Boy, oh boy, Freddy, you're my pal for life, and no fooling. Wow."

"I was just lucky enough to spot it in time," Freddy said. Then, getting to his feet, "I think, though, we'd better search this place to see if it has any brothers or sister hanging around. In case I do fall asleep, I'd hate to wake up with one of the beggars sitting on my nose."

"Sleep?" echoed Dave, as they started searching the shelf of rock, and gripped a shoe ready for action. "I won't do any sleeping. After that close call I'll have the jitters for a week."

Freddy just grinned and said nothing. The search took about fifteen minutes, but no brother or sister scorpions were found lurking about ready to avenge a death in the family. So presently they relaxed again, ate some of their emergency rations, and each drank half of the water left in Freddy's bullet-creased canteen.

"Well, that sure helped," Dave said, leaning back against the shelf wall. "I'm beginning to feel like a new man already. Now, if that sun will only slide into high gear and get across that sky, everything will be jake."

"Don't hurry the sun," Freddy murmured, and stretched out. "I'm perfectly comfortable right here. It can take as long as it likes. But it's a bit of a mess, isn't it, Dave? We sure let the Victory down."

"Yeah," Dave grunted, and felt his eyelids growing strangely heavy. "We sure turned out to be just a couple of foul balls. But we're not licked yet. We've got our strength, something to eat, and some water. Maybe when it gets a bit—gets a bit—a bit cooler—"

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## CHAPTER NINE

### *Wings From Tripoli*

A faint buzzing sound penetrating Dave's ears pried his eyelids open. For a second or two he stared bewildered at Freddy Farmer's motionless body a couple of feet from him, at the shelf of rock upon which he found himself, and out across a short rocky valley to a wall of jagged rock studded with sun-scorched brush on the other side. Then, like a door in his brain being opened, memory rushed back. Sure, of course! He had dropped off to sleep in spite of his jitters from the deadly scorpion episode. And a funny buzzing sound had awakened him.

He remained perfectly still for another moment, his ears strained and listening intently to the buzzing sound. At the end of that moment he realized what it was. Not a bee, or a hornet, or anything like that. The sound came from the engine of an airplane high overhead. He got to his feet and walked over to the edge of the rock shelf where he could stare up into the sky. It was then he realized that he hadn't had any cat-nap. The sun was well down toward the western lip of the desert and the sky was slowly being painted with streaks of gold, and red, and purple blue. An impulsive glance at his watch showed that his little refresher nap had lasted a good six hours and some odd minutes.

Because of the altitude of the plane, and the countless ever changing streaks of color in the sky, it was some time before he could pick it out. When he did, there was no way of telling whether it was friend or foe up there. The plane was just a dot moving swiftly toward the west. One thing was certain. It wasn't a Nazi plane. He could tell that from the steady unthrobbing note of the engine. It was either Italian or British. The direction of the plane's flight, the fact that he could tell it was a small single-engined job, and the fact that night was not very far away, gave him the belief that it must be Italian. A moment later the engine's note died off a little, and he saw the dot start sliding downward.

"What's that, Dave? Company?"

Dave looked around at the sound of Freddy's voice. The English youth was digging groggy sleep

out of his eyes and getting slowly to his feet. He came over to the edge of the rock shelf, shielded his eyes with his hands and squinted up into the sky.

"An Italian, or one of ours," he said after a moment's study. "I doubt it's one of ours, though. I say, look! The beggar is banking around and coming back this way. Good grief, do you suppose he's spotted us?"

"From that altitude?" Dave grunted, and watched the dot swing down lower and curve around in their direction. "Not a chance. But he's heading back here, sure enough. There! He's flattened out of his glide. And there's his engine hitting on all six again."

It was true. Even as the two boys watched, the still very indistinct plane seemed to level off, and the sound of its engine increased. Impulsively they both backed up a couple of steps and stood there silently watching the plane come closer and closer. Presently it was close enough to take on definite shape and outline. It was an Italian Fiat C.R. 42 fighter plane powered by a Fiat radial engine; a biplane type that had been used extensively by Mussolini's air force since the very start of the African campaign. They had proved no match, however, for even the slowest planes General Wavell used, and little by little it had become harder and harder to find one in the air. Their pilots had no stomach to stray close to R.A.F. controlled air.

The two boys had been acquainted with the facts about the Fiat C.R. 42, and so their interest and wonder increased as soon as they noted its type.

"Now what would that lad be doing way out here?" Freddy murmured aloud. "Of course he isn't near where our flying chaps might possibly be, but the fact the blighter's actually alone certainly looks queer."

"Yeah, if what they told us about those jobs is true," Dave grunted, and scowled at the oncoming plane. "Hey, I wonder! Could that bird be on reconnaissance patrol, or even contact patrol? Look at the way he's zigzagging. He's even losing some altitude. Freddy, that guy's looking for something as sure as you're a foot high!"

"Maybe the crashes of the four planes we shot down," Freddy suggested. "Perhaps that ship was sent out to confirm the results of the scrap, to drop food and water to any of those Nazi or Italian lads who may have survived the crashes."

"Could be," Dave nodded, and continued to scowl at the plane. "But they sure gave him the wrong location bearings. He's 'way too far north. No, I think that idea is out, Freddy. That bird's on the look-see for something else. He's—Hey! See there? He's found what he was hunting for. Look! He's veered to the north a bit and he's going down in a long power dive."

Dave gave a final look at the plane, then looked across the desert canyon toward the other side. The opposite wall was too high for him to see over it and the stretch of desert beyond. From the glide angle and direction of the Italian plane, he knew that it was going to pass low over some point well beyond the northern slope of the desert plateau. He half turned and touched Freddy on the arm.

"He's got business some place over there where we can't see," he said. "Get on your shoes, and collect your stuff. We're going to the other side of this plateau crack and see what the heck is what."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Freddy said, and started putting on his shoes.

Going down that side of the escarpment, crossing the valley floor and scrambling up the other side was no easy task. Bush thorns caught at their uniforms, and jagged points of rock inflicted more than a couple of bruises on their bodies. They sacrificed body safety for speed, however, and presently they were flat on their stomachs on the top of the other escarpment and peering ahead at the dune-humped stretches of sun-painted sand.

The Italian plane was now down very low. It wasn't more than three or four hundred feet above the surface of the sand. It was a good five miles away from them, however—much, much too far for them to make out the pilot seated in the pit. Breathlessly they watched the plane nose down even lower. Then suddenly Dave let out a startled cry and nudged Freddy with his elbow.

"Look!" he cried. "He's dumped something over the side. Looked like some kind of a box to me. Did you see it?"

"I saw it," Freddy replied in a voice reverberating with excitement. "And I see something else, too, to the left of where that box-shaped thing appeared to hit the ground. Look hard, Dave. See those—those little humps? They look like little sand dunes, but I'll bet anything they're not."

"No bet!" Dave breathed after a long moment of silence. "Freddy, there's something very screwy going on. Those humps are little shacks, or huts. So help me, that's a village over there. Yet darned if I can spot a single palm tree."

"And there's somebody there!" Freddy whispered tensely. "There must be, or that plane's pilot wouldn't be dumping anything over the side. Look! He's climbing now, and heading back where he came from. Dave, we're the luckiest two chaps in all Libya right now."

"Maybe," Dave admitted grudgingly. Then, giving him a keen look, "What makes you say it?"

Freddy didn't answer at once. He chewed on his lower lip and kept his eyes fixed on the distant scene.

"Do you think you could spot those humps from say five or ten thousand feet in the air?" he suddenly asked.

"Five or ten thousand?" Dave echoed with a laugh. "Unless I knew they were there, like that Italian bird must have known, I would probably sail right over them at five hundred feet, and not know the difference."

"Right!" Freddy replied instantly. "Now, answer me this one. Why would an Italian pilot be dumping something overboard on a spot you could miss at even five hundred feet, eh?"

"I give up," Dave said after a moment's thought. "What is this, anyway? Some kind of a game you've just thought up?"

"Use that stuff in your noggin you call brains!" Freddy said sharply. "Use it, Dave! Think hard. I may be completely off my base, but I think I now know why we didn't spot anything of interest during our patrol. Certain parties took care so that neither we nor anybody else should spot anything. Now, does that give you a little idea?"

"For cat's sake, you're talking in riddles!" Dave growled. "How do you know why we didn't—"

Dave suddenly cut himself short and clapped a hand to his forehead.

"Well, fry me for an oyster!" he breathed fiercely. "Yeah, I think I begin to see the light. That, Freddy, is an enemy desert outpost, and so perfectly camouflaged that you'd never spot it from the air, unless you knew exactly where it was located."

"Absolutely correct," Freddy said. "You may go to the head of the class, my little man. But wait a minute. One more question."

"Boy, how you wear a guy down!" Dave said, and sighed. "Okay, dear teacher, shoot."

Freddy nodded his head toward the odd-looking cluster of humps in the desert.

"Why do you suppose that plane didn't land?" he asked.

Dave gave him a startled glance and shook his head at the same time.

"I give up," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea. But you always were the military expert on this team, so tell me. Why?"

"It's just a guess, of course," the English youth said, after a long pause. "Maybe a crazy one, too. Somehow, though, I have the feeling that the Nazis or the Italians over there are taking no chances on being spotted by any possible British plane out on long distance reconnaissance. Now, if one of our ships were way up there in the sky somewhere, he wouldn't give a thought to seeing an Italian plane swoop down low like that chap we just saw. However, he would prick up his ears if he saw the plane land. He'd at least get curious enough to slide down himself to see if it was only a forced landing. Therefore I think that Italian pilot had orders not to land; to drop whatever he had to deliver, and not deliver it by hand. Are you getting a little bit of what I mean, now?"

Dave nodded and stared intently at his English pal. Count on good old Freddy Farmer to dig down and ferret around for the true meaning of everything that appeared strange and mysterious. He had a mind like a steel trap, and more than once his mental ferreting around ahead of time had helped them out of a tight corner later.

"Yes, I'm beginning to catch on," Dave said presently. "In fact, I'm getting a couple of ideas of my own. I don't know what that Italian pilot dropped, but it certainly wasn't food, and it wasn't ammunition. The box, or whatever it was, wasn't big enough."

"And so?" Freddy echoed as Dave hesitated and scowled off into space.

"And so maybe that's no ordinary desert outpost," Dave finally said. "Maybe there are important people there—I mean, important military people. Do you know something, Freddy?"

"Way ahead of you, Dave, as you would say," Freddy interrupted with a grin. "Important military people means staff headquarters. Yes, we're probably crazy, Dave. Both of us may be completely out of our heads, but I'll bet you the Bank of England against your oldest pair of flying boots that that spot over there is some kind of field headquarters for enemy troops in this area of the desert."

"Enemy troops in this area?" Dave echoed, and gave a wave of his hand that included the surrounding desert. "Troops where? You mean the force that's right over there where we're looking, don't you?"

Freddy shook his head and gave a stubborn tilt to his chin.

"No, I don't," he said. "I mean that that's the headquarters base for a *lot* of spots in this section just like it, only we haven't seen them. And, by good luck, we didn't stumble into them since leaving our burned up Skua."

Dave started to nod, then checked himself and gave Freddy a perplexed look.

"Don't look right now," he said, "but you're getting me all balled up, my friend. Just what are you driving at, anyway? Come clean with the works; then maybe I'll argue with you."

"It's quite simple," the English youth said with a faint smile. "You just mix a little imagination with what facts you know, and there you are."

"Maybe you are, but I'm not!" Dave grunted. "Skip the imagination part and just give me the facts."

"Right you are," Freddy said, and started counting off the fingers of one hand. "First, British

Middle East High Command knows that troops, planes, and supplies, and so forth, have been transported across the Mediterranean to Tripoli by air and water. Two, High Command knows that it is mostly Nazi stuff. Three, it is obvious that preparations are being made for a drive to beat back Wavell's forces. Four, it is equally obvious that the enemy knows that Wavell's forces are not very strong. As Group Captain Spencer said, everything that could be spared was yanked away and sent down south to hand the Italians a quick mop-up knockout blow in Ethiopia. Five, the one important thing in desert warfare is surprise—surprise attack. Six, if the Axis forces simply started along the main coast road from Tripoli and around the southern end of the Gulf of Sidra, Wavell's outposts, to say nothing of his planes, would spot them long before they were within attacking range, and there would be no surprise at all. You want me to continue?"

"Sure, stay in there and pitch," Dave nodded with a grin. "I know you've got something, kid, and I want to hear it all. I really mean that."

"Very well, then," Freddy said, and started counting his fingers over again. "Seven, to move a huge attacking army down toward the south and back up toward the north would be much too exhausting for the troops, and such an army would be spotted by Wavell's pilots days ahead of time. R.A.F. bombers would then sail out and bomb the stuffing out of the advancing armies."

"Just a minute," Dave cut in. "They wouldn't be dumb enough not to have air protection of their own."

"Correct," Freddy said, and made a little gesture with one hand. "But where would that air protection base itself in this part of the desert? Certainly not with the armies as they moved forward a few miles each day. At Tripoli? And keep flying way out here to guard troops and tanks and other motorized equipment on the move? Not a bit of it, Dave. They might just as well send General Wavell a letter telling him they were creeping up for a surprise attack! They'd—"

"Hold it, hold it!" Dave suddenly broke in excitedly. "You gave me the tip just now. Creeping up. That's it! Creeping up in *small units* until they get close enough to strike at some point in Wavell's defenses in a main body. Sure, sure, my imagination's beginning to work too! Small units that can camouflage themselves perfectly so as not to be seen by any of our planes that might pass over. And then when they're all close enough, and all set, the bombers and stuff can wing along the coast from Tripoli and take their part in the attack. Gosh, Freddy, I'll bet that you've hit the old nail right smack on the head. We've stumbled onto the hottest thing in Libya. And I don't mean the sun or the sand, either!"

"I'm sure of it!" Freddy said, and beamed happily. "And here's something else. The small units move only *during the night*. And before dawn they dig in and camouflage themselves so they won't be seen during the day."

"Yeah, like a tribe of Indians sneaking up on a frontier village in the old days back in the States," Dave breathed. "And—"

"Dave, that's exactly the idea!" Freddy suddenly cried, and gripped him by the arm. "Take a good look, now! I see things moving over there. Am I right, or are my eyes just going haywire?"

The setting sun was now quite low, and the long shafts of orange gold light that stretched across the desert made it extremely difficult to distinguish individual objects, or even movement, at any distance over a mile. The rays of the setting sun cutting through the shimmering waves of heat rising up off the hot sand made everything seem to blend into one huge picture of shadows and various shades of color. After a few moments of intense scrutiny, however, Dave was ready to agree with Freddy's belief. Unquestionably things were moving over there. Many things, in fact, and of all shapes and sizes. He continued to stare hard, and then suddenly the faint echo of engines coming to life drifted down the desert wind. He felt, rather than saw, Freddy stiffen at his side. And a moment later the English youth's excited voice came to his ears.

"Dave! Dave, do you hear that? Those are tank engines, and armored car engines! See? They're starting to take off the camouflage coverings. They're getting ready to move, Dave, just as soon as it gets dark."

"Right!" Dave echoed. "And that means us. We're going to get on the move, too."

"What do you mean?" Freddy asked without turning his head.

"We're going to get close for a good look," Dave replied, and rose up onto his hands and knees. "I don't think they'll pull out until it's actually dark. By then we can sneak up close to them and see what's what. You know, Freddy, I've a hunch there are the answers to a lot of questions over there. And if we get up close enough, maybe we can find out a few of those answers. Anyway, we can't stick here forever."

"No, of course we can't," the English youth agreed, and got up onto his feet. "Our bad luck seems to have turned into good luck, so we'd better make the most of it. Come on. Wait, let's see."

Freddy pulled out his compass and held it steady in one hand. He peered at it intently for a moment.

"Right-o," he said presently. "If we hold a course fourteen points east of north we'll be traveling a straight line toward that spot. As soon as we get down off this escarpment we won't be able to see the spot all the time. But this compass will take care of that. Right-o. Let's get started."

"Hey, hold everything!" Dave cried, and held Freddy back. "A fine Indian scout, you are! And have you forgotten everything you learned about aerial combat, huh?"

Freddy stared at him in wide-eyed amazement.

"What in the world is eating you, Dave?" he gasped. "Aerial combat?"

"Sure," Dave said with a nod. "What's the best way to sneak up on an enemy ship for a surprise attack?"

"Come down on him with the sun at your back, so it's extra hard for him to see you," Freddy replied promptly. "So what of it?"

"Plenty," Dave said, and pointed to the west. "The same idea holds good right here. We'll circle around to the west for a spell, and then creep up on them with the setting sun at our backs. That way we can get much closer. Less chance of anybody spotting us. Right?"

Freddy grinned a bit sheepishly and nodded.

"The young man is right," he said. "He's absolutely correct. My apologies and congratulations, sir."

"Oh, think nothing of it, my dear fellow," Dave said with a magnanimous gesture. "Think nothing of it at all."

"As Dave Dawson would say," Freddy grunted as they started down the escarpment, "nuts to you!"

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## **CHAPTER TEN**

### ***Courage Against Fate***

By the time the sun was a ball of flaming color that rested lightly on the western lip of the world, the two youths had detoured around to a point less than half a mile from the spot where they had seen mysterious activity. Now, though, it was no longer a mystery. Lying side by side on the western side of a rolling sand dune, they peered over its crest at a scene that caused their hearts to pound in wild excitement and the blood to surge through their veins.

There, less than half a mile away, were two enemy motorized units preparing to break camp and continue their obvious march northward under the cover of the Libyan night. There were at least twenty tanks of the small, light armored German type. There were also as many troop truck transports, and four or five armored cars. One good look at those armored cars confirmed their earlier beliefs. High ranking officers of the Axis forces were in charge of those attack units, and it was quite evident that the mobile force served as headquarters for other units scattered about the desert area.

If either of them held any doubts as to the truth of that, such doubts were dispelled some ten minutes later. As though by magic, a plane seemed to rise up out of the camp. It was a German Messerschmitt 109 single seater, and no sooner had it cleared the sand than it wheeled toward the northwest and streaked away with the speed of a bullet. It was not the plane itself that confirmed their belief, however. It was the German Staff markings they saw painted on the fuselage of the fleet plane as it raced by.

"Boy!" Dave breathed, and grinned at Freddy. "Talk about finding the old needle in a haystack! Lady Luck sure is giving us the glad smile."

"Sure, whatever that means," Freddy commented with a frown. "You and your American slang!"

Dave laughed.

"Slang, my eye," he chuckled. "I simply mean that out of all the enemy units that are probably hiding out here on the desert, we spot the headquarters unit right off the bat. See? Like finding a needle in a haystack first time."

"That's headquarters over there, right enough," Freddy murmured. "Ten to one that Messerschmitt is winging back to Tripoli to inform them of the new positions they will take up before dawn."

"And ten to one that ship will be back and nicely camouflaged with the rest of the stuff by dawn, too," Dave grunted. "Much as the Germans and the Mussies give me a pain in the neck, I have to hand it to them for being tops when it comes to camouflaging technique. You could fly over this desert until you were blue in the face and not even spot a thing that didn't look like just ordinary desert."

"They certainly know how," Freddy admitted grudgingly. "But let's grant them that and get our heads to working on more important things right now. In an hour at the most they'll be under way. What shall we do? Tag along behind them—or what?"

Dave scooped up a handful of sand and let it slowly trickle between his fingers as he silently considered the question.

"I think that idea's out, Freddy," he said after a while. "For one thing, tanks and armored cars don't travel at a snail's pace, not on a flat desert and in the middle of the night. Another thing, even if we did manage to keep up with them somehow, we'd be dead on our feet by dawn. And we'd be faced with the possibility of spending all tomorrow in the sun. There might not be any spot where there was shade."

"I know," Freddy murmured in a worried voice. "And tough as we think we are, that would be too



much for us."

"Check," Dave said. "But supposing we could take it somehow. So what? So we wouldn't be any better off than we are right now. What we've got to do is get into that camp and find out things, then get out and get word to the British High Command what the Germans and Italians are up to. That's the problem—two problems, they really are."

"And mighty ticklish ones, too," Freddy said with a sudden show of gloomy depression. "What do you think of the idea of trying to sneak in there and have a quick look around? We might find out something."

"And we *might* find a couple of Mauser rifle bullets heading our way, too!" Dave said with a shake of his head. "If they were camped there for keeps that might be a worthwhile bet. But they're getting ready to move, and they'd only need one look at our uniforms to know darned well we didn't belong. Even the dumbest Italian over there would figure that out."

"But after it gets dark, couldn't we—" Freddy began, and then stopped himself with a negative shake of his head. "No, I guess not."

"Nix is right," Dave said. "After it gets dark they'll all be in their tanks and trucks and armored cars, and on their way. Nope, even pulling the old hitch-hiking stunt wouldn't get us a thing."

Freddy Farmer started to speak, then seemed to change his mind. He closed his mouth and scowled unhappily at the fingers of his two hands digging in the sand. Dave watched him for a moment, then reached over and touched him on the shoulder.

"There is a way, if you're game, Freddy," he said softly.

"I'm jolly well game for anything!" the English youth came right back. "You know that, Dave. What's your plan?"

"We could make them take us prisoners," Dave said.

Freddy's jaw dropped in utter amazement, and his eyes bulged out like marbles on long sticks.

"Make them take us prisoners?" he choked out. "Give up? Are you mad, Dave?"

"No, just maybe a little screwy," Dave replied. "Pin back your ears for a couple of seconds, and listen. If we try to sneak up on them, we run the risk of being shot first, and questioned afterwards. That wouldn't do either of us any good. If we try to tag along behind them as they move northward, who knows what kind of trouble we might run into. So what's left? To go along with them—as their guests. See what I mean?"

"I don't even begin to see," Freddy replied with a befuddled groan. "Frankly, I don't fancy those chaps over there are in the mood to have guests. In fact, I doubt very much they would consider us as guests."

"Oh, I just said 'guests' for the heck of it!" Dave snorted. "Look! Here's exactly what I mean. You and I will be a couple of British infantry officers hopelessly lost in the desert. And, boy, that's doggone close to the truth, and how! Anyway, we have been wandering around for we don't know how long. We've lost track of time, see? Maybe the sun has got us a bit. We have just a few drops of water left in one canteen, see? Our uniforms are torn, and all our food has gone. We simply stumble right into that camp over there while it is still light, and they can see us and *not take pot shots*. Beginning to catch on?"

The light of hope had come back into Freddy Farmer's eyes, but he was still a bit befuddled.

"I think so," he said. "You mean, bury our stuff here, and tear our uniforms, and all that sort of thing?"

"Right on the button!" Dave nodded eagerly. "We happened to see their camp. When we get close enough we'll start yelling to attract their attention. We'll—Hold it! I've got an even brighter idea!"

"What is it?" Freddy demanded. "I'm sure it can't be any crazier than the one you've already told me."

Dave reached over and gave him a playful punch on the shoulder.

"It's a pip!" he cried. "We think we've finally found a small detachment of our own forces, see? We don't realize they're the enemy until they've captured us. That will start them spinning."

"Spinning?" Freddy echoed.

"Sure!" Dave nodded. "It'll start them playing guessing games with themselves. They'll start wondering if they really are alone out here, as they thought they were. They'll wonder just where we came from. They'll wonder plenty about us stumbling onto their camp, Freddy. And you and I can fill them with a lot of hoey that will make them wonder all the more. No fooling, Freddy, it's a perfect set-up."

"If all goes well," Freddy said as the cautious side of him came to the fore for a moment. "But, after all, this wouldn't be the first time we'd taken a long chance."

"That's the boy, Freddy!" Dave cried, and patted his shoulder. "That's the old fighting spirit. Okay, it's a deal, huh?"

"You and your wild ideas!" The English youth sighed, then smiled faintly. "They'll probably end up putting me in front of a firing squad one of these days. It might just be crazy enough to work, though, I guess. Right you are, you mad hatter. It's a go."

"My pal!" Dave breathed, and beamed at him. "Contact, then! Let's peel off the stuff we don't need, and muss ourselves up to look as though we've been through the mill."

"If we haven't been through the mill today," Freddy groaned, and started burying things in the sand, "then I sure don't know what you'd call it. But just remember, my little friend, if I get shot for this, I'll come back to haunt you every single night, I promise you that!"

"You won't have to come back," Dave brushed the threat aside, "because I'll be right there with you."

"I don't doubt it for a minute," Freddy said with a hopeless shrug. "The lad's just like my shadow. Can't get rid of it. Ah me! If I'd only had sense and remained in England, I'd probably be an air vice-marshal about now. Oh well, such is life!"

"Boy, am I glad!" Dave murmured with feeling.

"Glad about what?" the English youth asked unsuspectingly.

"Why, that you didn't stay in England and get promoted to be an air vice-marshal, of course," Dave said solemnly. "After all the good old R.A.F. has done, to have it fold up and fall apart because a young squirt has—I just can't finish. I shudder even at the thought of such a fate for the R.A.F."

"So?" Freddy grunted, and gave him a stern look. "Very well, then, I refuse to go through with this as planned. I'm going to tell them the truth. They may be Germans and rotters, but just the same I can't play that kind of a dirty trick even on them."

"Refuse to go—" Dave gasped as sudden alarm shot across his face. "Won't play a dirty trick on them? Hey! What goes on here? What do you mean, tell the truth?"

The English youth didn't answer at once. With deliberate movements he carefully smoothed the surface of the sand that covered the equipment he had buried. Then he nonchalantly brushed sand dust from his hands and glanced at Dave.

"I'm going to tell them who you are," he said firmly. "I just haven't the heart to let them think they've really captured somebody, when it's actually only you. No, I'm going to tell them who you are so they can kick you back out into the desert, the same way a fisherman throws back a fish that's too small. And I'm going to teach them that bit of American slang to say as they do it."

"What's that?" Dave asked as the corners of his mouth twitched.

"It's—" Freddy began, and hesitated. Then his face lighted up. "Oh yes, I remember now. Ten pennies for twelve. Yes, that's it."

Dave started to bellow with laughter, but clapped his hand over his mouth just in time. Sound carries like magic across the desert, and they were not yet ready to make their presence known to the enemy tank and armored car units. However, it was a couple of minutes before Dave could choke off his laughter enough to speak.

"Ten pennies for twelve!" he gasped out as tears streamed down his cheeks. "Boy, oh boy, is that one for the book. You mean, Freddy, a dime a dozen. But let it go. Anyway, you're one in a million, and that's no kidding. Well, all set?"

As Dave asked the question, it served as an automatic brake, a full stop, for kidding and joshing around. In a moment the serious business would begin—deadly serious business, upon the outcome of which might hang not only their own lives but the success or failure of Britain's war efforts in the Middle East. Freddy searched Dave's eyes for a couple of seconds, and then nodded.

"Right-o," he said quietly. "Let's get on with it. We've buried all our stuff, and we both certainly look as if we've been wandering around in this blasted desert for days. Yes, let's get on with it."

"Wait, just one more thing," Dave said as Freddy started to get up and move over the brow of the sand dune. "It just hit me, and it might help. You can't tell. Speak nothing but English. Make out that you don't understand German. That is, of course, if any of those birds speak English. But let's not let on we speak and understand German until we have to. They—Well, they might let something slip, you know."

"A darn good idea, Dave!" Freddy said in honest approval. "You're right. One never can tell."

"Then off we go," Dave said, and got up onto his feet. "Stagger and reel a little. Pretend you don't hear them the first time they challenge. Let's even lean a little on each other for support. Boy, if there's any of the actor in us, this sure is the time for it to come out. And to think—Gosh!"

"And to think what?" Freddy shot out the corner of his mouth as they started lurching forward and up over the crest of the sand dune and into full view of the enemy camp. "What were you going to say?"

"To think the day would come when you and I would walk up to a bunch of Nazi slobs and say, 'Here we are,'" Dave grunted. "Of course it's all for a reason, but—well, it sure gives me a funny feeling inside."

"I know just how you feel," Freddy said. "And I could feel a lot better, myself. But if things work out our way, we should fret."

"Things *will* work out for us!" Dave said grimly, and gave the English youth's arm a squeeze. "They've *got* to!"

Neither of them spoke for the next few minutes. They trudged forward across the sand, purposely faltering in their steps now and then and stumbling to their knees. Every second of the time, however, they kept a watchful eye on the desert camp that was just about ready to move forward. The sun was down below the rim of the world now, and night was rushing forward from the east on black wings.

Stumbling step by stumbling step, they drew closer and closer to the enemy camp. With each step they expected to hear a wild shout go up, a shout that would mean they had been sighted. With each step, also, a certain inner and unspoken fear walked with them, the tiny fear that their little plan might fail horribly almost before it had been put into action—the kind of failure, very definite and permanent, that the bark of a rifle and a singing bullet would cause.

No rifles barked, however, and no challenging voices thundered across the rolling sands. The tank, armored car, and truck motors had been silenced after a short test run period, and the stillness of the vast desert had closed down over everything. The boys impulsively held their breath every now and then as though they and the entire world were waiting for some sudden all destroying explosion to shatter what seemed an eternity of silence.

"Are we going to have to bump right into those birds before they see us?" Dave murmured desperately. "Gosh! We could have come this far on a couple of motorcycles and saved our feet. The dopes are—"

"Shut up!" Freddy whispered out the corner of his mouth. "Here they come! For goodness' sake don't keep your hand near your automatic. The blighters have their rifles trained right on us."

It was true. A squad of Nazi desert troops, led by a corporal, came dashing across the sand toward them with rifles held up and ready to shoot.

"Lady Luck, stay with us, please!" Dave whispered softly as he and Freddy lurched forward a few more steps.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Prisoners by Request*

"Halt!"

The order barked in German was akin to the crash of a rifle shot. The two boys reeled forward one more step and then lifted their heads and stared in surprise at the German non-commissioned officer who stood straddle-legged in the sand directly in front of them. There was a service Luger in his belt holster, but he wasn't using it. Instead he held a short-barreled, rapid fire Mauser in his hands.

"Put up your hands!" he snarled in German.

Neither of the boys moved. They continued to stare at him in bewildered dismay. Then Dave gave a little confused shake of his head.

"Germans!" he choked out. "These aren't our chaps, Freddy. We've run into Germans. We've been captured! Oh, blast our luck!"

As Dave spoke he shot a keen glance at the expression on the corporal's face. What he saw caused his heart to leap with hope. The man obviously understood English, for a triumphant light leaped into his eyes, and he smiled broadly.

"Yes, you have been captured," he said in English that was heavy with Teutonic accent. "Put your hands up. I will take your automatics. Careful, now! One move and I will shoot."

"Take them, and get it over with!" Freddy said in a hoarse voice. "All we want is water and food. Where are we, anyway?"

The corporal took a cautious step or two forward, then snatched their automatics from them. He looked at Freddy and grinned.

"Where are you?" he sneered. "What does it matter? You are my prisoners. Now get moving. *Herr* Colonel is anxious to meet you."

As though he considered that quite a joke, the German laughed loudly and showed a set of very bad teeth. Then, motioning his squad of soldiers to form about the two boys, he started back toward the camp. Still continuing to act exhausted and all in, Freddy and Dave staggered forward, faltering with every step, and reaching out to one another for support to stop from pitching down onto the sand. All the time, though, they shot glances at the desert camp through slitted eyelids. Dave counted some sixty vehicles in all, and as he looked at them his admiration for Nazi camouflage technique went up another point. Every truck, every tank, and every armored car was daubed with paint in such a way as to make it exactly the shades of the desert. Even two or three tents that were still standing looked more like the desert than the desert itself.

To all that, however, Dave gave but a passing look. What caught and held his attention was the actual equipment. It all was right up to the minute stuff. None of it was the shabby, slipshod equipment used by Mussolini's forces in Northern Africa. It was all made-in-Germany stuff, light, fast, highly mobile, and of high fire power. In short, it was instantly obvious to Dave that this was a strong and completely equipped attacking force of the Nazi army in Africa. It was no mere

scouting patrol. And there was one other item that impressed him at once, too. It was all Nazi. He did not see a single Italian uniform as the corporal marched them past groups of curious-eyed German soldiers toward one of the tents on the far side of the camp. It was as plain as the nose on his face that these Germans were out for business, serious business. For that reason probably, they had no Italian troops along with them who might break and flee for their lives at the sound of the first shot, or the first smell of gunpowder in their noses.

Presently the corporal brought them to a halt in front of a desert tent. It was the square type with slightly slanting roof and sides. The front flap was lifted up and fastened to poles stuck in the sand to serve as a sort of porch. But in the event of a sand storm, it could be lowered at once and made fast so that those inside were completely protected. Three portable tables had been placed side by side, and in back of them sat two German officers. One was a colonel. His head was the shape and size of a watermelon that was terribly sunburned. His eyes were little more than slits cut in the flesh on either side of his lumpy nose. His mouth was thin-lipped and much too wide. And on the upper lip was a little patch of black that was supposed to be like the little pen wiper mustache worn by his lord and master, Adolf Hitler.

The other officer was a major, and his appearance was the direct opposite of his colonel's. He was thin as a rail, and tanned the color of old leather. From the jaw to the forehead was three times as long as from ear to ear was wide. His nose made Dave think of a letter opener. His eyes were like green marbles, and his pointed chin could very well have served as one end of a pick-axe.

The corporal smacked his heels together and almost threw his arm out of joint saluting.

"Two English prisoners, *Herr* Colonel," he said. "We found them stumbling across the sand. They seem surprised that we were not of their own forces. I have taken their guns away from them. Here they are."

The corporal went forward two steps and placed the boys' automatics on the tables. The German colonel didn't give them so much as a glance. He kept his slitted eyes on his prisoners and stared at them as though they had just popped out of some museum. Dave stared back weary-eyed at him, and tried to read the look in his eyes. Did he see surprise, chagrin, or angry wonder there? He couldn't tell, because the lids were drawn so close.

"Where is your unit?"

The colonel suddenly spat out the question in German. The boys were perfect actors. They looked blank, shook their heads, and shrugged.

"Do you speak English, sir?" Dave presently said. "And could we have water, and—"

He cut himself off short as Freddy Farmer quickly played up to him. The English youth groaned, swayed on his feet, and would have fallen if Dave had not grabbed him. The little exhaustion act fooled the German colonel completely. He spat out a few words in angry annoyance, and then ordered the corporal to help Dave and Freddy to chairs just inside the tent, and to give them water. The boys gestured thanks with movements of their hands, and accepted the water canteen from the corporal. The two officers watched them in keen-eyed silence and waited until they appeared to revive a bit.

"Yes, I speak English," the colonel presently said, and surprisingly enough, without the slightest trace of an accent. "Where is your unit? I see from your uniform badges you are from the Sixth London Regiment."

"We don't know, sir," Dave mumbled as he lowered the water canteen from his lips. "We are lost. Two hours ago we saw this camp. We thought this was our regiment's post."

"How did you get lost?" the colonel demanded. "How long ago?"

"Four days, sir," Freddy spoke up. "We were on advance patrol and—"

"It was more than four days, Freddy," Dave interrupted. "It was six. I have kept count of them."

"Four or six, let him finish!" the colonel snarled, and then looked at Freddy. "Yes? You were on patrol? Where?"

Freddy hesitated and scowled.

"Is that necessary?" he asked. "Would you reveal valuable information if you were captured and taken prisoner, sir?"

The blunt question startled the two Germans. They exchanged swift glances; then the colonel bent his slitted eyes on Freddy again.

"I would not be captured and taken prisoner!" he said harshly. "If you do not wish to speak, that is your privilege. But—"

The German paused and waved a hand toward the surrounding desert.

"But you look as though you know what the desert can do to a man," he finished suddenly.

The two boys flinched visibly. Then Dave spoke quickly.

"My comrade got a touch of the sun, sir," he said. "We possess no valuable information we could reveal. We were simply on advance patrol. A sand storm came up and we became separated from the main body. We have been trying to locate it ever since. That is all of our story, sir."

Dave held his breath as he finished, and prayed inwardly. The prayer was answered. The very

fact he had said they possessed no valuable information had instantly convinced the German colonel that they were lying. That was as it should be. When the enemy *thinks* you know something, he will hold your life as valuable as his own until he has found out. The longer you keep him guessing, the longer you have to find out things yourself, and perhaps eventually beat him at his own game.

"I do not believe you!" the colonel suddenly snapped, thus confirming Dave's belief. "Listen to me! I have no time to waste. We have taken you prisoner. We have given you water. Later you will receive food. But we do not *have* to do those things. Understand that! You are completely helpless. I have only to give the order and you will be kicked out onto the desert to shift for yourselves. Or I can even give the order and have you shot. It is up to you whether you wish to be wise, or foolish."

The two boys didn't say anything. They simply sat motionless and stared unhappily off into space. Suddenly the German major spoke, and it was all Dave could do to stop from starting violently.

"I suggest you question them about that plane we sighted early this morning, *Herr* Colonel," he said in his native tongue. "The one we sighted and informed Tripoli about by radio."

There was a moment's silence after the major had spoken, and during that moment a hundred and one thoughts leaped and danced across Dave Dawson's brain. So this unit had sighted the Skua? This unit had radioed Tripoli, and attack planes had been sent out? Then it was not just by chance that those six planes had come slicing down out of the sun. On the contrary, their pilots had known exactly what to look for, and the location. They had climbed up into the sun on purpose. True, that maneuver had availed them nothing but the loss of four of their number. Nevertheless, the realization that hostile eyes had been watching them all the time sent little shivers rippling up and down Dave's spine. And at the same time it made his heart sink. When he and Freddy did not make their rendezvous contact with the Victory, another flying team would be drawn and sent out. They, too, would be sighted as they cruised about over what looked like nothing but limitless desert. And when Axis planes swooped down on them—perhaps they would not be so lucky as he and Freddy had been.

Lucky? The word was like a taunting laugh in Dave's brain. Were he and Freddy as lucky as they hoped? Had they perhaps walked knowingly into a trap from which there was no possible escape? Was this the end of the war for them? Was this perhaps the end of—everything?

At that moment the colonel's voice roused him from the depths of his bitter reverie.

"What have you seen since dawn?" the colonel asked.

"Since dawn?" Dave echoed vaguely, and then looked questioningly at Freddy.

The English youth rose to the occasion at once.

"Don't you remember, Dave?" he asked. "Or has the sun dulled your memory, too? We saw an air battle. We saw the planes fall. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, that?" Dave echoed with a shrug. "What was important about that?"

"So you saw the air battle, eh?" the German colonel asked quickly. "You saw the planes fall, perhaps?"

Both Freddy and Dave hesitated. Both had the same sudden feeling that the German was trying to lead them into some kind of a word trap. Just what they replied to his questions might make all the difference in the world as to their own safety. Finally Dave spoke.

"Yes, we saw the planes fall," he said.

The two Germans leaned forward slightly, and suppressed excitement showed on their faces.

"How many?" the colonel asked.

"Five," Dave answered promptly. "Three Nazi, one Italian, and one of ours."

"That British plane," the German major spoke up suddenly. "You say you saw it fall to the ground? What happened to the pilot and observer? They jumped with their parachutes, eh?"

Dave shook his head.

"No," Freddy said for them both. "They did not jump. They glided the plane down and crashed when they tried to land. The plane caught fire. It was about a mile away from where we were standing. When we reached it, it was too late to do anything."

"It is as I told you, *Herr* Colonel," the major said to his senior officer in German. "If those British aviators saw anything, they died before they could take the information back to their base. Yes, undoubtedly they were simply sent out to hunt for these two standing before us."

Dave kept a dumb, blank look on his face, as though he didn't understand a single word the German was saying. Inwardly, though, he was smiling happily to himself. Thank goodness he had made the suggestion to Freddy that they act as though they didn't speak German. And thank goodness, too, they had decided to wear infantry uniforms, and to admit readily they had seen a British plane crash and burn up, in the event they were captured. It was all working out perfectly.

A moment later, though, when the colonel replied in the same tongue, the smile died in Dave, and little fingers of worry and fear began to clutch at his heart.

"Perhaps," the senior officer grunted. "Then again, perhaps not. These two young swine puzzle

me. I feel sure their story is made up of lies. Four, six days in this cursed desert? I doubt that very much. Yes, very much, indeed."

"But just look at them, *Herr* Colonel!" the major protested. "Both are ready to collapse at any moment. They are completely exhausted. I agree that perhaps they lie a little. But I think they speak the truth about wandering about the desert."

"For six days?" the colonel echoed harshly, and gave him a scornful look. "It is evident you have had no experience with the desert. I have spent a lot of my life in this part of the world, *Herr* Major. Look at their boots! Six days of sand and sun would do more than that to a pair of boots."

It was all Dave and Freddy could do to refrain from looking down at their boots. Boots! The one item that hadn't even occurred to them. Of course the German colonel was right. Six days, or even four days of tramping across the desert would unquestionably wear their boots paper thin unless they had taken special care of them such as rubbing them with grease or oil to stop the leather from drying up and cracking, and mending each little crack or cut before it was too late. Their boots showed none of that kind of care, however. And the fact they had no packs was proof they hadn't had any shoe oil or grease in the first place.

"You're right, *Herr* Colonel," the major said as he scowled down at the boys' boots. "They do not look very much the worse for wear, at that."

"That doesn't prove anything, however," the German colonel grunted, and Dave's heart started sliding back down out of his throat. "We shall see, however. I have thoughts about these two, and I will find out soon enough if my thoughts are true ones. Meantime we will get as much out of them as we can."

"You mean, in case they do speak the truth?" the major murmured.

"Exactly that!" the colonel replied with a curt nod. "I doubt if there are any British forces within two hundred and fifty miles. Still, we must make sure. The success of this surprise smash against the British means much to me. It means everything. I wish to be removed from this cursed part of the world. I am sick of the sun, and the sand, and the flies and other insects. Soon, in case you have not been told, things will happen in the Balkans. That fat, stupid fool, Mussolini, has made a mess of things in Greece and Albania. It will soon be necessary for the *Fuehrer* to go to his aid, and pull him out of the fire. I hope to have a division command when the Leader marches down into Greece. If I smash the British out of Libya, and annihilate them so they cannot even escape to their Egyptian strongholds, I shall be given the command of a division of tanks for the asking. And I shall have it, never fear!"

The German colonel emphasized what he had just said by giving a savage nod of his head, and banging one huge clenched fist down on the table. Then he turned his glittering, half closed eyes upon the two boys.

"So you have been lost for four or even six days, eh?" he shot out. "Very well, then. Look closely at this map. Put your finger where you were when you started out of this advance patrol."

As the German spoke, he unfolded a military map and spread it out on the tables. Hope zoomed up in Dave. Perhaps the map would tell them about the plans of the expected attack against the British forces from Bengazi eastward to the Egyptian frontier. It might even show the location of the other Nazi units he was sure must be operating under the command of this headquarters colonel.

If he expected all that, however, or even a small part of it, he was doomed to disappointment. The instant he glanced at the map he saw that it was completely unmarked. He studied it for a moment as a stall for time. He didn't dare point out a spot too close to where he judged to be their present position. A short scouting trip by the Germans could prove them liars in no time at all. Yet at the same time he didn't want to indicate a point miles and miles away. It was obvious that the colonel suspected them, and to state they had wandered some two or three hundred miles across the desert would simply add to the German's suspicions. You don't walk that far in the desert in that short space of time. You don't even walk a small fraction of it—and live. Ten or fifteen miles in the cool of the night is about the limit.

Suddenly Freddy spoke up—Freddy, of the keen, sharp brain that had helped them avoid more than one enemy trap in the past.

"This map is printed in German, sir," he said. "I can guess at the spelling of some of the places, but I am not sure. The place where our patrol started from was called Amarir. Yes, I think that was the name. It was fifty miles southwest of El Siwa. One of the tanks broke down, and it was necessary to repair it at once. This officer and I went ahead on foot to reconnoiter the area beyond an escarpment. It was there the sand storm caught us."

Freddy paused, gave a little puzzled shake of his head, and scowled down at the map.

"I'm sure my brother officer is mistaken," he said presently. "It was not six days ago. No. Perhaps it was not even four. I have lost track of the days completely. But where are we now, sir? Are we very far from El Siwa? Or perhaps Amarir?"

The German colonel didn't reply. He gave Freddy a shrewd glance and then looked down at the map. Presently he raised his eyes.

"It is of no importance to you where you are," he said pointedly. "You are prisoners. Be content with that fact. You were lucky you were not shot on sight. I—"

The colonel cut himself off short as a tank captain appeared at the entrance of the tent and

saluted.

"All is ready, *Herr* Colonel," he said. "Shall I give orders for the column to proceed? As *Herr* Colonel can see, it is practically dark now."

"Give the order, then," the senior officer said with a curt nod. "But, as usual, have the armored cars and one truck remain for a time. Also their crews, of course. They can strike these tents in a few minutes. That is all."

The colonel waited until the tank captain had saluted and made a hasty exit. Then he turned to the major at his side and spoke again in their native tongue.

"Perhaps a little rest will help the memory of these two," he said with a faint smirking twist of his lips. "Anyway, I haven't any more time to waste on them right now. You will take charge of them, and take them in your car. Try to get something out of them if you want to. However, they will probably fall asleep on you. Tomorrow I will spring my little surprise. Then we shall see what we shall see. Curse that British plane we sighted this morning! It is the first we have seen so far, and it worries me a little. If we were not so far away, I'd—"

The German let his voice trail off and sat staring moodily down at his fingertips drumming on the table top. After a moment or so he jerked his head up and shrugged.

"Perhaps I will, even now," he said as though talking to himself. "Anyway, take these two away. Give them food and water and take them along in your car. That's all. Now get out. I'll see you later."

The colonel dismissed them with a nod and immediately started stuffing papers and maps into a black dispatch case. The major got to his feet and looked at the two boys.

"You will come with me," he said in halting English. "Please remember I have this Luger here at my belt. It may help you to remember that if I tell you I am one of the best shots in the German army. You understand?"

"A man would be a fool to go out there," Freddy said quietly, and pointed toward the desert.

"A first class screw-ball," Dave, grunted, and watched the German colonel cram things into the brief case.

The senior officer heard him and looked up sharply.

"So you are not English, eh?" he asked with a frown. "You are an American."

Dave didn't say anything. He simply returned the man's stare.

"An American?" the colonel repeated as though he were rolling the word around in his brain and observing it from all angles. "So you left your country and came over here to fight for the British? That is interesting. That is *very* interesting, indeed!"

A sly smile that curled the German's lips, and a sudden odd gleam that showed in his half closed eyes, made Dave's heart grow chilly and cold, and caused the back of his neck to tingle with that all too familiar warning sensation. He shrugged it off after a moment and obeyed the major's order to fall into step with Freddy and be marched away.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *The Colonel's Trap*

Dull pain shot through Dave Dawson's left shoulder and crawled up the side of his neck and into his head. It came at regular intervals like the ticking of a clock, and no matter which way he moved he could not seem to get away from it. From a long, long way off he heard the murmur of sound, but it held no meaning for him. His brain was too befuddled to grasp the meaning of anything. All about was darkness. Darkness, the shocks of dull pain, and the distant murmur of voices.

"I say, can't you just shake him? Do you have to punch his blessed head off? Let him alone, I say!"

The sound of Freddy Farmer's voice suddenly cleared Dave's head and revived his senses. He awoke from a groggy sleep to find himself in the back seat of one of the armored cars. The German major was bending over him and punching him on the shoulder and snarling in his ear.

"Wake up, you American swine! Wake up, do you hear me? Wake up!"

At the other end of the seat Freddy Farmer was protesting angrily, helpless to do anything else but that. A German soldier standing by the side of the car was holding a Mauser muzzle against the English youth's chest. For a split instant Dave was tempted to pretend he was still asleep and lash out at the German major's chin, and apologize afterward. On second thought, though, he decided that might not be so good. So, instead, he groaned and sat up so that the German missed his next blow and struck the back of the seat.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Dave cried sleepily.

The German stopped punching and swore softly in German through clenched teeth. Dave could just see him vaguely, as it was dark all around, although there was the first grey streak of a new dawn in the east. It was then he realized that the murmur of sound he had heard in his sleep was

caused by intense activity about him. The German mechanized column had completed its night march and was now "bedding down" for a new day. Trucks, tanks, and armored cars alike were being covered with strips of camouflage canvas that would render them invisible to aircraft above. Headquarters tents were being set up, and off to his right a couple of rolling kitchens were being made ready for the preparing of the early dawn mess for the officers and troops. The commands that flew back and forth were spoken in low tones, and every soldier seemed to know exactly what to do. It was a display of military efficiency plus, and once again Dave had to admit admiration for Nazi war technique.

At that moment he received a final blow from the German major.

"This is no sightseeing trip!" the officer barked at him. "Get out of this car, and come along with me. No wonder the British are losing the war. You seem to do nothing but sleep. Get out of this car, at once."

A blazing retort rose to Dave's lips, but he choked it back and climbed stiff-legged out of the car and down onto the sand. Freddy was pushed out beside him. He looked at his pal and grinned in the bad light.

"That shut-eye sure helped," he said to Freddy. "Anything happen? I think I must have popped off the instant we got under way."

"You did," Freddy replied. "Phew, you could sleep through a bombardment, I fancy. His Nibs didn't like it at all. He was full of conversation, and—"

Freddy suddenly received a blow in the middle of his back that sent him pitching headlong down onto the sand. Dave instantly leaped forward and helped him to his feet. The German major glared at the English youth and fingered his holstered Luger.

"Another insult and you'll get a bullet, British swine!" he hissed. "You forget I speak your filthy language."

"Do you?" Freddy echoed with icy calmness. "I hadn't noticed it, you know."

Dave set himself to leap in front of his pal in case the officer struck again. However, the German seemed to think better of it. Perhaps it was because the colonel came striding up at that moment. The commandant of the mechanized desert column ignored the major and peered at Dave and Freddy. Presently his flat moon-shaped face relaxed into a brief smile, and he nodded.

"So you got some sleep, eh?" he grunted. "That is good. Perhaps you will remember things a little bit better today. First, though, we must eat. Ninety-five miles is a long way, even in the cool of the night. Yes, we will all eat first."

The German nodded and turned to his major.

"Put them in one of the tents, and post a guard," he ordered. "Then report to me."

Without waiting for the junior officer to acknowledge the order, the colonel swung around on his heel and walked off. Dave still kept his muscles coiled and ready for action, but it proved unnecessary. The major's anger had cooled off. At any rate, the sudden appearance of the commanding officer had caused him to change his mind. He simply glared at Freddy for an instant and then gave a jerk of his head.

"Follow me!" he grated. Then to the guard who hovered close, "Walk behind them and use the muzzle of that gun if you have to."

A few moments later the two R.A.F. pilots were seated on the sand floor of a tent that had been set up on the eastern fringe of the camp. The front flap was left open, and they could look out at the guard pacing up and down in front of the tent and at most of the camp beyond. Dawn was coming fast, but the camouflage work had been completed, and the entire column was ready for another day of hiding from any patrolling British aircraft.

"They sure know their stuff!" Dave breathed softly. "Here we are right in the doggone camp, and we can hardly tell those covered over tanks from the sand. They must have been preparing for this a long time, what I mean!"

"I don't doubt it a bit," Freddy grunted moodily. "Thoroughness is a by-word with the Germans. Listen, Dave, what do you think—?"

Dave suddenly reached over and touched his arm.

"Take a look at that guard," Dave said in a loud voice. "Did you ever see such a funny-looking face in your life? And look at the way the slob carries his rifle. I bet he hasn't been in service over a couple of weeks. Bet he couldn't hit the back side of a barn door. What an awful-looking dope! Holy smoke! He's got a face even funnier looking than that dizzy boss of his, Hitler. Hey, Guard! You're all out of step, you fathead!"

"Dave, for cat's sake!" Freddy gasped.

The guard turned toward them, looked blank, then shrugged and continued his slow pacing up and down.

"Are you mad, Dave?" Freddy choked out. "You want a gun butt or a boot heel in your face?"

"Who, me?" Dave echoed, and grinned at him. "Of course not. I just wanted to see if the guy understands English. He doesn't. Now, what were you going to say?"

Freddy whistled softly and gave a little shake of his head.



"You certainly find out things a strange way!" he breathed. "Lucky for you he *didn't* understand English. He would have bashed you a good one for those insults, have no fear. What was I going to say? Blast it, I've forgotten. No! Wait a minute. What do you think of that colonel, Dave?"

"Dumb like a fox," Dave said slowly. "He had the wheels in his head working all the time. He's not even close to being satisfied about us. Yeah! I sure wish I were a mind reader. I'd like to know what this surprise he was hinting about is."

"I have an idea it is some kind of a trap," Freddy murmured with a frown. "He's jolly well up to something."

"Speaking of traps," Dave said, "thanks for not letting me step into that one he set when he pulled out that map. I was just about to point out some town. That would have let him know we understood German. You sure gave him a good line. By the way, where the heck are the Libyan towns of Amarir and El Siwa, anyway? Never heard of them."

"Me either," Freddy said, and grinned. "Just made them up. I think it worried him a bit, too. Out this way there're lots of little spots you don't hear mentioned once in a hundred years. Like all those islands in the South Pacific, the names seldom appear on maps because the places are too small. Yes, I think that German colonel spent a lot of time last night studying his maps and looking for Amarir and El Siwa."

"It sure was fast thinking, pal," Dave said. "My hat's off to you. We're in a jam, though, Freddy, and you and I've got to work fast. I can only guess where we are, but my guess is that we're not far from British-occupied ground. That means the surprise attack is going to be pulled pretty soon."

"I agree with you," Freddy said with a nod. "By the way, did you see that dispatch case of his? Those maps and papers? I have a feeling they could tell us all we want to know."

"I'll bet my shirt on it!" Dave said excitedly. "If we could only get hold of that dispatch case, and get us a plane, we'd—"

Dave cut himself off short and made a wry face at the vast stretches of desert he could see by simply raising his eyes and glancing out the front side of the tent.

"Sure!" he said presently with a bitter chuckle. "And if we had some ham we could have some ham and eggs, if we had some eggs! Nuts!"

The two boys lapsed into moody silence and stared unhappily at the guard marching slowly up and down in front of their prison tent. Then, suddenly, it happened! Perhaps it was just another of those mysterious coincidences so common in war, or perhaps Fate had been waiting for that exact moment. At any rate, the sound of a distant airplane engine suddenly came to the boys. They sat up straight, cocked their heads and stared hard at the shadowy dawn sky to the west.

"That's a Nazi ship!" Dave breathed excitedly. "I can tell the throb of a German Daimler-Benz engine with both ears stuffed with cotton."

"And it's a Messerschmitt," Freddy said, and pointed. "Look! Take a bead on that sand dune over there and then look up above it. See it? A Messerschmitt One-Ten. There! He's cut his engine and he's gliding down toward this camp."

"Not the ship we saw take off last night," Dave grunted as he found the plane in the sky and watched it glide downward and toward them. "That was a Messerschmitt One-Nine single seater. This is the Messerschmitt One-Ten three place job. Yeah, pilot, radio man, and gunner. Maybe they take turns contacting this desert headquarters. Boy! Seeing that ship certainly gives a guy thoughts, doesn't it, huh?"

Freddy simply nodded grimly and said nothing. The plane was very low, now, and sliding in to land in full view of their prison tent. As it slowly settled down onto the sand, they suddenly saw the German colonel and the major run out to the spot where the Messerschmitt was braked to a stop. There were only two figures in the plane. They climbed down at once and engaged in what appeared to the boys to be an excited conversation with the colonel. Dave wasn't sure, but twice he thought he noticed the column commandant half turn and shoot a look over their way.

The group talked for a few minutes, then moved away in the direction of the headquarters tent. When they had passed from view, Dave turned his head and smiled sadly at Freddy.

"Look at that plane just over there!" he said with a happy sigh. "They've even left the prop ticking over. Gosh, what I wouldn't give for a chance to—"

He left the rest hanging in midair and stared unhappily at the flat-faced guard walking up and down. The man carried a Mauser rifle in the crook of one arm, and there was a long-barreled Luger in the holster at his belt. He looked as though his thoughts were a million miles away, but Dave was quite positive the man was on the alert and ready for any sudden action of their part.

A moment later a second guard appeared with a couple of mess tins of food. Hardly looking at the two boys, he set the mess tins down inside the tent and then stepped up to the guard.

"We are all to report at *Herr* Colonel's tent at once," he said in German. "Come along."

To the utter amazement of the boys, the two Germans walked away and disappeared around a group of camouflage-covered tanks in the direction of the headquarters tank. Two moments of tingling silence ticked by, and then Freddy grabbed Dave by the arm.

"A perfect chance, Dave!" he whispered excitedly. "Not one of the beggars in sight. Let's make a run for that Messerschmitt and be off. What utter fools they are to give us this chance!"

Dave was already scrambling up onto his feet, but upon hearing Freddy's last words something seemed to grab hold of him; seemed to freeze him motionless for a brief instant and then push him down onto the sand. Freddy half turned and stared at him as though he had suddenly gone crazy.

"What's the matter?" the English youth gasped. "Are you paralyzed? Come on, Dave! No telling when they'll come back."

Dave shook his head, took hold of Freddy's arm and pulled him down onto the sand.

"Nix, Freddy!" he admonished. "Sit down and start eating. The hunch just hit me right between the eyes. This is *it*, Freddy!"

"This is what?" the English youth demanded angrily. "Listen, Dave, if—"

"Shut up, and eat!" Dave cut him off. "*This is the surprise*. I'm sure of it. The colonel's little surprise. Don't you get it? They don't believe our story about the British plane crashing, and the two fellows in it burning up. They think *we're* those two chaps. Get it? So that Messerschmitt is the colonel's little trap. I'll bet you every dollar I ever hope to have that they're waiting and watching for us to make a break for that plane, and have got a couple of machine guns trained on it in the bargain. It's up to us to fool them, and stay put."

The annoyance and anger slowly and reluctantly faded from the English youth's eyes. He looked at Dave, then looked sadly out at the plane.

"Of course you're right, Dave," he murmured after a moment or two. "I'm a blasted fool, and almost ran us into something. Yes, you're dead right, Dave. Oh, well, let's eat. At least that's something to do!"

They had been eating for about ten minutes when their guard suddenly appeared in front of the tent. He glared at them for an instant and then motioned with one of his hands.

"*Herr Kommandant* wants to see you," he said in German. "Come!"

The two boys didn't move a muscle. They simply looked blank and puzzled until the guard made motions that even a blind man would have understood. Then they slowly got to their feet and walked out of the tent.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Desert Doom*

The German colonel was flanked by his major and two Nazi Air Force pilots. All of them stared flint-eyed as the guard ushered the two boys into the headquarters tent. They returned stare for stare and waited for somebody to speak. The colonel seemed to be trying the silence and hard eye cure on them, for it was a good three minutes before he opened his mouth. Dave had the crazy urge to laugh in the man's face, and if the situation hadn't been so deadly serious he probably would have. German officers have never taken any prizes for good looks, and the colonel was certainly at the bottom of the list.

"Tell me your story again!" he suddenly snapped out, and nodded at Dave. "Yes, you, my little American."

Dave hesitated a moment as though to get the facts straight in his mind. Then he slowly told a story identical with everything that he and Freddy had said before. The Germans listened in silence, but a sneer twisted the colonel's lips by the time Dave had finished.

"So?" the German commandant echoed in a purring tone. "You did not arrive at the crash in time to save the two Englishmen in it, eh? They were unfortunately burned up alive?"

A warning bell sounded in Dave, and the familiar tingling sensation was at the back of his neck. He was sure that he and Freddy were being trapped, but he was helpless to do anything about it. The only possible thing he could do was to stick to their story.

"They certainly looked burned up to me, sir," he said.

The colonel smiled, and his slitted eyes held a triumphant glitter.

"You were very clever not to take advantage of the chance just now to try and escape in that Messerschmitt plane," he said with a leer. "Very clever, because you would most certainly be dead now if you had made such an attempt. However, you do not fool me a bit. Infantry officers, eh? Bah! Do you think we are fools, you swine?"

Both Dave and Freddy had the sickening sensation of the ground falling away from under them. They forced themselves to keep dismay from their faces, however, and stared puzzled-eyed back at the colonel.

"What is that, sir?" Freddy presently asked in a surprised tone. "You—you think *we* were in that plane? But that's ridiculous! Those two poor chaps burned up. They died! We saw them with our own eyes. Look at these cuts and scratches on my hands. I got them trying to save those R.A.F. lads. I don't understand what you mean, sir!"

"You understand perfectly!" the colonel said harshly, and stabbed a thick finger at him. "Yes, you

would like me to believe your story, but I don't. You see, I have other proof. You probably injured your hands on rocks and desert brush, but *not* from trying to save two British airmen. They didn't burn up and die in their plane!"

"Say, what is this?" Dave choked out with forced dumbfounded amazement, though his heart was actually sliding down into his boots. "Who says they didn't burn up?"

"I do!" the colonel thundered in a voice that was probably heard 'way back in Tripoli. "These two German pilots have just returned from an inspection of that crash. I radioed Tripoli last night for that to be done. They have just arrived and made their report to me!"

The German paused and bent the eyes of death on the two boys.

"They found no charred bodies in that crash!" he suddenly spat out in their faces. "They found goggle glasses and rims in the burned cockpit. They found radio earphones of burned helmets. They found the remains of a camera—something that is only carried in that type of plane on *special* occasions! They found parachute harness buckles and clasps. They found lots of things that the occupants of that plane left behind when *they set fire to their craft!*"

"Set afire, my hat!" Freddy blurted out. "I tell you we saw it crash and burn up!"

At that moment one of the German airmen shook his head and said something to the colonel so fast that neither of the boys could catch what it was. The colonel nodded and broadened his leer.

"Stop lying!" he snarled. "You are caught. The plane did not crash and burn up. *Herr* Captain, here, has just told me that the marks in the sand show that the plane made a good landing. There were also other marks in the sand. *Two sets of footprints leading northward from the crash!*"

The German commander thumped his fist down on the table in front of him and glared at the two boys out of eyes fitted with dancing shafts of lightning. Dave could almost feel every drop of blood drain down out of his body. His mouth went bone dry and his leg joints seemed to turn to jelly. It was all he could do to hold himself erect. He glanced at the German pilot who had spoken, and in that moment he would gladly have given anything to get his hands about the man's scrawny, leathery-skinned neck.

"So what?" he suddenly shot out, returning his gaze to the colonel's face. "If you think we're R.A.F. pilots, then that's your mistake. So what?"

The colonel's eyes flew open a bit in stunned surprise. Anger flooded his face with a fiery red. Then just as quickly the anger faded and he laughed harshly.

"American bluff!" he snorted. "I have heard of that, but it will do you no good. No good at all, do you hear? I know all about you now, and—"

The colonel leaned forward and thrust out his jaw.

"And I shall deal with you as I would any other spies!" He fairly crammed the words down their throats.

The boys blinked, but that was the only outward sign they gave of the conflict of emotions that raged within them.

"Yes, deal with you as spies!" the German repeated. "And I know a very nice way to deal with spies."

"We are not spies," Freddy spoke up quietly. "We are no more than prisoners of war. We demand we be regarded as such. Or do the recognized rules of warfare mean nothing to you?"

Dave expected to see the German fly into a rage at Freddy's final outburst, but such was not the case. The colonel's face became hard as a disc of frozen ice. His eyes were pin points of flame that licked out from between the lids. He gave a curt shake of his melon-shaped head.

"No, they mean nothing to me!" he said, tight-lipped, and flung one arm out in a circular gesture. "Here in this desert I hold the supreme command. Here *I* am the *Fuehrer*, the Leader. My word is law. To disobey means instant death. My officers and my troops know that, too. No, I make my own rules. And when I order, you to be shot—*you will be shot!*"

Dave knew, as Freddy knew, that it was foolish and a waste of time to pose as infantry officers any longer. The game was up. Well laid plans and precautions had availed them nothing. They had failed. An inspection of the burned up plane had knocked the props right from under them. Their future was in the laps of the gods. No plans and preparation now. They could only fall back on fast thinking, fast action and prayer.

"Okay, go ahead and shoot!" he told the German defiantly. "Our job is done. Our reports are now in the hands of the British High Command. Sure! We've done our job, and we're not afraid to die. Go ahead and shoot, and nuts to you and your whole gang!"

The German colonel gave him the kind of a look a wearied parent might give a spoiled brat, and slowly shook his head.

"It is no use, my little fool American," he said. "You only waste your breath seeking to fool me. Whatever your mission was, I know that it failed. It failed because you did not return to your base. You landed in the desert, and very stupidly allowed us to take you prisoners. And you made no code report to your superiors because there was no radio in your plane. These German pilots made sure of that, too."

The colonel turned to them, repeated the statement in German and watched the two pilots shake their heads vigorously. Then suddenly the colonel whirled around as Freddy burst out laughing.

"And what is so funny, my swine Englander?" he snarled.

Freddy didn't even look at him. He looked at Dave instead and grinned broadly.

"Well, I guess we lose that bet, Dave," he said. "But I have to laugh when I think of Jones and Barker in that other patrol plane trying to collect from us. I don't fancy they'll come out this way again looking for us."

"Not a chance," Dave replied quickly, playing up to Freddy's lead. "They're safe and sound at Wavell's base now. They'd be crazy if they didn't stay there until Zero Hour."

"What's that?" the German colonel shouted, and came part way up out of his chair. "Another patrol plane? Zero Hour? What do you mean?"

Dave fairly leaped at the opening the German's questions presented.

"Oh, nothing," he said with a shrug. "We were just kidding to see what you would do. We were really alone. There wasn't any other plane along with us. Oh—Anyway, *you didn't see one, did you?*"

The German colonel didn't reply. He dropped back on his chair and eyed first one of them and then the other. Because his eyes were so well hidden behind the slits, it was impossible for Dave to tell what effect his lies had had upon the German. However, he was fairly sure that the man was puzzled; wasn't so sure of himself now, and was giving the matter very serious consideration. For a second Dave was tempted to carry on his crazy chit-chat with Freddy in the hope of befuddling the German even more. On second thought, though, he killed the urge and was content to let well enough alone.

"Another plane, eh?" the German muttered in his own tongue. "I wonder. It is of course possible, yet—"

He jerked his head around to the taller of the two German Air Force pilots.

"You took part in that air battle yesterday shortly after dawn," he snapped. "How many enemy planes did you engage?"

"Only one, a British Blackburn Skua," the pilot replied instantly. Then, as his face darkened from memory, he added, "I would have shot it down, myself, but I was flying as observer-gunner in one of the Italian planes. The weakling at the controls became scared and ran away."

"Those Italians!" the colonel said, and spat onto the sand. "Not one of them, including their fat dictator, has the courage of a newborn chicken. Bah! I spit on their flag! So there was no other enemy craft?"

"None," the German pilot assured him. "Only the one."

The colonel nodded and turned to the boys again.

"And if you had been lucky enough to return to—to General Wavell's base, as you think that *other* plane did," he asked softly, "just what would you have reported, eh?"

Dave opened his mouth to let fly with a wise-crack, but Freddy beat him to the punch.

"Your plan of surprise attack, of course," the English youth said quietly. "How you have fifteen motorized units hidden out here on the desert. And how you plan to make the surprise attack on the British garrison at Tobruk just before dawn tomorrow. And how you expect to take Tobruk from the English and thus trap all of the British forces that extend westward to Bengazi and the most advanced outpost at El Aghelia at the southern end of the Gulf of Sidra. Yes, those and a few other details. But it doesn't matter now about us giving the British High Command the information. The other two chaps have informed them, of course."

Had a thousand pound aerial bomb suddenly blown up inside the desert headquarters tent at that moment, no one there could have been more surprised. The German colonel's eyes bulged out, and his jaw dropped down so low it almost struck the top of the table covered with maps. Even Dave caught his breath and stared hard at his pal. The English youth simply smiled and shrugged, and appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. Eventually the German colonel pulled himself together and snorted aloud.

"Very clever, my little swine," he sneered. "For a moment I thought you did know something. But of course you don't. Nor does anybody else, for you two were alone."

Freddy Farmer shrugged again.

"Then it must be so if you say so," he said gravely.

The colonel reddened again. He clenched and unclenched his big fists and looked as though he were going to lose his temper completely and lash out at the young Englishman. He held his temper in check, however, and twisted his lips into a sneer.

"Perhaps you know some of the other details?" he asked, and watched Freddy's face closely.

"No, I don't, to tell the truth," Freddy replied calmly. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me. It's about the Italian fleet. I'm not sure what part it is to play in your attack plans."

The words scored another bull's-eye, that once again amazed everybody including Dave Dawson. Then, before anybody could speak, Freddy spoke again.

"Not that it matters," he said, "but are units of the Italian fleet to bombard Bengazi and Derna? Or just Tobruk? Of course, the British Mediterranean fleet will be there to greet them, but I'm

curious to know, just the same."

The German colonel opened his mouth to bellow with anger, then suddenly snapped it shut. He smiled and looked at Freddy with almost a touch of admiration.

"My congratulations, my little Englisher," he said. "You are far more clever than I suspected. But your eyes gave you away just now. Too bad. You might have enjoyed yourself a bit watching me worry. But such is fate, eh? My surprise attack? I am quite willing to explain it to you. Dead men cannot talk, you know."

The German paused, and the cold glitter that came into his eyes seemed to touch Dave's heart like fingers of ice.

"You are quite correct," the German continued speaking. "There are fifteen desert units hidden out here on the desert. We have been in the desert for a full week now. And not one Englishman has known that we were here. Fifteen units. A mechanized infantry division, and a tank division. Over thirty thousand troops ready and eager to teach you Englishmen a lesson you will never forget. No, the Italians are not fighting your great General Wavell this time. This time it will be Germans—*real* soldiers. And we will crush and annihilate Wavell's troops to the last man."

The German nodded savagely and thumped his fist on the table for emphasis.

"At Tobruk, at dawn tomorrow!" he shouted a moment later. "Tonight will be our last night on the desert. At dawn tomorrow the battle and victory. Nothing can stop us. Nothing shall! And within a week we shall be in Alexandria and Cairo. The British Northern African army will be shattered, and your great General Wavell's troops in Ethiopia and Eritrea will arrive too late. They will simply march into our waiting arms!"

"And the Italian fleet?" Freddy murmured as the other stopped shouting.

"They will do their little part to help with the bombardment of Tobruk," the Colonel said with an impatient gesture. "But we are prepared to carry them on our backs if we have to. And now, my little Englisher, we speak of you. Does your American friend understand German, too?"

"We both speak and understand it," Freddy replied calmly.

Dave stifled a gasp of utter amazement just in time. As it was, he could not stop himself from jerking his head around and staring at Freddy out of accusing eyes. Freddy admitting they both spoke German? What in thunder had gotten into him? Yet the German colonel seemed to have known they spoke his language, or at least that Freddy did. What in the world—

"It is amusing to speak English," the German colonel's voice cut into his whirling thoughts. "So we will not change. Now I have given you a little information. It is your turn to give me some. I wish to be sure about the strength of the British garrisons at Tobruk, and Derna, and Bengazi. Also the British strength at Bardia, and at Sollum on the Egyptian frontier. You will give me that information?"

"Even if I knew, which I don't," Freddy said, speaking right up to him, "I most certainly wouldn't tell you a thing."

"Bravo!" the German cried in a mocking voice, and clapped his hands. "The little English pig is full of courage. Of course you wouldn't tell me *now*! Later, it will be different. You both will beg and scream for permission to tell me everything you know."

"That's what you think!" Dave spoke up for the first time in several minutes. "You've got another guess coming, if you ask me."

"I am not asking you, my American fool!" the German snapped at him. "You, and this little Englisher, will be asking me—yes, begging me to listen to all you have to say. And that will be a lot. Ah, sneer, and look very brave, if you wish, but tonight it will be different. Yes, much different. You two will come along with us tonight on our last march to our attack positions. But tonight you will not ride in one of the cars. You will walk and run behind my car. Your hands will be tied behind your backs, and there will be a rope leading from each of you to the rear of my car. It will not be pleasant, my little ones. Sand and exhaust fumes will get in your eyes, in your noses, and in your mouths. You will stumble and fall and be dragged through the sand before we can stop the car. The sand and the desert brush will peel the skin from your bodies. We will set you on your feet again, and continue onward. Presently, again you will stumble and fall, and again the sand will do its work. Again, and again, and again—until your brains crack and you beg me to listen to what you have to say."

The German stopped short, and his smile was as cruel as the smile on the face of Satan himself.

"Yes, you will talk tonight, never fear!" he spat at them. Then he jerked his head around to the major.

"Have the guard take them back to their prison tent!" he barked. "Perhaps when they have thought it over a bit, they will decide not to make me force them to speak. I am no murderer, but victory comes first! Take them away!"

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *R.A.F. Lightning*

When the two boys were back in their prison tent, and the guard had taken up his post, Freddy turned to Dave and looked at him out of sad and apologetic eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dave," he said. "I was a complete idiot, and I wouldn't blame you for shooting me. I guess I just couldn't resist throwing it into the blighter's face."

"Maybe you know what you're talking about," Dave said with a hopeless sigh, "but it's all just so much succotash to me. What gives, anyway? How did you find out about their attack plans? And for cat's sake, when did he find out we spoke German? Boy! Am I in a flat spin!"

"Then you didn't notice it?" Freddy asked in surprise. "You didn't see what I saw?"

"No, guess I'm blind as a bat," Dave said. "But let's cut out the guessing games. Tell me the works before I pass out with curiosity."

"Why, it was one of those maps on the table in front of him," Freddy said. "The one by his right hand. It was completely marked and showed the whole plan of attack. It was hard reading the notes he'd made because they were upside down to me. But I got most of them after a while, and filled in the rest with guesses. At the end there he saw me looking at the map and realized how I had found out so much. If only I hadn't let him catch me. I had the beggar mighty worried. I'm sure I had him actually believing that there was another plane with us, and that it got back to Wavell's headquarters. Blast the luck, anyway!"

"Well, I sure take the booby prize!" Dave groaned. "Sure, I saw the maps, but I was just dope enough not to give them a thought. Old Freddy Farmer with the hawk eye—and brains. But how come he figured you spoke German?"

"The maps, Dave, the maps!" Freddy said patiently. "All the notes and stuff were in German. He realized at once that I had read and understood them. Don't you see?"

Dave groaned again and threw up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Look, Freddy," he said, "if I turn around will you give me a good swift kick? Boy, am I slipping! Yeah, I guess you were crazy to select me to come along with you on this trip. I'm a lot of help, I don't think!"

"Now, just cut that out!" Freddy snapped at him. "No one runs down my best pal to my face, not even you. It was just by luck I happened to notice the map, anyway. And look what small good it's done! That cold-blooded beggar wasn't fooling us, Dave. He's just the type to do what he says he'll do. And it's all my fault. If I'd only kept my mouth shut."

"It's your turn to lay off running down my best pal," Dave told with a grin. "What's done is done, as they say. We've just got to figure some way to beat him. One thing, anyway. We know the whole set-up now. Gosh! If we could only get hold of that map and get out of here—"

Dave let the rest trail off into silence and stared moodily out the opened front of the tent. The Germans were making an inspection of their equipment after the night's march across the desert. Fuel supply trucks were being unloaded, and squads of soldiers were refueling the tanks and armored cars and troop transports, while others were checking engines and guns, and making sure that everything was in order.

The two boys watched them for several moments, then suddenly Dave leaned close to Freddy and spoke in a whisper.

"We've got about one chance in a thousand, Freddy," he said, "maybe not even that much of a chance. But we've got to do something, and do it darn soon. Got any ideas, or suggestions?"

"Not a one," the English youth replied instantly. "But I can tell you have. What is it?"

"While one of us keeps this guard busy," Dave said, "the other has got to sneak over there to that fuel supply truck and touch off the gas and Diesel oil it's carrying, and get back here. Then in the excitement that follows, we've got to reach the headquarters tent, grab that map and get away in the Messerschmitt. What do you think?"

"I think it's like trying to fly to the moon," Freddy grunted. "But that doesn't mean I'm not game to try it. Just how do you expect to keep the guard busy while one of us sneaks over to that fuel truck?"

Dave didn't answer at once. He sat watching the squads of German soldiers move farther and farther along the line of trucks. Presently they were hidden from view at the far end of the line. He touched Freddy's arm, put a cautioning finger to his lips, and rose slowly to his feet. Before the English youth could stop him, Dave had moved forward with the speed of striking lightning. The guard had his back to them and was staring out across the camouflaged desert camp for a moment before resuming his pacing. In that split second of time allowed, Dave Dawson acted. He flashed out his right hand and plucked the guard's Luger from its belt holster before the German realized what had happened.

"Turn, and you're a dead man!" Dave warned him in German, and backed into the tent.

The guard checked his half turn and froze, the hands gripping his Mauser rifle turning white at the knuckles.

"Just keep walking up and down," Dave spoke to him in a steady, deadly voice. "Go ahead and raise an alarm if you want to, but it won't do *you* any good, see? Your pals may shoot us, but *you'll* be dead before they can start shooting. Go ahead, now. Walk up and down some more—and hold that rifle just like you're doing. *Barrel pointed up!*"

As Dave held his breath, the guard hesitated a moment. Then his desire to go on living won out. He started pacing up and down in front of the prison tent, holding his rifle so that the barrel pointed to the sky.

"Good grief!" Freddy breathed softly. "I never would have believed it possible. That was wonderful, Dave. Phew! It was—it's left me weak as a kitten. It—"

"Then get strong, and pronto!" Dave ordered, and thrust the Luger into his hands. "I'm on my way to the fuel truck. Shut up, and don't argue. You keep that guard occupied. Don't let up on him for an instant. If worse comes to worse—shoot and duck out the back of this tent and head for the rear of the headquarters tent. Your shots will bring them running, I hope, and we'll still have a chance. But watch the guard and keep telling him how a bullet hurts. He's yellow, or he wouldn't have folded up just now. Okay, I'm on my way. Luck to us both, pal!"

Freddy started to open his mouth to protest, but Dave silenced him with a quick shake of his head.

"About time I did something for our team," he grunted, and moved toward the front of the tent. "You just hold everything. Be right back."

He took another step and flashed a searching look outside. The Germans checking their equipment were well out of sight by now. As a matter of fact, he didn't see a sign of a single German save the guard who marched slowly up and down with eyes that were saucers of fear.

"You're doing fine," Dave grunted at him in his own tongue. "Just keep it up. My pal is the best shot in the British army. He could split your backbone in two from that distance without half trying."

The guard shivered slightly but did not turn his head. Dave threw a final wink and a grin back at Freddy, and then went out of the tent and off toward the left with the speed of a shell leaving the muzzle of a gun. Legs working like piston rods, and body bent well forward, he streaked across a fifty foot open stretch of sand to the safety of the first of the parked tanks. There he halted for a brief instant, tore off a large piece of his shirt and pulled an army clip of waterproof matches from his pocket. Then he streaked forward again toward the nearest fuel truck. Tins of gas and oil had been taken out and placed on the ground. He grabbed hold of one and, working with the speed of lightning, untwisted the cap and soaked his torn piece of shirt with gas. Then he placed the piece of cloth close to the pile of tins. Crouching down, he struck one of his matches, tossed the flame down onto the gas-soaked strip of shirt cloth, spun around in a continuation of the same movement and raced for dear life back toward the prison tent.

He was still several strides from the tent when the flames reached the first of the gas tins. It exploded in a roar of sound, and brilliant orange red fire leaped up into the sky. Even as Dave dashed into the tent and snatched the Luger from Freddy's hand, a second and a third tin of fuel exploded. Dave didn't take time out to watch the fireworks display. As Freddy gaped at him open-mouthed, Dave twisted back toward the guard, who stood staring dumb-eyed at the flames, and cracked him back of the ear with the barrel of the Luger. The German slowly folded up and dropped to the ground without a sound.

"So he won't shoot when our backs are turned!" Dave barked at Freddy, and dived for the rear of the tent. "Come on, and put plenty of speed into your legs. It's make or break for us now!"

The English youth needed no urging. He dived after Dave, and they both squirmed out from under the rear side of the tent like a couple of snakes fleeing a flaming jungle. By then the whole desert camp was in a terrific uproar. Troops and officers were racing madly toward the fuel truck, which was now a towering column of flame and pitch black smoke that reached high up into the sky. Hoarse shouted orders flew thick and fast, and the soldiers fell upon nearby equipment like mad demons and tried to haul it farther away from the blazing inferno.

All that Dave and Freddy saw out of the corners of their eyes as they raced zigzagging toward the rear of the headquarters tent. They actually passed German troops rushing toward the fire, but not one of the enemy soldiers so much as gave them a glance. All eyes were riveted on the towering column of flame and smoke.

In less time than it takes to tell about it, Dave and Freddy had darted and twisted around tanks and armored cars and reached the rear of the headquarters tent. There they halted and strained their ears for any sounds inside. It was impossible to tell if there was anybody inside, however, because of the terrific din that rolled across the desert camp in ever increasing waves of sound.

Dave nodded to Freddy, gripped the Luger tightly, dropped to his knees in the sand and whipped up the bottom edge of the tent canvas. One look and wild joy flooded his face. Freddy saw that look and didn't bother to ask questions. Seconds later both were inside the empty tent and stuffing maps and papers inside their shirts. Another few seconds and they started to turn around and skin out the way they had entered. At that exact instant, however, a blurred figure came racing into the tent. Dave saw the flash of a gun coming up and let his body drop. At the same time he shoved Freddy with his free hand, and swung his Luger and pulled the trigger with the other.

Two shots blended together as one. Death hissed past an inch from Dave's nose and bored a hole in the rear wall of the tent. The blurred figure screamed with pain, dropped his gun and clutched wildly for his right shoulder. It was not until then Dave recognized the pain-twisted face of the German major.

"For the two punching bags you made out of us!" Dave barked at him in German, and then

practically slid out under the rear tent flap on his stomach.

Leaping to his feet, he paused long enough to give Freddy a hand up, and then led the way at top speed toward the extreme rear of the camp. Once he reached it, he swerved sharply to the right and ran along behind a line of parked troop trucks. Presently he pulled up to a panting halt beside the last truck. The burning fuel truck was now far to his right and to his front. Directly in front of him, though, and not fifty yards away, was the Messerschmitt One-Ten. There wasn't a soul near it. Every jack man in the camp was busy fighting tooth and nail to stop the blaze of the fuel truck from spreading. Dave reached back and gripped Freddy's arm.

"I'll dive for the controls," he said, talking fast, "You dive for the rear pit and the guns. They've stopped the engines, but I'll kick them into life, and taxi away from here. You hold them back with your guns in case they start after us. Can't taxi too fast because of the sand. And I don't dare take off at once. Want to give the engines a little time to get turning over sweet. Okay?"

"Okay!" Freddy breathed. "And you'll get the Victoria Cross for this, if I've got anything to say about it."

"Just the flight deck of the Victory will be okay by me," Dave said grimly. "Right! Here we go!"

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Vulture Wings*

The fifty yards to the unguarded Messerschmitt One-Ten seemed more like fifty miles to Dave as he and Freddy sprinted across the sand. His heart hammered against his ribs, and not just because of his running efforts. With every step he expected to hear the roaring challenge and the sharp bark of rifles and Lugers speeding bullets toward him. With every step, also, a hundred wild, crazy thoughts flashed through his brain. Was the Messerschmitt in condition to fly? Was there enough gas in the tanks to take them to British held ground? Would the engines start? Would he be able to make a good desert take-off? Hundreds and hundreds of wild thoughts, each one stabbing his brain like a pin point of fire.

And then, suddenly, they had reached the German plane and had vaulted into the cockpit. Dave's fingers fairly flew to the starter buttons, the throttles, and other gadgets all marked in German. A soul torturing eternity dragged by, and then the twin 1150 hp. Daimler-Benz engines roared into life. The instant he heard the first peep out of the engines, Dave kicked off the right wheel brake, gunned the engines slightly and started the One-Ten moving around to the left. Every ounce of his flying skill was in his fingertips as he nursed the throttles and got the plane to moving faster and faster. Whether they had been seen, whether they were already being pursued and fired upon, he did not know. He didn't even bother to find out. He simply concentrated every bit of his effort on taxiing the Messerschmitt away from the desert camp and "nursing" the throttles so they would get maximum power out of the engines.

One moment—two—three—Finally the One-Ten was fairly skipping across the surface of the sand. A high dune rose up straight in front of Dave. He gulped, swallowed and pulled back hard on the control stick. The wheels seemed to stick to the sand for one last moment, then the plane practically leaped into the air, and the dangerous sand dune rushed by underneath. Dave whistled, wiped sweat from his face, and twisted around in the seat to look back. The desert camp was rapidly falling away and down. The column of flame and smoke from the burning fuel truck still mounted into the sky. He saw several other tongues of flame spitting his way, and realized at once that they were Germans trying to knock them out of the sky with rifle and machine gun fire. The bullets, however, weren't even coming close. And Freddy, hunched over the rear guns, wasn't even bothering to pull the triggers.

A moment later the English youth let go of his guns and turned front to grin happily at Dave.

"Clean as a whistle, Dave!" he cried. "The beggars are only just now realizing what happened. Good grief, don't ever remind me that this actually happened, because I won't believe you. Talk about your fairy stories! This is certainly one nobody would ever swallow."

"Oh, that was child's play!" Dave chuckled, and made a mocking bravado gesture. "You should see me when I'm really hot, pal. Heck! That was just fun. Let's go back and do it all over again just to make them madder, huh?"

Freddy made a face and stabbed a finger to the north.

"Just get going *that* way, and quickly, my friend," he said, "or I'll boot you out of that seat and take the controls myself. No, thanks! I've jolly well had all I want of the nasty Nazis for a while!"

Dave laughed and stuck the Messerschmitt out of its roaring power zoom, then banked around toward the north. He took one last look back at the desert camp that was now little more than a darkish patch on the distant desert, and then turned front and gave all of his attention to the instrument panel. The things he noticed brought a happy smile to his lips. The tanks were full, the engines were performing perfectly, and there was not the slightest indication that the plane would not carry them safely to British-occupied Bengazi.

Fate, however, had decided that such was not to be their good fortune. Fate, assisted by the radio back at the desert camp, and three Messerschmitt 109 single seater fighters sent streaking



away from the nearest Nazi air base. Fate, plus the marvel of radio, plus the speed of Messerschmitt 109s. What Dave's instruments told him really didn't have anything to do with it at all.

The first indication that all was not to be nice, pleasant sailing came at the end of some thirty-five minutes, when Freddy suddenly banged him on the shoulder and pointed up and off to the left. He looked in that direction and saw the three dots high-tailing down out of the dawn sky with the speed of comets gone absolutely crazy.

"Company, Dave!" Freddy shouted. "The blighters got on the radio, of course, and contacted Tripoli air base. Looks like we're in for a bit of trouble."

"Not Tripoli," Dave said with a shake of his head. "Those birds couldn't have come this far so soon. Sure, they probably got on the radio, but to some spot much closer. If you ask me, it looks as if they've started moving the planes up closer. Set up a few emergency fields out in the desert so they wouldn't have to fly so far to give air support to the ground forces."

"That's probably it," Freddy agreed. "But right or wrong, it doesn't make any difference now. Think you can skip past before they catch up with us?"

Dave stared at the three dots coming down from the left and then glanced ahead at the seemingly endless expanse of desert. It stretched to the north as far as he could see, and there wasn't a single sign of any British outpost or desert village garrison. He couldn't tell for sure, though, because a strange copperish color was crawling up over the northern horizon.

"No, we can't fly away from them," he told Freddy with a shake of his head. "We'll have to make a running fight of it, and hope for the best. Okay, Freddy, they're asking for it, so let's give it to the bums."

Freddy made no answer. He went back to his guns and checked them to make sure everything was in order. Dave fed the two Daimler-Benz engines every ounce of gas they would take and eased the nose up to get as much altitude as possible before the three Messerschmitt 109s could close in from the left and give battle. The lull before the battle lasted less than a minute. Flying by hand, Dave kept his eyes glued on the diving attackers, and was set and ready the instant he saw the little stabbing tongues of flame dart out from the nose of each German plane.

In that instant he acted, and at lightning speed. He tossed the Messerschmitt One-Ten up over on wingtip and pulled it around in a steep bank and headed straight for the three One-Nines. It was obviously not what the German pilots had expected. They had undoubtedly counted on Dave to wheel around the other way and attempt to race away from them. So when, instead, they saw the "victim" plane flash around toward them and open up with a withering fire from the nose guns and two 20-mm. cannon, they broke diving formation at once, and each pilot tried frantically to skid out into the clear.

Two of the planes succeeded in doing just that. The center plane of the formation, however, was doomed. Dave had it square in his sights, and a blind man could not have missed from that distance. His savage fire covered the German plane like a tent. The craft staggered forward a short distance, then suddenly fell off on one wing and went down, leaving behind a long trail of oily black smoke.

"Let that teach you to stay home where you belong!" Dave shouted impulsively, and pulled up for more altitude.

"And you, too, my little Jerry!"

Freddy's words were drowned out by the yammer of his guns. Dave jerked his head around in time to see a second Messerschmitt appear to fly right into an invisible meat chopper. The left wing came off and broke up in a hundred pieces. The fuselage buckled just in back of the cockpit, and the right wing crumpled like so much tin foil. Never had Dave seen a plane come apart so completely in the air, and he gazed pop-eyed at the shower of debris slithering downward.

"Man, oh, man!" he gasped aloud. "What are you throwing at him, Freddy? Naval shells?"

"Wondering, myself!" the English youth called back in an awed voice. "Good grief, that ship must have been made of cardboard!"

"Or maybe china!" Dave added. "Gee, I never—"

The savage chatter of German Rheinmettal-Borsig aerial machine guns didn't give him a chance to finish. The third Messerschmitt One-Nine had cut around in a flash turn and was boring in with all guns blazing. A handful of death slammed into Dave's plane, and he felt the One-Ten shake and shiver under the savage impact of the shower of bullets. He jumped on the left rudder with every ounce of his strength and slammed the plane around in a turn that made a pinkish haze rise up before his eyes. Just the same he held the plane in the turn as long as he dared. Then, just before the terrific turning force would have rolled his eyes back and made him temporarily blind, he eased out and zoomed for altitude. Five hundred feet higher he flattened off at the top of the zoom, banked to the left and looked down and back for a sign of the Messerschmitt One-Nine.

It wasn't there, gun spewing up after him, however, and he swallowed in relief. That surprise attack had come much too close for comfort, and he was positive that had the German followed up his advantage one Dave Dawson, and one Freddy Farmer, would have been in a mighty bad fix right then. Then Freddy's hand rapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't look down, look west, Dave!" the English youth called out. "There he goes, and bad luck to him, I say. The blighter took twenty years off my life. I could have reached out and caught his

bullets as they went by."

"Reach out?" Dave echoed, and watched the attacking plane race farther and farther westward. "Boy! If I hadn't ducked I *would* have caught them with my *head*! Well, it's nice the guy decided he'd had enough, anyway. Now, we can—"

But it suddenly wasn't so nice after all. The German pilot had gone racing away, but he had left his calling card. And the gods of war, wherever they were sitting huddled together, laughed with glee at the unfortunate turn of events. The right engine (right outboard engine) started sputtering out its story that it was all through for the day. Dave instantly cut the ignition and throttle to prevent the possibility of fire. With the right engine gone, the force of the left outboard engine tried to veer the ship around in that direction, and Dave was forced to put on a lot of opposite rudder to keep the plane flying straight.

That, however, didn't help much. With one engine completely dead, the plane began to lose altitude slowly. Even with the left outboard engine running full blast, the Messerschmitt One-Ten became lopy in the air, and it was all Dave could do to keep it on an even keel, and stop it from whipping over and down into a spin. Presently, after he had almost lost control a couple of times, he was forced to nose down slightly and keep the nose down. He turned around and shook his head sadly at Freddy's bitter expression.

"This doesn't seem to be our lucky day, either," he said. "We have a little altitude, but not much. In ten minutes or so we'll be down so low we'll have to land. These jobs just won't fly on one engine. Would you like to take a stroll on the nice desert, my little man?"

Freddy groaned aloud and flung a look of hate down at the stretches of desert sand below.

"If I come out of this alive," he declared in harsh tones, "I'll shoot the blighter who even mentions the word, sand, to me. Well, tough luck for us, Dave. Thank goodness, though, that beggar got scared and went barging on home. I fancy he'd be enjoying himself a lot right now, if he had hung around."

"Being a Nazi, he sure would," Dave nodded. "Crippled ships are their favorite dish. It was the same in the First World War, too, I understand. What a race of people! But, darn it, this desert landing burns me up. And I don't mean that as a wise-crack. It's getting to be a habit with me. I probably won't know what to do if I ever see a real airdrome or carrier flight deck again. I wonder how far we are from the British lines."

"A long, long walk over this blasted desert, I'm afraid," Freddy said gloomily. "And we've got to get there long before dawn tomorrow, too, or the information we have won't be worth much. It will take a few hours at least for the British garrisons west of Tobruk, at Derna and Bengazi, to fall back to the main body, or they'll be cut off by the Germans blocking the way at Tobruk."

"That's right," Dave said, and guided the plane downward. "And that's exactly what the Nazis plan to do to make their attack a complete success: smash right through the middle of the British defenses; cut British strength in half, and then mop up a half at a time. But, darn it, we can't let them get away with that even if we have to run all the way to Tobruk, or some British outpost that has a radio. No, darn it, we'll beat those Nazis yet. We're not through, and all washed up."

"Well, we are with this airplane, anyway," Freddy grunted. "Here comes that blasted desert. Oh, how I hate the very sight of sand! But don't think I'm giving up hope and quitting, Dave. Don't crack us up. I'm just talking aloud, you know."

"It'll be a rainy day when you up and quit, Freddy," Dave said with a chuckle. "Don't worry. I feel just the same way. I could chew nails plenty right now. Oh well, hold your hats, children."

Dave cut the ignition of the left outboard engine, leveled off just over the sand, and then let the plane sink down to one of the finest landings he had ever made in his flying career. When he had braked the plane to a stop, he sank back in the seat and sighed heavily.

"And I'd go and waste a nice landing like that way out here!" he grunted. "Well, I guess—Hey! *Hey, Freddy!* Look over there! That cloud of sand. What in thunder is it?"

To the right and far ahead, a cloud of swirling sand was moving swiftly toward them. Both boys stared wide-eyed as the approaching cloud seemed to grow bigger and bigger and spread up to the sides. Then suddenly they saw dull colored objects under the cloud and moving over the sand. Freddy found his tongue first.

"Tanks or armored cars heading for us!" he cried. "Blast them, I'm jolly well going to make them pay for taking us prisoners. I won't just walk into their waiting arms this time!"

As the English youth shouted the words, he stood up in the pit and swung his mounted guns around to bear on the rapidly approaching cloud of sand. Dave reached back and grabbed him by the arm.

"Hold it, Freddy!" he cried. "That would be just plain dumb. We've got more than just ourselves to think about. It would be just plain foolish to fight it out. They can blow us right out of the desert without half trying. Then where'd we be? Keep your shirt on, and just keep thinking of the maps and papers you've got stuffed under it."

The English youth's eyes blazed with anger, and he hesitated a moment before he slowly dropped his hands away from the guns.

"Yes, of course you're right," he mumbled. "Getting ourselves killed would simply spoil everything. But, good grief, what I wouldn't give to—"

"Freddy, shut up, and look!" Dave interrupted in a wild voice. "They're armored cars, but they're not German! Take a look! See? See the type? Those are from a British unit. They're English! For cat's sake start waving your arm before they start pegging bullets at us. This is a Nazi plane, you know. And maybe those guys don't feel like taking prisoners today!"

Freddy Farmer didn't bother wasting breath agreeing. He had seen for himself. He popped up onto his feet, as did Dave also. And together they started waving their arms at the most comforting sight they had seen for many long hours—British made and British manned armored cars of the desert!

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Desert Wrath*

The British desert patrol consisted of four cars led by a small scout car that flew a Staff pennant from one of the front fenders. The scout car came straight at the landed Messerschmitt, while the patrol cars circled around to the right and the left and came to a halt in a ring about the plane. Two officers were riding in the scout car—a major, and a lieutenant who sat at the wheel. When the car stopped, the major jumped out and ran toward the plane, one hand on his holstered service automatic. He was tall and broad-shouldered and was tanned a deep mahogany from many weeks and months under the blazing desert sun. The decoration and campaign ribbons on his tunic showed that he had served his King in the last war as well as in this one.

"Don't shoot, sir, we're English!" Freddy shouted, and scrambled down from the plane.

The major stopped dead and stared at them, wide-eyed. Then he took a cautious step forward, his right hand still resting on the butt of his gun.

"What the devil?" he gasped. "Infantry officers flying a plane? What's this all about?"

"Pilot Officers Dawson and Farmer from the Aircraft Carrier Victory, sir," Freddy said. "We've just escaped from the Nazis far to the south, and were on our way to G.H.Q. when we were attacked by a trio of Nazi pilots. We got two of them, but the third beggar got our engine and we were forced to come down. Thank God you saw us, sir."

"Thank God we didn't open fire on you," the major grunted. "We don't care much for Nazi planes. But what's this about escaping? Nazis far to the south? That's rot! The desert's bare as can be."

"That's what you think!" Dave cried before he could check his tongue. Then, blushing, "Sorry, sir. I mean, it looks that way, but the desert is practically alive with them. Freddy, let's show the major our stuff, and tell him the whole story. You tell him."

Just about six minutes later the major, who said he was Major Alden, of the 41st Armored Division, was probably the most amazed and dumbfounded person in all Libya, and Egypt as well. He could hardly take his eyes off the maps and papers the boys pulled out from under their shirts and spread out on one wing of the Messerschmitt One-Ten. The other officer in the scout car, a Lieutenant Baxby, joined them, and he too was struck speechless.

"Bless my hat, bless my hat!" Major Alden kept mumbling. "The whole blasted plan of attack. Units, numbers, gun strength, air, navy—everything. Great guns! I'll never be able to believe it!"

"But it's true, sir," Dave spoke up. "That Nazi colonel actually told us what he planned. He was shooting off his—I mean, he was boasting. Like Nazis do, because he thought he had us for keeps. Can you give us a lift to the nearest radio post, sir? The sooner we notify G.H.Q. the better it will be, I think."

"Eh, give you a lift?" the major echoed looking up from the maps and military papers. "I'll jolly well drive you there myself, straight to General Maitland at Tobruk H.Q. We can make it by just before sundown if we hop along now. Great guns! The blighters would have wiped out the lot of us in no time at all. God bless the R.A.F., I say!"

The major gathered up the stuff on the wing and spun around to his junior officer.

"Take over the patrol, Baxby," he ordered. "Ride in Sergeant Tucker's car. Head back to the post at once, and have all other patrols called in immediately. Then move back to Tobruk to await orders. Got it?"

"Right you are, sir," the lieutenant said.

"Then off with you," the major ordered. "Come along, you two R.A.F. lads. Blast it, if this isn't like a cinema thriller!"

Motioning the two boys to climb in back, the major slid in behind the wheel, shifted gears and sent the light, fast scout car careening around and toward the north. The violent movement pitched Freddy and Dave down onto the floor, and by the time they had scrambled up onto the little stools again and were clutching the two mounted machine guns for support, the car was like a brown streak of lightning ripping across the surface of the sand and leaving a swirling trail behind.

"Gosh!" Dave shouted above the roar of the engine. "If we had wings this darned thing would take off!"

"Dashed if I don't think we already have!" Freddy called back. "Look over there to the right, Dave! Look at the color of the sky."

To the east the sky was filled with a dull copperish haze. It spread out to the side for miles and towered high into the heavens. It was as though a huge expanse of copper screen mesh had been spread across the blue of the Libyan sky. At its highest point the sun was perched like a brass ball on the top of a flag pole.

"Maybe it's going to rain," Dave suggested. "Maybe rain clouds are that color in this neck of the woods."

"Rain in March?" Freddy snorted. "The rainy season's long over before then. That's some kind of a desert storm, I think."

Freddy let go of the machine gun mounting long enough to lean forward toward the front seat.

"What's that sky mean off to the right, sir?" He shouted the question.

The major took his eyes off the desert ahead just long enough to flash a snap glance toward the copperish-colored sky to the east. As he saw it, he started slightly, and his sandy-colored brows came together in a frown.

"Sand storm!" he called back over his shoulder. "And if it catches up with us it'll be very nasty indeed. That's a good one, too. Getting close to the time of year when they kick up quite a bit. If we can't outrace it, duck low and stay there. The stuff's like powdered glass. Dash it all! Even the weather's fighting for the Nazi. I—"

The dreaded snarl of aerial machine gun fire cut off the rest of the major's statement. Dave whirled around and stared upward and to the rear. He saw the diving plane at once. It was a Messerschmitt One-Nine. As a matter of fact, he was positive it was the same One-Nine that had quit that last air battle and gone racing off home. Obviously, though, the pilot had come back, sighted the One-Ten on the ground, and the scout car speeding across the desert to the north. He had added things up to get the right answer, and was now making a final effort to prevent valuable information from reaching British headquarters.

"The bum has come back, Freddy!" Dave shouted, and swung one of the machine guns around on its swivel mounting. "He wants some more, so let's give it to him!"

Freddy Farmer didn't bother wasting breath replying. He simply nodded, swung the other gun around and lined up the diving plane in his sights. A split second later both boys were sending savage bursts of bullets up at the diving plane. The Messerschmitt did not swerve off, however, even though Dave could see their tracers slapping right into the plane. The German pilot was determined to do his worst while he lived. He came right on downward, engine howling a song of mighty power, and all of his guns spewing out streaks of nickel-jacketed lead bullets.

"That guy sure can take it!" Dave shouted as he continued to pump bullets up at the plane. "Maybe he's gone nuts and plans to dive right down into us."

"Let him!" Freddy shouted back without taking his eyes off the plane. "It will be the last dive that beggar makes, anyway!"

"And a lot of good that will do *us*!" Dave cried. "We'll—*Hey!*"

The speeding scout car had suddenly careened around crazily to the left. The violent movement tore Dave's hands from his machine gun and flung him heavily up against Freddy. He regained his balance as soon as possible, shot a questioning look toward the major at the wheel, let out a bellow of alarm and dived forward.

"Keep at that plane, Freddy!" he shouted, "The major's been hit—and bad!"

It was even worse than that. The major had received a burst of bullets straight through the back of his head. He was stone dead and slumped over the wheel of the car. Bracing himself as best he could, Dave hauled the limp body to the side with one hand and clutched wildly for the wheel with the other, and somehow managed to straighten out the car before the terrific turning motion sent it off balance and spinning over and over across the surface of the sand.

The instant he had the car straightened out, he pushed and shoved the dead major out of the seat and scrambled in behind the wheel himself. In his ears was the continuous yammer of the Messerschmitt's guns, and the retaliating chatter of Freddy Farmer's single gun in back. He didn't dare turn his head for a look, however. He kept his eyes front and made the car zigzag as much as he could to throw off the diving pilot's aim.

Suddenly there came a wild shout of triumph from Freddy Farmer's lips.

"That will teach you, you blasted blighter!" Freddy roared. "Now you can't go back home!"

Hardly had the last reached Dave's ears before he heard the sickening sound that a plane makes when it dives engine full out into the ground—a sickening sound no words can describe. An instant later there was the roar of the gas tanks exploding, and as Dave jerked his head around to risk a quick look, he saw a fountain of flame and smoke that shot upward. Impulsively he eased off the scout car's speed a bit, and took a deep breath.

"Thanks, Freddy!" he called back over his shoulder. "I knew you could do it. Poor Major Alden! What a tough break for him. Gosh! I almost wish he hadn't spotted us. Then this wouldn't have happened to him. Can you lift him in back, Freddy, and then come up front here with me? We'll have to use your pocket compass for a course. I've lost mine, and the burst that got the major raised heck with his dash compass. Can you lift him back, or do you want me to stop and give you

a hand?"

"Stop nothing!" Freddy cried in wild alarm. "Drive like blazes, Dave! Look at that sand storm! It's almost on top of us. You keep driving. I'll get him back here all right!"

As Dave turned his head and looked to the east, his heart zoomed up into his throat. The coppery sky had changed to dull black, streaked with shafts of swirling yellowish white. In that instant the whole world seemed to stand still. All sound ceased, save the roar of the scout car's engine. And its sound was twice as loud because of the sudden silencing of everything else.

"Gosh!" Dave whispered in awe as his eyes stayed glued to the hovering menace aloft that seemed ready to spring upon them in the next split second. "Holy smoke! Like the end of the world, or something. It's— Hey, Freddy, what's the humming sound? No, more like a whine, I guess."

Freddy didn't have time to offer his guess. A low hum that seemed to be sweeping across the desert suddenly rose up to a blood-curdling scream that blasted the surrounding silence to the four corners of the earth. The lull and the silence were no more. In the bat of an eyelid the fury of a Libyan desert storm swept down upon the boys in full force. The car shuddered, and rocked, and threatened to roll over on its side from the terrific impact of the wind driven sand clouds slashing against it. Dave bent low and clung to the bucking wheel with every inch of his strength.

Daylight was no more. All about him was a swirling, twisting, screaming inferno of shadowy darkness. Billions and billions of tiny pin points of pain slashed at his face and hands. They even seemed to dart through his uniform and practically scrape the skin from his body. It was impossible to keep his eyes open to see where he was driving. If he did, he would be blinded in the flash of a split second. All he could do was keep his head bent low, his face shielded from the furious onslaught of the desert storm, and hold the wheel as steady as he could and pray that he was steering a northerly course.

As the fury of the storm increased, and the high, shrill scream of the wind seemed like daggers of fire in his ears, he was tempted to swing the car around and race with the storm in the hope of outdistancing it. He checked the urge, however, because of the possible consequences. If they once lost direction in this storm, it would be all over for them. True, they had Freddy's compass and they could always find north. But from where? That was the point. If he tried to run with the storm, he might get so twisted up that he'd be racing back to the south. Then when the storm passed they would be farther than ever from their destination.

No, it was best to hold a general northerly course now, and pray they could live out the storm. At least the swirling sand would not choke up the engine and put it out of commission. That was their greatest fear, and as Dave strained his ears to catch the roar of the engine, and to feel it by the vibration of the wheel, his heart stood still, and the blood was so much sluggish ice water in his veins.

The car's engine, however, had been adequately protected for just such a situation as it now faced. And it kept roaring out its song of power that spun the wheels and sent the car rocketing forward slam bang into the teeth of the storm. Seconds totaled up to minutes, and the minutes mounted up one on top of the other until Dave felt as though he had been plowing through the raging desert inferno since the very day he was born. Wave after wave of stinging pain swept over his body. Every muscle and bone ached. His head felt three times its size and throbbed unmercifully. It was like racing down a long black tunnel filled with roaring thunder, for he dared not open his eyes. He wondered how Freddy was making out. He didn't dare take his hands from the wheel. Nor did he dare open his mouth to call out. His words would not only go unheard, but he would also instantly get a mouthful of stinging wind-swirled sand.

There was just one thing, and one thing alone to do: hang on hard to the wheel to keep the car traveling a straight course to the north.

Swirling sand, screaming wind, and a hundred new aches and pains attacking his body every minute. Dave's mind became a spinning blurr, a blank. Fighting instinct kept him clutching the wheel and guiding the scout car ever northward. Fighting instinct and a will-power of iron refused to permit him to brake the car to a halt and sink exhausted down onto the floor of the car out of the swirling sand and the cutting wind. He lost all track of time. Time even ceased to exist. It was as though the howling, screaming sand storm had always been about him, and always would be. There was no end. Everything would be like this forever and ever.

"Dave! Dave, come out of it! Dave, wake up. The storm's over. It's gone. Dave, look at me. Look at me!"

From a thousand miles away he heard Freddy Farmer's voice droning in his ears. His pal was punching his shoulder, grabbing hold of him and shaking him violently. Through sand-burned eyelids he stared fixedly at a limitless expanse of desert stretching out ahead of him. Suddenly, something seemed to let go of his brain and he realized what it all meant.

The car wasn't moving. The engine had stopped. The desert storm had passed on and was now blotting out the sun in the western sky. The desert was the desert again. He turned his head slowly and stared at Freddy. It was like looking at a ghost. The English youth was covered with fine white sand dust from head to toe. It was caked in his hair, caked on his face, and was sticking like a layer of white glue to his tattered uniform.

"Dave, are you all right?" Freddy gasped, and shook him again. "You've been driving for fifteen minutes as though you were hypnotized, just clinging to that wheel for dead life and staring straight ahead. I had to switch off the ignition to stop the car. You were absolutely deaf to every

word I said. Are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm okay," Dave heard his own voice say. "Gosh! Driving with my eyes open? Holy smoke! The last thing I remember was driving blind with my eyes shut and my head ducked down. And, hey, it must be late afternoon. That storm lasted for hours. Wonder where we are?"

"I don't know," Freddy said. "But we're headed north, anyway. The sun's over there on our left, so we must be headed north. Phew! How you were able to keep on driving through that inferno I don't know. I ducked down on the floor, and just didn't have the strength to get up and give you a hand. You must be made of steel, Dave!"

"I sure don't feel as if I were right now," Dave said, and grinned, stiff-lipped. "But let's get going again. The ground seems to rise up quite a bit just ahead there. Maybe we'll see something on the other side. Boy, oh boy, do I hope it's something besides desert."

"If it isn't, I swear I'll go stark raving mad," Freddy muttered. "If I never see a desert again that'll be much too soon."

"You and me both," Dave grunted and started the engine again. "So cross your fingers, Freddy, and pray hard. Here we go for the top of that rise!"

It took ten minutes to reach the top of the high point of desert, but every second of those ten minutes was a lifetime of torturing suspense to Dave and Freddy. Neither of them spoke a word, but the same question stood out in letters of fire in their brains. What was beyond the rise of ground? For the last fifty yards Dave fed every ounce of gas to the pounding engine that it would take, and the car fairly streaked over the sand. Then finally they roared up and onto the crest. Dave slammed on the brakes, and sat motionless, unable to utter a word. Emotion ran riot within him, and the hot tears of inexpressible joy stung the backs of his eyes. Freddy threw both arms about him and hugged him like a long lost brother.

"There it is, Dave!" the English youth cried wildly. "The good old Union Jack flying from the pole. The British flag. That's Tobruk, Dave. I recognize it from pictures. Tobruk. You hit it on the nose, Dave. Right on the nose!"

"Tobruk!" Dave whispered softly. "Tobruk, and—and I'll never forget how good you look as long as I live. Never!"

"The end of the trail, and in time!" Freddy breathed, and unashamed tears of joy streaked the caked sand on his cheeks.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Claws of the British Lion*

A continuous roaring thunder that seemed to shake the entire world greeted the new Libyan dawn. The roaring thunder of war on the land, in the air, and on the sea. Thanks to Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer, the British Middle East High Command had been warned in time to call in its outpost forces and concentrate them into a swift mobile force that streaked out to smash hard at the enemy forces stealing in for a surprise attack that never took place.

On land the British forces struck the middle and both flanks of the enemy desert forces and sent them reeling back into the desert scattered and completely disorganized, and suffering terrific casualties. To the west at El Aghelia, and Bengazi, other Nazi-Italian units found nothing but small British rear guard units that made them pay far more for every foot of ground they captured than that foot of ground was worth. It was the same at many other points, too. Instead of being surprised, it was General Wavell's armies that surprised the Axis units. They weren't where the Nazi and Italians had fully expected them to be. They were like ghost armies that faded out of sight, and then suddenly materialized on a Nazi flank to crush a tank company as though they were so many toys, and to spread terror and complete befuddlement in the enemy ranks.

In the air every available R.A.F. plane had been hurled into the battle. Carefully guarded Nazi fuel supply truck units and ammunition trains and armored car columns were blasted into eternity by the rain of bombs and bullets showered down from R.A.F. wings. Nazi and Italian planes were shot down like flies. Numbers made no more difference to the R.A.F. boys on the wing than numbers meant to the brave-hearted, two-fisted fighting British, and Australian, and New Zealand and South African soldiers on the ground. They gave ground, yes, but they left nothing worth the holding. And the Axis forces paid one of the highest prices in history for stretches of useless hot desert land.

On the sea, units of the Mediterranean fleet were doing their share, too. Italian navy ships sent to take part in the surprise Axis attack were caught cold by John Bull's sailors, and were scattered about the blue waters of the Mediterranean like helpless chunks of steel. Not a single Italian naval shell was fired ashore into the ranks of the British troops. The Italians didn't have the chance to fire a single shell. The British sailors caught them in a perfect trap and plastered them from bow to stern with screaming shells. In a couple of hours there wasn't a single Italian ship in sight off the Libyan coast. Those that had not gone down under the waves were scurrying like terrified ducks for the safety of their bases in Naples and in Taranto, leaving behind the British navy in supreme command of Libyan waters.

In one of the R.A.F. planes that roared above the raging war inferno that stretched from El Aghelia in the west to Bardia and Sollum in the east, were Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer. They were still caked with sand, and they still wore their tattered uniforms. And they were dead tired and practically all in. But not for all the gold in the world, or all the discipline in the world, would they have remained on the ground inactive during this great conflict in the middle East. The high ranking officers of British G.H.Q. had suggested, begged, and practically demanded that they go to a hospital in Tobruk, and place themselves under a doctor's care at once. But arguments, threats, and demands had simply fallen on deaf ears. In the end, and with frank admiration glowing in his eyes, General Maitland had granted permission for them to take a plane from one of the nearby R.A.F. bases and go aloft for an hour or so to watch the gigantic battle. At the end of an hour, however, they were to fly out to sea to the Victory, whose position had been given to them.

"Five minutes more, Dave!" Freddy shouted above the roar of their engine. "Think we can get just one more Heinkel bomber before we head for the Victory?"

Dave turned in the cockpit, grinned at him, and shook his head.

"Boy, what a hog for air scrapping you are!" he cried. "But nix, no more. We more or less promised the general we wouldn't get too close to the scrapping—just take a look-see around. Instead we tore in and got us a Nazi apiece. But two's enough. I haven't got half a dozen bullets left. Besides, this isn't our show, really. The other fellows deserve their innings. Also, I've suddenly got a yen for the flight deck of the Victory. What say? Shall we let these guys have their fun without us butting in, and buzz home to the Victory?"

Freddy cast a sad glance about the sky swarming with British and Axis planes, then sighed heavily and nodded.

"Right you are," he said. "Guess we've been selfish long enough. Yes, the flight deck of the Victory would be fine. Hurry it up, though. I've got something very important to do. Matter of life or death, you know."

"What?" Dave cried in alarm. "You—?"

"Never mind the questions!" Freddy cut him off. "Just get me to the flight deck of the Victory as fast as you can."

Forty minutes later Dave sighted the aircraft carrier, and ten minutes after that he received word from the operations officer to come aboard. The huge ship looked strangely bare and alone as it steamed into the wind. There wasn't a single plane on deck. All available ships were in the air, either scouting for fragments of the Italian fleet or lending their aid in the battle ashore. Just the same, the long smooth deck looked like home sweet home to Dave as he guided his borrowed two-seater fighting plane downward.

He came in clean as a whistle, and no sooner had the secret arresting gear brought the plane to a halt than Group Captain Spencer seemed to pop right out of thin air and come racing across the deck to greet them.

"The happiest day of my life!" he cried, and reached up a helping hand. "Climb down out of there, you two. Blessed if I don't want to hug and kiss you. Fancy that!"

"First tell us about the others, sir," Dave said as he climbed down onto the deck. "I mean, the other patrols that went out when we didn't return. Did they get back okay?"

"Fit as fiddles, and without a speck of information!" the group captain cried, "But we all know why, now. By George! Is it good to see you two! I suppose you know you helped a little, eh?"

"Well," Dave said with a grin, "I hope we helped at least a little."

"Oh, it was a bit more than that," Group Captain Spencer said with a mocking shrug. "All you did was save half the British army in Libya from walking into a death trap. That, plus making it possible for us to give the Nazis a licking that will slow them up long before they reach Egypt. And when they do reach Egypt, we'll be able to hold them until General Wavell's ready to run them all the way back where they came from. Yes, you two helped some, I guess. And as soon as you're rested up I want the whole story in detail. Don't leave out a thing. I insist.... By George! Farmer, what's the matter?"

Freddy had squatted down on the deck and was tearing off his boots as though his feet were on fire.

"Must get rid of them at once!" he panted, and struggled with his boots. "Die if it touches me any longer. Most terrible stuff in the world. Deadly poison. Absolutely fatal."

Dave's heart looped over as he remembered a squashed scorpion on a Libyan desert rock.

"Freddy, what is it?" he cried, bending over. "What's in your shoes? That stuff you talked about life and death in the plane? Freddy, speak to me! *What's in your shoes?*"

The English youth got to his feet, picked up his two shoes and hurled them far out over the side of the carrier. When they had hit the water and sunk from sight, he shuddered and heaved a long grateful sigh.

"Sand," he said hoarsely. "Blasted desert sand!"

**THE END**

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***A Page from***  
**DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL**

Golden sunshine was streaming down on the broad wings of the American built Consolidated "Catalina" flying boat, but ominous coal black clouds were beginning to pile up high in the western sky. Even as Dave Dawson stared at them, they seemed to fling a dark shadow far out over the rolling grey swells of the North Atlantic. He gave a little angry shake of his head and impulsively took a tighter grip on the controls of the flying boat.

"That storm looks plenty bad, Freddy," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "What do you think?"

Freddy Farmer, seated in the co-pilot's seat, nodded grimly and glanced at the altimeter. It showed exactly nine thousand feet.

"We'll just have to hit it on the nose, and pray," he said after a moment. "If we climb above it we might just as well go back to port.

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