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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL ***



DAVE DAWSON ON CONVOY PATROL

By R. SIDNEY BOWEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Secret Orders

The savage fury of the Nazi Luftwaffe was once again raining down upon the brave and stubborn city of London. Wave after wave of German bombers roared in over the city from every possible direction, dumped their tons of life blasting missiles, and then went streaking away toward safety with British searchlights, anti-aircraft shells, and night flying Spitfires and Hurricanes of the R.A.F. hot on their tails. Some made it, but some others were caught by the two fisted hard fighting boys of the R.A.F., and once caught the Nazis didn't stand a chance against such flying skill, daring, and perfect marksmanship. One after another the German planes burst into flame and went hurtling downward to complete destruction.

Down on the ground in the city, London's millions squared their shoulders and grimly took the terrific blasting from the night skies. Air raid wardens went about their jobs with a look on their haggard faces that told the whole world that a thousand such raids as this one would not even begin to crack England apart. The gallant fire fighters went about their dangerous tasks with the same expression on their faces, and the same confident belief in their hearts that England would forever survive. In the air raid shelters it was the same. In hotels, too, and apartment buildings, and restaurants, and theatres. All London was one huge fortress that nothing made by man or devil could destroy. And in that fortress the men, the women, and the children stood ready and waiting to take the worst unflinching.

In the basement restaurant of the Savoy Hotel were two youths who ate their meal outwardly calm, but seethed inwardly as the faint dull boom of each exploding bomb echoed through the thick walls and ceiling. Both wore the uniform of the Royal Air Force, and both held the rank of Flying Officer which is equal to the rank of First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps. One was Dave Dawson, American born, but now offering his life and his all in serving England's cause. The other youth, a year younger, was Freddy Farmer, Dave's dearest friend and squadron pal, and true British from the soles of his shoes all the way up to the top of his head.

For several moments they had been eating in silence, each contentedly occupied with his own thoughts. But as a louder roar seeped down into the room, Dave put down his fork and clenched both fists in a gesture of raging helplessness.

"I can't eat any more," he said. "Every bite chokes in my throat, I feel such a heel."

Freddy Farmer put down his own fork and gave a slight lift of his head to indicate altitude.

"Because of the business up there, you mean?" he grunted.

"Yes," Dave replied through clenched teeth. "I feel that I should be up there helping the boys dust off the baby killing rats, instead of being down here shoveling food into my mouth."

"Feel exactly the same way," Freddy agreed. "But, after all, there's no sense wasting good food, you know. Blessed little of it around these days. Besides, orders are orders. We have to stick right here. So I say eat while the eating is good."

Dave grinned and heaved a long sigh.

"You and that stomach of yours!" he exclaimed. "It's a darn good thing they've got the ration card system here. Let you loose and you'd have the rest of the country starving in a week. And when

you're not eating you're sleeping. What a man, what a man!"

The young English youth forced a stern look to his face. He pointed a finger at the blue and white Distinguished Flying Cross ribbon under the wings on Dawson's tunic.

"Watch your tongue, my good fellow!" he said. "One more crack like that last one and I'll go straight to the Air Ministry and tell them the truth. Quite right! I'll tell them you didn't do a blessed thing to win that ribbon. That I did all the work, but simply said that you helped a little so's you could get a medal, too. And frankly, that's really the way it was, you know."

Dave grinned then put up his hands in mock terror.

"Please don't!" he pleaded. "Now that I've got it I want to keep the medal. So help me, you spill a word and I'll tell them how you were always falling on your face in the sand, and that I had to carry you halfway across the Libyan Desert on my back."^[1]

"Oh is that so!" Freddy cried. "Well, you didn't carry me a single yard, and you know it. In fact, I..."

The thunder of a Nazi "egg" striking much much too close for comfort cut off the rest of Freddy's words. They both stiffened slightly, and sat perfectly motionless half expecting to see the ceiling split open and spill plaster and brick down upon them. However, the ceiling was thick and well constructed, and after a brief moment or so the building stopped shaking and trembling. The two youths instantly relaxed but there was hot anger in their eyes.

"Bang away, Adolf!" Dave grated softly. "For every one you drop we'll be dropping two on your neck of the woods soon. And that'll be only the beginning."

"Check!" Freddy breathed fiercely. "And when that time comes I think I'll ask for a transfer from fighters to bombers. I'd love to dump bombs on Berlin."

"Me, too," Dave agreed absently. Then as a frown creased his brows, "What do you make of it, Freddy? You got any ideas? Boy, if anybody can send a fellow's curiosity sky high it's those Brass Hats who run the Air Ministry!"

"Meaning what?" Freddy asked with a blank look on his face. "Have I got any ideas about what?"

"For you I should draw pictures on paper!" Dave groaned. "What do you think I mean? Why were we suddenly recalled from service with the Fleet Air Arm in the Mediterranean back here to England? Why have we been skipping all over England flying everything from kites to four engined transports? And why when we're only back with our old Fighter Squadron for a day do we suddenly receive mysterious orders to come here to London, and take rooms in this hotel, and stick here day and night until we receive further orders? Answer me those, my pal!"

"Simple," Freddy said with a straight face. "Air Ministry just can't believe that a chap like you can actually fly an airplane. But before kicking you out they decided to give you one last chance to prove it. Right now you are waiting for them to decide whether to keep you on, or kick you back to Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A. But don't lose heart, my little man, you may...."

"Nuts!" Dave snorted. "You were with me, pal, and...."

"And I was simply along to check and make a personal report on your flying ability," the English youth interrupted in an easy voice. "And if you must know, I said that you weren't too bad. A little ragged on the turns, but that you usually do manage to get into a field after shooting for it five or six times."

"Then everything will be jake!" Dave breathed in mock relief. "But now that you've got that side splitting humor off your chest, get over on the sane and intelligent side for a change. What do you think it's all about anyway?"

Freddy Farmer didn't say anything for a minute or so. He stared thoughtfully down at the last piece of meat. He nudged it a couple of times with his fork, then presently speared it and put it into his mouth.

"Next week'll be okay!" Dave growled. "There's no hurry."

"We English never talk with food in our mouths," Freddy said after he had swallowed. "But what do I think? Frankly, nothing, Dave."

"Well, that's acting natural, for you," the Yank born R.A.F. ace said with a grin. "But I had hoped that a bright idea or two had wormed into that thick skull of yours. At least, that you might have heard a hint dropped here and there. After all, Freddy, it all seems so screwy. Look, a little over five weeks ago we were doing daily patrols off an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. Since then we've flown everything they've got over here on this island, but not once have we had the chance to take a crack at a German ship. Holy smoke! What are they trying to make out of us? Test pilots, or something? I asked a million questions, but I always got a sweet little blank for an answer. And between you, me, and that dab of mashed potato on your chin, I don't think the birds I asked knew the answers either."

"Now that you've confessed," Freddy said and automatically wiped his chin with his napkin, "I might as well admit that I asked a few questions, myself. And like you, got nothing for an answer. No, Dave, I'm afraid I can't help you at all. I'm practically passing out with curiosity, myself. It's been a queer business these last five weeks, and no doubt about it. All that I can even guess at is that Adastral House has something up its sleeve. And we'll not find out until they're darn good and ready to tell us."

"It's always like that," Dave grumbled. "Gee, sitting here is driving me bats. For two cents I'd go out and take a walk, and the heck with the bombs. But I...."

Dave cut himself off short as he suddenly became conscious of the waiter standing at his elbow. He looked up.

"Yes?" he grunted.

"Beg pardon, sir," the waiter said, "but would you two gentlemen be Flying Officers Dawson and Farmer?"

"Right," Dave said with a nod. "I'm Dawson."

The waiter held out a folded slip of paper.

"A phone call just received, sir," he said. "The party at the other end said that either of you two gentlemen was to call this number at once. It took a moment or two to find you. The manager thought you might be in your rooms. He tried there first."

As the waiter spoke the last he gave the pair a look that seemed to say that men in uniform shouldn't scurry down to the basement just on account of a mere bomb raid.

"We would be, but we're hungry," Freddy Farmer said quietly.

"Yes, of course, sir," the waiter said as his face got beet red. Then he hastily shoved the paper into Dave Dawson's hand and hurried away.

Dave unfolded the paper and looked at the phone number. It was a London exchange but the number was completely unfamiliar. He handed the paper to Freddy.

"Any of your girl friends know you're here?" he asked.

Freddy glanced at the number, himself, and shook his head.

"Clear as mud to me," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea. But we'd better call it before a Jerry bomb flattens the telephone company. There's a booth over there. You want to call it?"

"And maybe get one of your girls?" Dave chuckled and shook his head. "And you tell her it was your valet? Nix, pal. You go call her. I'll stand outside and make faces. Boy! Love in an air raid. Now ain't that something!"

Freddy blushed slightly but made no return comment. They got up and crossed the dining room to the phone booth built into the wall. The young Englishman stepped inside, closed the door, and put through the call. Dave watching him saw his eyes pop, and his jaw drop, and the light of eager excitement leap into his eyes. In less than a minute Freddy was out of the booth and as breathless as though he had just run a couple of miles at top speed.

"Guess what?" he gasped.

"You just tell me instead," Dave said. "What's up? An armistice been signed?"

"That was an Air Ministry number, Dave!" Freddy breathed. "As soon as the All-Clear sounds you and I are to report to Room Five Hundred, Fifth Floor, Air Ministry!"

"No kidding?" Dave echoed as the familiar tingling sensation came to the back of his neck. An eerie tingling that had always proved in the past to be an advance warning of action and danger just ahead. "Who has Room Five Hundred?"

"The chap who talked to me on the phone just now," Freddy said. "None other than Air Marshal Manners!"

"Manners?" Dave gasped. "The man who led the R.A.F. at Dunkirk? Hey, wait a minute! Before we went out for service with the Fleet Air Arm in the Middle East I heard some kind of a rumor that he was going to be put in charge of something very big, and very hush-hush. Boy, oh boy! Do you think, Freddy?"

"I'm not thinking," Freddy said and fished in his pocket for money to pay for his meal. "I'm heading for Adastral House right now."

"You mean you're following me!" Dave cried and bolted from the dining room.

CHAPTER TWO

Daredevil Wings

As Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer stepped through the door of Room Five Hundred on the Fifth Floor of the Air Ministry their first impression was that they were stepping into a concert hall, and that the place was almost filled up. The room was huge, tremendous in size, and at least thirty or forty men in R.A.F. uniform were seated in chairs. At the far end Air Marshal Manners, the R.A.F. hero of Dunkirk, sat at a table on a small raised platform.

"Name, rank, and papers, please!"

Dave stopped short and jerked his head around to stare into the inquiring eyes of a Staff Sergeant. The non-com held a sheet of paper in one hand, and a pencil in the other.

"Must make sure you're supposed to be here, you know," he said as Dave continued to stare.

"Oh sure, sorry," Dave grinned, snapping out of his trance. "Flying Officer Dawson, Former Flight Squadron Two-ten. Here's my pass and papers."

The Staff Sergeant checked the papers with what was on the sheet he held in his hand. Then he gave Dave a searching look and nodded.

"Check, sir," he said. "Take any seat."

Dave put his papers back in his pocket, and waited for Freddy to pass examination. Then they walked farther into the room and found a couple of vacant chairs. For some ten or fifteen minutes they just sat there looking around and wondering what was up. They were not alone in wondering either. They could tell that all of the others were as much in the dark as they were. One thing struck an important and intriguing note, however. Both of them saw many faces they had seen during the last month flying off at least fifty different airdromes about England in as many different types of planes. It wasn't until then that it dawned on them that they had not been the only ones to take that unusual and mysterious advanced flying course.

And then when general curiosity was just about ready to burst wide open like an exploding bomb, Air Marshal Manners stood up, rapped on the table and grinned down into the sea of faces.

"All right, chaps," he said. "I guess we can get on with it. Relax, all of you. Smoke if you wish. I know this must look like some blasted school room, but it isn't. I decided this was the best place to get you all together, so that was that."

The Air Marshal paused, cleared his throat, and took a perch on a corner of the table. Then for a moment or two he let his wide set steel blue eyes roam from face to face. As Dave locked looks with the famous ace he had the sudden impression that Manners was looking straight into his brain and reading all that was there.

"In case you don't know," the Air Marshal spoke again, "I hate blasted speech making. So don't expect anything polished from me. And if what I say doesn't make sense, don't hesitate to interrupt me with questions. First, though, I've got to ask you a question. And, lads, don't try to be heroes. Everybody is a hero in this confounded mess. It doesn't mean a thing. Find the answer to what I ask deep down inside of you. Be honest with yourself, and with me. Now, here's the question. Is there any one here who would rather return to his squadron for regular service in place of accepting assignments that may call for service and performance far beyond the ordinary call of duty? Think it over, chaps, and if you would prefer to return to your squadron and your pals it will be perfectly all right. It will mean nothing to me one way or the other. And I will give you my word on that."

The Air Marshal stopped talking and a pin dropping silence settled over the room. If anybody actually debated whether to return to his squadron, or remain, nobody else realized it. Every pair of eyes was fixed steadfastly on Air Marshal Manners' face. And every pair of lips remained still for two long minutes. It was the Air Ministry high ranker who finally broke the silence. He grinned and made a little gesture with one hand.

"Knew perfectly well it would be a waste of breath to ask it," he said. "Okay, right you are, then. We're all in it together, come what may. Now, you don't have to tell me you've been close to blowing your top with curiosity these last few weeks. I can see it in your faces right now. Well, I'll put an end to the mystery. A few weeks ago I was put in charge of what is to be known as the Emergency Command. In simple language the Emergency Command is to be made up of proven pilots who can fly anything, at any time, and at any place. That's why you chaps have been buzzing from drome to drome these last few weeks. I made a list of a hundred pilots I'd like to have in my Command. Those pilots were sent through the special training courses. And you thirty-five lads qualified for service in the Emergency Command. And by the way, congratulations to each and every one of you. You all proved you have the kind of stuff I'm going to need."

The Air Marshal paused for breath and to grin at the sea of eager faces before him. The pilots grinned back, and in the breast of each was the tingling warmth that comes with the knowledge of having accomplished something above the ordinary.

"And now to get down to serious business," the famous ace of Dunkirk said in a grave tone. "The jobs you'll get will be tough ones. All of them. I fancy that no two jobs will be the same. You'll be flying one type of ship one day, and another type the next. Maybe one day you'll go on a special Berlin bomb raid. And perhaps when you return ... if you do ... you'll be assigned the task of ferrying War Office officials to Canada, or goodness knows where. In case you're wondering just why such a Command should be formed, just give a thought or two to the name. That's the whole explanation. An Emergency Command. Pilots ready to do any kind of a job at a moment's notice. A suicide command, if you like. The point is, though, you will not act as a unit. You'll be assigned to a number of established squadrons, but your job there will be special, and you will follow my orders as given you through the O.C. of the squadron to which you happen to be assigned at the time. All clear up to now?"

Air Marshal Manners paused again and ran his eyes over the group. Heads nodded and the murmur of assent passed from lip to lip. He grinned and heaved a sigh of mock relief.

"Well, so much for that, then," he said. "Now, something else. The Emergency Command is to be something that is very hush-hush, and for very good reason, I think. Because of your work you will soon learn many, many important secrets about R.A.F. operation. Adolf's little Intelligence and Gestapo boys would love to find out some of those things themselves. So to check any attempt on their part to find out, the identity of you chaps is going to remain a secret. By that, I mean that on the records you will join a squadron as a replacement, and only the O.C. of that

squadron will know that you are there for a certain purpose. And when you leave it will go in the records as a routine transfer or some other suitable explanation. So naturally you lads have got to live up to it all the time. Act the part of a replacement, and don't say a thing to anybody.

"And now, thank heavens, I come to the last part of this speech making. Here on this table are thirty-five sealed envelopes. In each envelop is the number of an R.A.F. squadron, the name of its O.C., and its present location. As all of you have qualified for any kind of a job there is no sense in my designating a certain job for a certain chap. In short, you'll pick your first assignment blind. Some assignments are solo, meaning that you'll go alone. And some will be for two of three of you chaps. It all depends. So step up here and each of you take an envelop. However, don't open it at once. I've got a few more words to say first. Right-o. Step up, all of you."

The Air Marshal finished the sentence with a gesture of his hand-toward the table. There was a shuffling of feet as the pilots stood up and walked towards the table on the raised platform. Dave turned his head to look at Freddy, and in his pal's eyes he read the same thought that was in his own brain. Was this night to see them split up? To see them sent to opposite ends of the British Isles? Perhaps to opposite ends of the earth? It was a thought that cut deep, and though each forced a cheery grin to his lips there was the beginning of a dull ache of dread and fear in his heart.

"I've got my fingers crossed, if you know what I mean," Dave whispered out the corner of his mouth.

"I've had mine crossed since we came in," Freddy replied. "Had a feeling that something like this might pop up. Luck, Dave, old boy!"

"Luck to us both!" Dave breathed fervently and took his place in the line that was forming.

Some ten minutes later each pilot held a sealed envelop in his hands, and he held it as gingerly as though it were a delayed action bomb that might go off any second. Air Marshal Manners crushed out the cigarette he was smoking and faced them again.

"More rubbish talk, chaps," he said, "but I owe it to you and to myself to give you all a fair chance. Don't take what I say lightly. This is serious business. Mighty serious. Maybe half of you will be dead by this time tomorrow night. There is no telling. When you open your envelopes you'll jolly well be thumbing your nose at death. The odds will be all against you. That's why I had to pick the best I could find. Pilots with all around ability, courage, and fighting spirit. The Emergency Command, and just that. Pilots who have the choice of two things. Doing the well nigh impossible, or getting a wooden cross. And so, if any of you want to change your minds now, go ahead. It will still be perfectly all right with me."

As Air Marshal Manners spoke the last he looked at each man in turn, and his eyes repeated sincerely what his lips had just said. Nobody made a single move. Not a pilot so much as licked his lips as though to say something. Thirty-five steel clawed birdmen of the R.A.F. stared him right back in the eye, and waited.

"God bless you all," the famous ace said softly. "Right-o. Open your sealed assignments. Orders as to what you are to do will be awaiting you at the Squadron you join."

Almost before the Air Marshal had finished the room was filled with the crackling sound of sealed envelopes being ripped open. However, neither Freddy nor Dave opened theirs at once. Invisible hands seemed to stay them, and they looked once more at each other. For some crazy reason Dave's throat choked up, and for a moment Freddy's face became a sort of a blur. It was clear again in his vision almost instantly, however. He grinned and shrugged.

"Well, it's got to be done, and so here goes," he said.

With that he ripped open his envelop, and drew out the card inside. The few words were printed by typewriter, and read:

**Squadron No. 74,
Coastal Command,
Squadron Leader Hays,
Plymouth, England.**

Dave stared at the printed words, and was almost afraid to raise his eyes and look at Freddy. He heard the ripping sound that the English youth made. And then there was a moment of silence as Freddy read of his own assignment. Then suddenly both acted as though by silent and mutual agreement. They stepped close and placed their cards side by side. The whole world seemed to stand still as they stared at each other's cards. A moment later unconfined joy filled their hearts, for the printing on the cards was identical.

"Boy, do I feel ninety years younger!" Dave finally breathed.

"That's putting it mildly," Freddy echoed in a voice choked with emotion. "Phew! I feel like I had just died a thousand times, and come to life again. Wonder if any other chaps are going to Coastal Command?"

A few minutes later they found that they were the only two assigned to the Coastal Command Squadron stationed at Plymouth. And just before they left to head for their new station Air Marshal Manners drew them to one side.

"You're either lucky, or mighty *un*lucky, lads," he said. "I wondered what two would get that assignment. The toughest of the lot, in my opinion. Means everything to England. Everything. But

that's all I've got to say, now. Good luck, you two. And happy landings!"

The famous ace of Dunkirk gripped them both hard by the hand, then abruptly turned on his heel and walked away. Dave and Freddy looked at each other, but neither spoke. There was no need to speak. Each knew what the other was thinking, for he was thinking the same thing. High adventure and furious action awaited them just ahead. And perhaps death, too. But what they did about it would mean everything to England. Air Marshal Manners had said so. And knowing the man and his reputation for abrupt frankness they realized that he had not purposely painted the picture black. He had told them straight from the shoulder, and he had meant every word he said. England was counting on them, and there could be no such thing as failure. Not even in death.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Dave finally grunted. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER THREE

Satan's Agent

All Nazi bombing aircraft had gone scurrying back across the Channel to their funk holes in Occupied France, and a new dawn was sliding up out of the east as the train bearing Dave and Freddy raced along the track toward the great British naval base at Plymouth on the south coast. By a bit of luck they had managed to get an apartment to themselves. And as soon as the train had pulled out of the London station they had stretched out on the seats with the idea of getting in as much sleep as possible before tearing into the mysterious task that lay ahead of them.

Their intentions and their efforts were fine, but that's about as far as things went. Sleep completely ignored and abandoned them. There was too much in their brains, and in their hearts to permit sleep a single chance to take charge. And so after an hour they both gave it up, sat up, and switched on the dome light in the car ceiling.

"Boy, that did me a world of good!" Dave breathed and rubbed knuckles in his eyes. "Feel like a new man, and rarin' to go."

"Liar, you didn't sleep a wink," Freddy said scornfully.

"Yeah?" Dave shot at him. "Who says so?"

"I do!" Freddy shot back. "I was awake every second of the time, and I didn't hear a thing."

"Hear a thing?" Dave questioned without thinking. "What do you mean?"

"You," Freddy said. "When you sleep you snore loud enough to shatter windows. And there was hardly a murmur out of you."

"Ouch!" Dave yelped. "Strike three on me! I sure walked right into that one. Okay, I was kidding. I didn't get in a wink, either. Boy, if you must know, this suspense is wearing me down."

"Practically exhausted, I am," Freddy murmured. "Coastal Command, eh? I guess that means those Yank built Consolidated "Catalina" flyingboats."

"Or maybe those big four engined British Short "Sunderland" flying boats," Dave added in a speculative manner. "Well, either one suits me. Both are tip-top crates. But that means patrolling over coastal waters hunting for submarines. Heck, unless the bus falls apart and you drop into the drink I can't see much danger in that kind of work."

"Neither can I," Freddy said. Then thoughtfully rubbing the palms of his hands together, "Somehow, though, I have the hunch that it's going to be a bit more than tootling a flyingboat around from here to there and back again. The way Manners said happy landings to us makes.... Well, the way he said it made me sort of feel my stomach was suddenly filled with cracked ice. You know, sort of cold and shivery?"

"Right on the nose!" Dave said and nodded vigorously. "And there was a look in his eye, too. Gave me the feeling he knew darn well he'd never see us again."

"What a pleasant thought!" Freddy groaned. "I say, let's talk about something else. Any more of this and I swear I'll leap off the train and walk back."

"That will be the day, when Freddy Farmer back-tracks on anything!" Dave said with a chuckle. "But maybe it's best to talk of other things. After all, in this game talking about the unknown doesn't help at all. Like other jobs we've had, we've just simply got to take this one in stride as it comes along. And let it go like that."

"Oh quite," Freddy murmured. Then wistfully, "But I'd still jolly well like to know what we're going up against."

"You'll find out, and soon!" Dave said. "Right now, skip it. Tell me. What do you think of the Dodgers' chances to cop the flag this year?"

Freddy Farmer sat up a bit, blinked, and looked blank.

"Eh?" he echoed. "Dodgers? What country is that, and who are they fighting? I don't believe I ever heard...."

The English youth cut himself off short as Dave rolled over on the seat and collapsed with

laughter. Then before Freddy could draw in breath to demand an explanation, the compartment door was rolled aside and a tall moon faced youth in the uniform of an R.A.F. flying officer stood in the doorway. Dave cut short his laughter, and both looked up into the grinning face of the man in the doorway.

"Am I interrupting something, chaps?" he asked in a north of England accent. "Just passing as I heard the outburst of humor, and saw you were R.A.F., too. Name's Steffins. Heading for Coastal Command, Plymouth."

"Come in, come in, Steffins," Dave said and moved over to make a place. "I'm Dawson, and my son, here, is named Freddy Farmer. Don't pay any attention to those wings and D.F.C. ribbon on his tunic. He stole them."

"All lies, Steffins," Freddy said, extending his hand. "The truth is, Dawson's really wearing my extra tunic. Likes to put on a show, you know. Look, Dave, have you cleaned those field boots of mine, yet? And don't forget to change back into your corporal's uniform before we reach Plymouth."

"Oh, you chaps going to Plymouth, too?" Steffins asked in a delighted tone. "By any chance is it Seventy-Four, Coastal Command? That's where I'm headed. Been up north on Lockheed Hudsons for the last two months. Got dropped in the water twice."

"Yeah, we're heading for Seventy-Four, too," Dave said. "We were in Sixty-Two on the west coast. Catalinas. What do they fly in Seventy-Four, anyway? Do you know?"

Dave wasn't sure but he got the impression that Steffins flashed him a searching, puzzled look. It was gone in an instant, however.

"Most everything, so I've been told," he said, "I say, you're a Yank, aren't you?"

"R.A.F. for the duration, anyway," Dave replied with a nod. "What was your Lockheed squadron? I know some chaps on Lockheeds up North."

Steffins seemed to hesitate, but perhaps it was only to draw air into his lungs.

"Squadron One Hundred and Twenty," he said. "A fairly new outfit. Squadron Leader Clancy was O.C. But I'm keen to get to Plymouth. Never been there before. And I'm blasted sick of the North Sea, I can tell you. Funny thing, though, about leaving my old squadron. Thought I was set there for good. Then suddenly yesterday the O.C. told me I had been assigned to Seventy-Four at Plymouth. Seemed to hint it was special duty, or something. Wouldn't say a thing, though. Just gave me my traveling papers, and such, and sent me off."

A suddenly liking for Steffins shot through Dave Dawson. Perhaps the lad was on the same kind of a mission as he and Freddy. He started to open his mouth to speak, but at that instant he happened to catch Freddy's eye. The English youth gave a hair width shake of his head, and said the rest in a look. Dave closed his mouth and started again.

"It wasn't like that with us," he lied. "Freddy and I asked for a transfer. Change of scenery, and all that kind of stuff. I guess there's more action off the south coast anyway. For the last two weeks we didn't do anything but use up gas and oil. I hope..."

At that moment all three of them heard the ungodly wail of a plane coming down in an all out power dive. It was not the wail but the sound of the plane's engine that brought them to their feet and diving for the compartment windows. It was not the steady beat of a British or an American engine. It was the throbbing pulsating roar of a German made engine. In fact, the unsynchronized throb of two engines. Even as they reached the window and stared up into the dawn sky they saw that the plane was a long range Nazi Focke-Wulf 187 destroyer plane. The craft was low down and racing in toward the moving train. An instant later the savage yammer of machine gun fire sounded above the beat of the engines.

"Strafing us!" Dave shouted unconsciously. "Why, that tramp! Do I wish I was in a Spitfire or a Hurricane! I'd soon..."

Dave stopped short, half turned and saw Steffins striving frantically to crawl under one of the seats. The man's face was paper white and he was biting into his lower lip hard. Another yammering burst from the strafing plane and jerked Dave's eyes back to the window. He started to duck himself but checked it as he saw that the pilot of the plane seemed to be concentrating on the rear car of the train. He looked at Freddy and saw the veiled contempt in the English youth's eyes. Freddy half jerked a thumb at Steffins still trying to crawl under the seat, and shrugged.

Dave laughed, and called out to Steffins.

"Give it up, Steffins! Those things are bolted to the floor. Besides, the lug isn't shooting our way."

"And also he has gone on his merry way!" Freddy said, turning away from the window. "The blighter just thought he'd have a bit of murdering sport on the way home. If I was in my old Hurricane he'd jolly well get a bellyful of his kind of sport."

Very red of face and twice as sheepish looking, Steffins stopped trying to crawl through bolted wood, and got up onto his feet. He gave Freddy a hard stare, then smiled slowly.

"Sorry I made such a fool of myself," he said with an effort. "Truth is, though, I got peppered a bit by one of those lads back in the September show. Turns my blood cold every time I hear one of the beggars come down. Well, I guess I'd better buzz back to my compartment and get my stuff together. Must be getting near there, now. Nice to meet you two. Hope we see a lot of each

other."

"Sure, I guess we will, Steffins," Dave said pleasantly.

"Right you are," Freddy murmured as the pilot slid through the door and closed it shut.

"A nice guy to have around in the clutch," Dave grunted when he and Freddy were alone. "Ask me and I'll tell you the guy is yellow. Hey, why the heavy scowl, pal? What's suddenly on that thing you call a mind?"

"Your nice little friend," Freddy said with a jerk of his head toward the door. "It doesn't quite check. The lad is a bit queer, I'd say."

The opening was too perfect for Dave to let it slip by unnoticed.

"What Englishman isn't?" he cracked.

"I'll remember that one," Freddy growled. Then grave of face, "No, serious, Dave. I wish the devil the lad hadn't come in here. I'd feel better right now. I think I've seen him someplace before, but blessed if I can remember where. And the beggar lied to us, unless I'm completely wrong on my R.A.F. squadrons."

Dave started another smart remark but cut it off at the look on Freddy's face. He hitched forward a bit on the edge of the seat.

"How come?" he asked. "What are you driving at? I didn't notice anything unusual, but I really wasn't listening very hard. What do you mean?"

"A friend of mine *used* to be in One-Twenty Lockheed Hudsons," Freddy said with meaningful emphasis. "I ran into him a couple of weeks ago, when you and I were at Hull for that spell. He told me then that One-Twenty was *washed out three months ago*. Rather it was hooked up with One-Thirty-Six and they were doing coastal patrol around the Dover area."

"No kidding?" Dave exclaimed. Then with a puzzled frown, "But what was the point in the guy lying to us? He.... Say, I had a hunch at first when he came in. Maybe he's on some hush-hush thing like we are."

"I doubt it, and a lot!" Freddy said tight lipped. "I'm sure the chap was trying to pump us for all he was worth. Remember that time I shook my head at you? Well, he was fairly falling over on his face waiting for you to speak. And the way he tried to crawl under the seat! No, the lad has something very queer about him. Blast it! I wish I could remember where I've seen him before. I.... Wait! Let me think. I almost had it that time!"

Freddy scowled hard and pressed both palms against his forehead as though that would help memory to come back. As Dave watched him the tingling sensation came to the back of his neck once again. He sat as a man turned to stone, hardly daring to breathe.

"Well?" he finally got out after several tormenting minutes dragged by.

Freddy shook his head, started to gesture for silence with one hand, and then gasped and sat up straight.

"Got it, of course!" he cried. "Unless I'm completely balmy."

"Could be," Dave grunted. "But spill it anyway."

"Earlier tonight just as we were leaving Adastral House," Freddy said in a strained voice. "You were ahead of me yelling for that cabby, so you didn't see. In the blasted blackout I flew full tilt into a chap. We both went flat. I used my flash to help us both get up. And I got a look at the other chap's face. Dave, I swear to you that the chap was this Steffins. I can see his face now as clear as day!"

"So what?" Dave grunted as a sense of disappointment rippled through him. "The guy was in London to catch this train, and you just happened to collide with him in the blackout. Maybe he didn't get a look at your mug, so didn't recognize you just now."

"Let me finish!" Freddy snapped angrily. "When I bumped into him outside Air Ministry *he was wearing the uniform of a captain in the Fifth Londonshire Infantry!*"

"Sweet jumping tripe!" Dave breathed softly. "And he pops up again on this train wearing an R.A.F. uniform? Heck, Freddy, you must have made a mistake. It doesn't add up to make sense!"

"Perhaps it doesn't," Freddy said with a shrug. "But I still don't like that chap. And what's more, when we get to Plymouth I'm going to make it my job to find out more about him."

Dave made no reply. He turned his head and stared absently out the car window. For reasons he couldn't possibly explain to himself at the time he suddenly had the feeling that Freddy Farmer had spoken words of truth. That the English youth had looked into the future, seen what the war gods were brewing, and spoken an advance warning for them both. Dave shivered slightly and turned from the window.

"I wonder what it will be like when peace comes to this cockeyed world again," he grunted.

"I wonder how many of us will be around to find out," Freddy murmured as though talking to himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Atlantic Fury

With her twin engines thundering out their duet of mighty power, the American built Consolidated "Catalina" flying boat patrolled back and forth over the convoy of fifteen merchant ships plowing through the Atlantic swells toward the southwest coast of England. At the controls sat Dave Dawson, and at his side in the co-pilot and navigator's seat was Freddy Farmer. Aft at their respective stations were the three other members of the plane's crew. For seven long hours the flying boat had been escorting the convoy through dangerous waters. And every instant of that time five pairs of R.A.F. eyes had been searching the waters below for signs of a lurking group of Nazi "steel fish," and scanning the heavens for the first glimpse of a Nazi air raider winging out from its base in occupied France.

Nine solid hours of being constantly on the alert, and not so much as a single floating hunk of wood sighted. It was as though the Germans had no idea that valuable cargoes of war material were headed for England. Or else the presence of the Catalina flying boat and the small but heavily armed "Corvette" escort freighter leading the convoy made them decide to leave it alone. At any rate the merchant ships had not received a single scare, and soon they would be through the danger zone and unloading their war stuffs at England's docks.

Taking one hand from the controls, Dave dug knuckles into his tired eyes and sighed heavily.

"If this is the British idea of a joke," he growled, "all that I can say is that it smells out loud."

"Meaning what?" Freddy asked and made a few final marks on his navigation charts. "Mad because all those ships down there are going to get through safely?"

"Nuts, of course not!" Dave snapped and gave him a scornful side glance. "And you know darn well what I mean."

"That's true, I do," Freddy said and scowled out over the nose of the flying boat's hull. "Certainly is funny. Do you think by chance that something's gone haywire?"

"All I know is that *I'm* getting close to going haywire!" Dave replied savagely. "For two days now, we've been attached to Seventy-Four Squadron of the Coastal Command, and what have we done? Nothing but toot these big babies out over the Atlantic, pick up a merchant convoy, and toot back with them. Not a sign of a U-boat, not a sign of a Nazi plane, and.... Heck! Not a sign of anything. And we were two chaps who were to tackle a do-or-die mission and receive secret orders from our new O.C. You know, Freddy, I'm beginning to think, it's all a lot of hog wash. But why Air Marshal Manners should hand out all that fancy stuff sure beats me."

"I'm just as much in the dark myself," Freddy grunted. "But somehow I don't think that it was supposed to be this way. I think that something went wrong some place, and Manners had to hold up our special orders. Or perhaps he wanted us to get well acquainted with things. I mean, make it definitely look as though we were just a couple of replacements."

"Maybe so," Dave sighed and stared at the flock of British destroyers steaming out to take over and lead the convoy into port. "Maybe so, but I still don't like it. So help me, I doubt I'd be able to recognize a Nazi plane now if one should fall into my lap. Well, there're the destroyers, so this trick is over. Send the code signal to Plymouth Base that we've made contact and are coming in. And tell Sergeant Black aft that I'll have another slub of that coffee before we go in. And tell him I mean coffee, *not* tea!"

"A regular barbarian, drinking that horrible stuff!" Freddy groaned and adjusted his radio mike. "I swear, we'll never be able to make you a real Englishman!"

"It's still coffee!" Dave said with a grin. "And hurry it along, my little man."

A few minutes later the Catalina flyingboat had left the convoy far behind and safely in the charge of the destroyers. A cup of warm coffee was in Dave's stomach, and he was almost becoming slightly satisfied with the world again. Now, if only about forty-'leven Nazi planes would show up and give them a little action everything would be all to the merry. No hope of that, though, he reflected gloomily. They were too near to Base, and any Jerry lad who showed his nose around Plymouth Base just naturally didn't get back to Germany. The Jerries knew that and so they stayed well clear of that little bit of England.

"And what about the great mystery, Dave?" Freddy suddenly spoke up to break his train of thought. "Do you think we should go to Squadron Leader Hays and tell him our story?"

"Meaning your boy friend, Flying Officer Steffins?" Dave echoed with a frown.

"None other," the English youth replied. "I told you there was something queer about that chap. I really think we should speak to Squadron Leader Hays about him."

Dave made no comment for a few moments. During these two days at Plymouth Base he had thought a lot of thoughts about the queer acting R.A.F. pilot they had met on the train coming down. And the most important thought was the fact that neither he nor Freddy had so much as set eyes on the man since the moment he had picked himself up off the compartment floor after the Nazi plane strafe and gone forward to his own seat. The man had simply vanished into thin air. He most certainly had not reported at Plymouth Base. Freddy had made sure of that by asking all around. As a matter of fact, nobody at Plymouth Base had even heard of the man. And the bulletin board in the mess had said in so much black type that Dawson and Farmer were the only two replacements posted to Seventy-Four.

"Sorry to wake you up, Dave," Freddy spoke again. "But what do you think about the situation?"

"Pipe down, I was thinking," Dave growled. "But I can't even get to first base. Maybe we should speak to the Squadron Leader, yet that might make us look like a couple of saps. If there's one thing that gets a fellow's goat in this war it's the dizzy unfounded spy scares that pop up every time you turn a corner. And after all, to us he was just a yellow belly who shot off his face and asked a lot of questions. Maybe he was just some bird posing as an R.A.F. officer just for the heck of it. That sort of thing's happened before. You know, some bird wants to make an impression on his girl and he goes calling all dolled up as an officer, when he really should be wearing his private's uniform. No, Freddy, I don't think Squadron Leader Hays would love us extra much if we went to him with such a crazy story."

"I'm afraid you're right," Freddy grunted. "It is just a little bit crazy. But I still swear he's the same chap I bumped into in front of Adastral House."

"Well, maybe that time he was calling on a girl who likes the Army best," Dave chuckled. "Anyway, let's skip it for the time being. There's Base, and here we go down to a stack of warm food, and a little shut eye."

Dave's statement was half truth and half falsehood. They did put away a stack of food, but there was to be no shut-eye for either of them. They had hardly finished their meal when an orderly appeared with word that they were to report at once to Squadron Leader Hays' office. They exchanged looks, grinned happily, and instantly lost all desire for sleep.

"Hot dog!" Dave breathed and pushed back from the table. "Maybe this is it!"

"I'm saying nothing until I'm dead sure," Freddy grunted and got up, too. "The way things are going perhaps we're to be favored with the special honor of washing dishes."

"Boy, can you make a guy feel good!" Dave growled and gave his best pal a playful poke in the ribs.

When they reached the Squadron Leader's their hopes dropped a little for the simple reason that they were not the only two summoned. There were ten other pilots there as well. Squadron Leader Hays waited until Dave and Freddy had settled themselves in chairs and then started to speak.

"Special job for you fellows," he said. "Coastal Command is testing out a new type of plane to be used on short range work. It's the new Fairey "Fulmar" fighter. It's powered with a Bristol Pegasus engine that's been jacked up a bit to give a couple of hundred more horsepower than the ordinary Pegasus. It's a land job, of course, but it's been fitted with extra tanks, and sections of the wings are sealed so that you'll float for quite a bit of time in case you fall down into the drink. Whether these Fulmars will give us the service Coastal Command demands remains to be seen. Anyway, six of them arrived last night, and I've selected you chaps to give them a good testing. If you can find any off-shore Nazi planes then so much the better. However, don't go too far out, and don't get too close to the French coast. You can be sure that the Jerries are just aching to shoot down a Fulmar and get a good look at it. Well, that's all. They're out on the line now, and the mechanics are waiting. You can take off any time you want."

The Squadron Leader made a little gesture with his hand that dismissed the group. Disappointment tugging at their hearts, Dave and Freddy started toward the Squadron Office door, but pulled up short as the Commanding Officer spoke again.

"Oh, Dawson and Farmer!" he called out. "Wait a moment, will you?"

Both youths wheeled around with hope soaring up anew. The Squadron Leader waited until all the others had left, then grimaced and sighed unhappily.

"Darnedest war I ever fought in!" he growled and motioned to the boys to step closer. "There's enough blasted hush-hush stuff to smother the whole Empire. Of course what I told the others was plain rot. We've got Fulmars here, and they are to stay for keeps. This testing idea is all bosh. But orders are orders. So there's nothing I can do about it."

The Squadron Leader made another face and took a sealed envelop from out of his inside tunic pocket. He handed it to Dave.

"Your orders for something or other," he said. "Don't read them until you're in the air. And don't bother asking me questions. I don't know a blessed thing about them. What's more, I don't want to know. This arrived from Air Marshal Manners an hour ago. Here, take it, and get on with your job. Stuff it in your tunic pocket and keep it there until you're in the air. And.... Well, naturally, good luck and all that sort of thing. Now, buzz off, both of you."

Dave and Freddy saluted, executed a snappy about face and walked on air out of the squadron office and over toward the south side of the field where Six Fairey Fulmar fighter planes were lined up with engines ticking over. From the depths of dread and despair they had soared up to a new high. The long awaited event had come to pass at last. The sealed orders in Dave's pocket seemed to turn into a white hot coal that burned right through his clothing to his skin. He couldn't speak because excitement and eager expectation was like a hand of steel clutching at his throat. Sealed orders. For what? For life, or for death? Right now neither of them cared very much. One thing was certain. Those sealed orders meant action, and action was all that mattered to those two fisted, stout hearted, steel clawed birdmen of the Royal Air Force.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mystery Wings

It took every ounce of his will-power, but Dave Dawson forced himself to wait until he and Freddy had the Fulmar clear and well out of sight of the Plymouth Base before he took the sealed orders out of his pocket. He turned in the seat so that Freddy could read them at the same time, but he didn't rip open the envelop at once. He held it up and looked at Freddy.

"Let's fool Manners," he said with a straight face. "Let's just toss this over the side and go on down back and land. There's probably nothing in it anyway. What say, huh?"

Freddy's jaw dropped, his eyes popped, and his face turned white as a sheet.

"Good grief, Dave, have you gone mad?" he gasped and grabbed for the envelop. "Don't you dare...!"

The English youth cut himself off short and turned beet red as he saw the grin on Dave's lips. He swallowed hard and balled one hand into a hard fist.

"Some day you'll pull one of your bad jokes just once too often!" he growled. "Open that letter before I throw you out bag and baggage. Phew! What years you took off my life, you ... you...!"

"Naughty, naughty, don't say it!" Dave said with a laugh as Freddy floundered around for a suitable word. "Mama wash your mouth out with soap! Okay, pal. Sorry you almost had heart failure. Guess it is a bum time to pull one like that."

"Shut up and open that letter!" Freddy shouted in a fuming voice.

Dave nodded and tore open the envelop and pulled out two typewritten sheets of paper. He smoothed them out, let the ship fly itself, and then started reading the orders. They read:

Flying Officers Dawson And Farmer

You are to first make sure that no aircraft either British or Nazi are in sight. Then you are to set a course for the area off the French coast as indicated on the second sheet of these orders. En route you will tune your radio to wave length reading 429-6B and *leave it at that reading regardless of what happens*. For your information when your radio is set at that reading it will be in constant contact with special directional finder apparatus aboard certain British naval craft in surrounding waters. They will know your exact location every second of the time, but your signal will not be heard by any enemy aircraft or surface vessels.

When you reach the area marked on the second sheet you will cruise about and *maintain a constant look-out* for a single funneled Nazi surface sea raider of some seven thousand tons. The craft will probably be painted a dull grey, and may be flying the flag of almost any country. The craft has flat decks from bow to stern and sets low in the water. Even from close range she looks like an ordinary tramp. She is, however, heavily armed and is fitted with hidden guns that can be hoisted above decks at an instant's notice.

Most important of all she is the fuel ship for a wolf pack of some ten to fifteen Nazi U-boats. They will be close to the ship but will submerge the instant your plane is sighted. You probably will not even see them. So concentrate only on the surface raider.

Make no attempt to attack the raider! Do not touch your radio! The raider's set will be open and although it will not be able to hear your directional finder signal it will pick up anything else.

Even though you are attacked by enemy aircraft do not give battle!

You are to act as though you are lost. As though you are having engine trouble, or are out of fuel. When you sight the raider start down and keep on going down. You are to make a crash landing in the water.

As soon as you have crash landed your signal will stop going out over the air. British naval craft in that area will then head under full draft for the spot. And Fleet Air Arm craft will be launched with torpedoes and bombs. The two units will attempt to trap the raider and her U-boats and blow them out of the water.

When you have landed your job is done, and you are to save your own lives as best you can. This area is believed to be the rendezvous point of the most dangerous raiding pack England has yet battled. It is absolutely essential that this pack be destroyed. And it is hoped ... and expected ... that you will fulfill your orders to the letter. The success of the entire venture depends upon your causing the raider no alarm, keeping your directional finder signal going out over the air all the time ... and creating the impression that you are lost and making a forced landing in the water without being able to send out your position.

Good luck, and God bless you!

Dave waited until Freddy nodded to indicate that he was through reading, and then took a look at the second sheet. It contained a complete navigation course that led to an area of the Atlantic about seventy-five miles west-south-west of Brest on the coast of occupied France. One glance was enough to tell them both that surface and under-sea raiders working out of that rendezvous area could fan through England's trade lanes with Canada and the United States in the matter of a few hours and then go scooting back to any one of a number of bases on the French coast.

"Well, Manners certainly wasn't kidding when he gave us that little pep talk," Dave finally broke the silence. "Boy, he sure did hand us something sweet, didn't he?"

Freddy didn't reply at once. He swallowed a couple of times and ran a finger around the strap of his helmet as though it had suddenly become a little bit too tight.

"And not a chance to fire a shot!" he groaned. "Blasted clay pigeons, that's what we've got to be."

"Dead ducks, and how!" Dave breathed. "Nope, I don't think it's going to be nice at all sitting in the water with the British navy and Fleet Air Arm lads heaving everything at the raider and her subs. Of course, though, I can still pitch this thing overboard, and we can swear Hays didn't give us a thing."

"Never mind that!" Freddy growled. "As you would say, we stuck our chins out, and we've got to keep them out. Set the course, my little man, and tune in on that wave length. No, wait, I'll do that little thing. Who knows but what you might get Manners on the thing and start offering brighter suggestions. Blast it, though, I hate swimming. Specially in mid Atlantic this time of year."

"Cheer up, pal!" Dave laughed. "I'll save you, my boy!"

"In that case I'm doomed for sure!" the English youth groaned and turned his attention to the radio.

For the next several minutes neither lad spoke. Each was busy with his own thoughts. And be it said they were not pleasant ones. However, they were not unpleasant thoughts simply because almost certain death awaited them out over the Atlantic. That their chances of surviving this assignment were almost nil didn't bother them a bit. What rankled was that they had to go down to whatever kind of doom awaited them without so much as starting to put up a show of resistance. Aerial decoys, that's what they were. Just a couple of lads sent out to act as helpless enemy bait, and when they had done their job probably get blown to atoms forty ways from Sunday. It wasn't right, and it wasn't fair. But it was orders, and that was that!

"A penny for your thoughts, Freddy!" Dave suddenly called out. "If they're the same as mine they're not worth that much."

"Matter of fact, I was thinking about that directional finder gadget," the English youth replied as he stared at the radio. "It sure must be something pretty neat. Just think, British war craft know where we are right now. The chaps at the other end can put a dot on their navigation charts marking the spot of water we're over now. What will this war bring out next?"

"Don't ask," Dave grunted and fixed his eyes on the distant horizon. "One thing I hope, though. When we crash land and our signal automatically stops, I hope those boys will get to the spot in a hurry. The Jerries are no dopes. They may smell something fishy. And they sure will once they spot naval craft smoke on the horizon."

"The bombers will be on top of them long before that," Freddy said. "Besides, though Manners didn't say so, it's up to us to delay the raider as long as we can. Ten to one she'll have to pick us up. Particularly the plane. This Fulmar is a new job, you know, and it would be a feather in the raider captain's cap to take one back to port."

"Sure, that's true," Dave nodded. Then with a frown, "But the set-up doesn't appeal to me so much. No, I don't mean about our necks. I mean, Manners' hope that the navy and Fleet Air Arm will wipe out the raider and her tin fish children. Seems too much to hope for, the way I figure it. Frankly, I wish we could have talked with Manners instead of only being able to read what he wrote. I've got ideas that...."

"Don't I know it!" Freddy cut in. "But forget them, my friend. You'd have Manners tearing out his hair in two minutes. Don't worry, he's considered this thing from every angle, and picked the best way to do the job."

"Maybe," Dave grumbled reluctantly. "But I still would like to have been able to talk to the guy."

"And that's a break Manners will never know about," Freddy chuckled. "Anyway it's no good now. The area's just ahead, and who knows what else. And by the way, Dave, did I ever tell you that it's been nice knowing you? I'm afraid I'll have to admit it's true."

As the English youth's quiet voice came to Dave's ears a hard lump formed in his throat and for a brief instant the horizon ahead became just a little bit blurred.

"Well, I guess I've got to admit that you're aces, too, Freddy," Dave said, a moment later and reached back a hand.

Freddy took the hand in his own and gripped it hard. Neither spoke a word. They didn't have to. All the words in the world meant nothing compared to the real meaning and significance of that handclasp. It was Freddy who finally broke the silence.

"What am I?" he said gruffly. "Your precious little girl friend, or something? Let go, and get to work."

"Now isn't that just like the guy?" Dave sighed and kept his eyes on the sea and horizon ahead. "I hold his hand to help stop him shaking and trembling with fright, and he bawls me out. Yes, the English are a screwy race, no fooling. I...."

"Shut up, Dave!" Freddy cut in sharply. "Take a look to the left! What in the world do you make of that?"

"Huh?" Dave echoed and bent forward slightly to stare down over the left wing of the plane at the rolling grey green swells of the North Atlantic. "What do you mean, look? I don't see a thing but water."

Freddy reached forward and rapped him sharply on the shoulder.

"Not down, *up!*" he shouted. "Off to the left about three miles, and a couple of thousand feet above us. It's a plane!"

Dave jerked his head up and stared hard in the direction indicated. For a couple of seconds he saw nothing but sun bathed blue sky and scattered patches of clouds. Then suddenly he saw the flash of sunlight on wings. He took a good second look and gave an angry shake of his head.

"Now what?" he grated. "Aren't we ever going to get started on anything? That's a British plane. From here it looks like a Fairey 'Swordfish' torpedo plane of the Fleet Air Arm. It's a biplane, and not a low wing monoplane job like this one we're in."

"It is a Swordfish torpedo plane!" Freddy cried excitedly. "And look, Dave. There! See? See its markings? What in the world?"

"Boy, what eyes you've got, pal!" Dave grunted and squinted hard at the distant plane. "I can't see a thing. That darn sun is.... Hey! Holy smoke, Freddy! That ship is carrying the markings of Seventy-Four Squadron! Our own outfit!"

"Exactly!" Freddy echoed. "It means that somebody was sent out to signal us that the show was all off. Or else some lad has been trailing us just to find out what we're up to."

"Well, it can't be the first," Dave said as a tiny tingle of worry rippled through him. "Our orders were sealed, you know. Nobody at the Plymouth Base knows where we are."

"Well, one chap does," Freddy said and pointed. "That chap up there."

Dave made no comment to that. He turned his head front and searched the rolling swells all the way south to the horizon line. And to the east and to the west as well. But that was all he saw. Just miles and miles of rolling grey green swells. There wasn't the sign of a single thing on the surface, nor the faint shadow of a U-boat lurking under the surface. In fact, there wasn't so much as a single puff of smoke to denote the presence of surface craft.

"Somebody's either taking us for a sweet sleigh ride," he grunted to himself. "Or else we just naturally read those orders wrong. My guess is that...."

Dave never stated what his guess was. At that moment the savage yammer of aerial machine gun fire crackled against his ear drums above the roar of the Bristol engine. He jerked his head around just in time to see Freddy Farmer clutch at his left cheek and slump over against the side of the cockpit. The English youth straightened up almost immediately and took his hand away from his cheek. Dave's heart started beating again when he saw the thin narrow red line that cut down from the lobe of the ear toward the point of the jaw. Freddy had been slightly creased by a bullet. An inch or so more to the right, however, and the English R.A.F. ace would have been stone dead.

In practically the same instant that Dave looked at Freddy he jerked his gaze skyward. The strange plane from Seventy-Four Squadron was racing down at them with all guns blazing. The thick glass hood over the Fulmar's two place cockpit was being turned into a mass of millions and millions of tiny cracks as the bullets from the Fairey Swordfish's guns slammed against it. Hardly realizing that he was doing so, Dave jumped hard on the controls and whipped the Fulmar up over and down in a wing screaming half roll. The maneuver took them clear of the other plane's gun for a moment or so. But no longer. The biplane followed through in a similar maneuver and came tearing down in again.

"You dirty rat, what gives?" Dave bellowed angrily and slid off the safety catch of his gun triggers. "If you're asking for trouble you're getting it now ... and plenty!"

Even as the words raced off his lips he kicked the Fulmar through a vicious half roll and then hung it on its prop. The Swordfish's pilot was caught cold and a ten year old kid could have picked him off at that distance. It so happened, though, that Dave didn't have the chance to fire a single shot. Quick as a flash Freddy leaned forward and knocked his thumb off the trigger button.

"Don't, Dave!" Freddy screamed. "Are you crazy? Our orders were not to shoot even if we were attacked!"

"But this is different!" Dave roared. "That bird...."

"No!" Freddy cried insistently and hung onto Dave's hand. "We've got to follow orders. Fake that you've been hit, and try to get away from him. Gosh, Dave, we haven't even sighted the raider yet. Get away from this chap. A Fulmar can fly rings around a Swordfish. Get away from him and let's continue with the patrol."

Whether it was Freddy's convincing argument, or whether it was the fact that the Swordfish was no longer a perfect target, Dave didn't really know. Anyway, he kicked the Fulmar off its stall and went sliding off and down to the right. However, the stall had cut the Fulmar's speed to

practically nothing. Also there was more than just an average run of the mill pilot flying the strange plane with Seventy-Four Squadron markings. Before Dave could pick up sufficient speed to do any fast maneuvering the Swordfish came ripping in again with its guns spewing out jetting streams of flame.

Dave felt the plane tremble as it was hit in a hundred different places. Then suddenly the Bristol in the nose began to cough and sputter, and the controls went wishy-washy in his grasp. A cold lump of ice took the place of his heart, and a load of buckshot began to bounce around in his stomach. For a moment he couldn't move a single muscle. He simply sat there like a man of stone waiting for the next burst from the Swordfish's guns to rip and tear into his body. Instinct, however, took charge where his brain failed. The next thing he realized he had put the plane into a tight spiral and was working down toward the surface of the water as fast as he dared.

It was not enough, though, for the mysterious Swordfish pilot to know that the Fulmar was crippled and going down. The plane tore in for three more bursts before it zoomed up for altitude and went thundering away at full throttle toward the east. Luckily the parting burst did no further damage to the Fulmar. The plane was finished for good, however. The engine made one last gasping sound and then died completely. Dave gingerly worked the wobbly controls and eased the craft out of its tight spiral and put it into a long flat glide. Then he turned around and glared at Freddy.

"Right or wrong, we should have plugged that tramp!" he growled. "I had him pinned to a cloud when you knocked my hand away from the trigger button. But skip it, pal. Orders are orders, I guess. How's the face feel?"

"Can't feel a thing!" Freddy called out and impulsively touched the bleeding bullet crease on his cheek. "What do we do now, Dave?"

Dave laughed harshly and pointed down.

"Three guesses!" he said. "And all of them correct. We go down and play we're in the Navy. And I... Oh my gosh, Freddy! Look! That rotten bum plastered our radio and knocked it haywire. That means our signal's stopped going out over the air. And that means that the navy ships and planes will come a-running, and there's not a raider or a U-boat within miles of here, I bet."

Freddy looked blank for a moment. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"What a lad, what a lad!" he finally cried. "Yes sir, one in a million. Sure the planes and ships will come a-running. But won't it make *you* feel good to be picked up instead of floating around until you sink?"

Dave grinned and gave a little shake of his head.

"Yes, I guess it will at that," he said. "But, heck, once we crashed the signal would have stopped, and they'd have come anyway. But darn it, I don't like this, Freddy. Not even a little bit. I've got a funny feeling that Manners didn't think of *this* possibility at all."

"What do you mean by that crack?" Freddy exclaimed as he saw the look on Dave's face.

The Yank R.A.F. ace slowly raised a hand and pointed ahead and toward the east. Freddy looked in that direction, gulped, but said nothing. About a mile away and just beneath the surface of the water was the tell-tale shadow of a submarine. It was slowly coming to the surface, and as the boys watched it they saw that it was a Nazi U-boat. Just a lone Nazi U-boat in an area where they had been expected to sight ten or fifteen in the company of a powerful surface raider.

Dave slowly turned and looked Freddy in the eye.

"And on second thought I like it even worse," he said. "That U-boat knew that we were coming here. It also knew that a Fairey Swordfish was going to shoot us down. Catch on to what I mean?"

"No, I don't quite follow you," Freddy said with a worried shake of his head.

"The old double cross, or whatever you want to call it," Dave said and flattened the glide of the plane even more. "We were going to set a nice little trap for the Nazis, but they've crossed us up. It's my guess they have set a nice little trap for the naval ships that are right now racing to our rescue!"

Freddy Farmer's face paled as he looked at the damaged radio.

"And there isn't a thing we can do about warning them," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Not a thing," Dave said as he stared at the submarine again. "But there's something we can *do*, Freddy. Hang onto your hat, pal! You and I are going to crash right on top of that baby! By the time he gets clear of our wreckage it'll be too late for him to crash dive and let go with his torpedoes at our navy ships. Hang on, pal!"

"Right you are!" Freddy sang out. "Give it to the beggar! At least we can do one more thing to help. Let her rip, Dave, and the heck with our necks!"

CHAPTER SIX

The Dead Don't Fly

Hunching over the controls, Dave veered the Fulmar around until it was heading in the direction of the U-boat, and then steepened his dive to gain extra speed. Unconsciously he felt for the straps of his life jacket, or Mae West as they call them in the Royal Air Force. Even as he touched them, however, he grinned and gave a little shake of his head. If they smacked that surfacing U-boat as they planned, their life jackets wouldn't be of any use to them. When you're smashed to pulp in a crash a life jacket is just a souvenir for somebody else to take home.

"And smack him we're going to!" Dave grated to himself. "Good old Freddy. I simply told him what I was going to do, and there wasn't a single yip of complaint out of him. Dear God, if one of us can come through this thing please make it Freddy Farmer. England needs him, and alive!"

As the simple but straight from the heart prayer slid off Dave's lips he steepened his dive even more. The U-boat had suddenly started acting strangely. It was half awash and seemed to be hanging half in and half out of the water. Then as the bow started to go under again the truth dawned on Dave. The U-boat's commander had sighted them, guessed their intentions, and was not taking any chances. Instead he had slammed shut the conning tower hatch and was crash diving as fast as his diving fins and propellers could take him down.

"Faster, Dave, faster!" Freddy's voice screamed. "The beggar is trying to cheat us. He's going to pop down where we can't hit him. Get the blasted rotter, Dave. Get him, please!"

"What do you think this is, slow motion?" Dave shouted back over his shoulder. "Our engine's dead, pal, you know. All we've got is gliding speed. And it isn't going to be enough, I don't think."

"It's got to be!" Freddy howled and unconsciously thumped Dave on the back. "We can't let him cheat us. We just can't!"

Dave didn't bother to make any further comment. The Fulmar was streaking down like a comet straight from Heaven, but the U-boat wasn't losing any time in crash diving. In the last couple of seconds Dave knew that they had lost. If he dived straight in they would only hit hard water, and not even touch the U-boat that was now completely submerged. And so in the last split instant of time Dave hauled up the nose of the Fulmar in order to save Freddy and himself from certain instant death.

The diving speed of the plane was too great, however, to permit him to pull it completely up onto level keel. The belly of the plane struck the water with terrific force. The mighty hands of invisible giants seemed to reach down and jerk the plane up toward the sun flooded sky. Then suddenly they sent it crashing down again. Twice more the plane bounced before it finally stayed down. And during that time Dave and Freddy were tossed about in their double cockpit like a couple of dried peas in a tin can. A thousand and one fire crackers went off in Dave's head. Hundreds of bombs exploded, and countless balls of colored light wheeled and spun around before his eyes. Then as though somebody had slammed shut a sound proof door, there was nothing but silence all about him.

For a moment or so he sat slumped up against the side of the cockpit where the last crazy lurch of the plane had flung him. Then he gulped air into his aching lungs, slowly sat up straight and turned around to look at Freddy. The British youth was upside down in his section of the cockpit. His head was down by the flooring, and his feet were sticking up in the air. His safety belt had been snapped in two by the terrific impact of the plane, but by some miracle he had been spared serious injury. Even as Dave reached back to lend a hand Freddy wiggled himself around and came upright, eyes popping and his face the color of a flaming sunset. It was a second or so before he could drag enough air into his lungs to speak.

"Did we get it, Dave?" he finally choked out.

"Sure we got it!" Dave replied. "But I don't mean the U-boat. You don't happen to have a nice ocean going cruiser in your hip pocket, do you? I think this baby is going to sink right from under us in darn short order."

As Dave spoke he made a sweeping gesture with one hand. Freddy looked about and it was not joy and happiness that came into his eyes. The Fairey Fulmar fighter plane looked as though it had been jammed through a meat grinder. The tail was completely gone; broken off clean as though clipped by an axe. The wing was twisted and bent, and the fuselage was punched full of holes. Sea water was coming in through the holes, and coming in fast. Freddy shook his head and looked at Dave in apologetic chagrin.

"If we get out of this you can kick me around the block six times!" he said bitterly. "All my fault for not letting you get that blasted Fairey Swordfish when you had him cold. It wasn't until after that that he got our engine. Gee, Dave, I could jump overboard and drown myself for being such a blasted fool. I...."

"I might have known!" Dave snapped at him. "We no sooner get in a tight spot and you want to quit me cold!"

"But, Dave," Freddy protested, "I didn't mean it that way. I simply meant that I...."

"Then get a grin on your mug, and stop picking on yourself!" Dave cut in. "How many times have I got to explain that Freddy Farmer is the best pal I ever hooked up with, and that I don't allow anybody to ride him. Not even you, Mister! Get it? Come on, that grin, or I'll toss you overboard, myself."

Freddy blinked a couple of times, swallowed, and then forced a faint smile to his lips.

"Always right there to put sense into a chap's head," he said softly. "That's Dave Dawson. But I

still say I was a blasted fool. How long, though, do you think before we'll be in the water with only our Mae Wests keeping us afloat?"

Dave shrugged and made a little gesture with both hands.

"Search me," he grunted. "Your guess is as good as mine. What's worrying me is that darn U-boat. If we'd only been able to clip it. We didn't, and now the darn thing's down under some place getting ready to let loose a brace of torpedoes at the first navy ship that comes tearing up this way."

"I wonder about that," Freddy said. "Maybe it just happened to come to the surface by accident. Ten to one it's making tracks for distant places right now."

"No," Dave said firmly. "I'm sure it's hanging around. This thing was all planned, Freddy. That bum in that Fairey Swordfish proved that to me."

"How so?" Freddy questioned with a frown.

"Gosh, it's simple to figure that one!" Dave cried. "Didn't you see that bird make a couple of final passes at us and then breeze off? No, Freddy, that boy had a perfect chance to riddle us both with slugs so that it would be a waste of time for anybody to pick us up, but he didn't! His job was just to shoot us down for a forced landing."

"Good grief, I believe you're right!" Freddy Farmer gasped. "But what was the idea of that U-boat coming to the surface? Why did it risk showing itself to the pilots of a forced landing plane? That doesn't make sense to me."

"I think it makes sense to me," Dave said after a moment of thoughtful silence. "I think the U-boat was taking no chances of our signalling to anybody once we were in the water. Or of our sinking the plane so that searching craft wouldn't sight it. I think they planned to take us aboard, let the ship float, and submerge to wait for our navy ships to arrive."

"And that is probably what it's doing right now!" Freddy said, tight lipped. "Dave, we've got to think of something, some way to warn all surface ships away from here. There may be a dozen U-boats waiting!"

"You're telling me?" Dave muttered grimly and hoisted himself up on the seat to keep clear of the mounting water level in the cockpit. "But what in thunder can we do? The radio's out. And even if we could set the ship on fire ... which we can't ... the column of smoke would only attract the navy boats all the more. There's just one chance, one hope. And it's the slimmest hope you and I ever had, my boy!"

"Well, what is it?" the English youth cried impatiently. "Anything's worth a try."

"We can only hope that a Fleet Air Arm plane will get here well ahead of any naval craft," Dave said. "The trouble is they may hold back the planes for fear that they would be sighted before the destroyers and cruisers arrived. It's the raider they want most, you know. And I don't think they'd risk showing a plane until the surface ships were close enough to check the raider from making a run for port and escaping."

"And there isn't any raider!" Freddy groaned as lines of worry grooved his face. "We don't know what kind of a trap this is. We don't know what the navy ships may run into. Phew! What a mess I made of things."

"Shut up!" Dave growled. "I was as much at fault as you were. A great deal more, in fact. I should have made a run for it the instant you sighted that plane, instead of sticking around and trying to outfly him. No, Freddy, we're in it together. And our only hope is that a Fleet Air Arm plane will get here first."

"You mean so's they'll see there's no raider about and suspect that it is some kind of trap?" Freddy asked hopefully. "And they can radio the surface ships to stand clear?"

"Partly that," Dave said with a nod. "But mostly so's we can wig-wag them with our shirts and *tell* them to radio the fleet to stand clear. That's our hope. That they'll spot us first and read what we signal to them. And...."

"Dave, look!" Freddy suddenly screamed. "The hope's come true. There's a plane up there to the northwest. It's a Catalina, too. And they've spotted us. See? She's starting to slide down from altitude!"

Dave snapped one quick glance up toward the huge flying boat several thousand feet overhead and some five or six miles distant. Then he started tearing off his Mae West life jacket, and ripping off his tunic to get at the white shirt he wore.

"Get your shirt off, too, Freddy!" he barked. "Here, give it to me. Thanks. You wave both arms westward and I'll wig-wag for them to radio the surface boats to stand clear. Okay, Freddy, start waving. We've got to make those boys understand that all plans have gone haywire!"

Hoisting himself up until he was standing straddle legged with a foot braced on either side of the cockpit, Dave clutched Freddy's shirt in one hand, his own in the other and started wig-wagging furiously at the huge Catalina boat that was continuing to lose altitude rapidly. Seconds passed and his arms ached so much he thought they were going to drop off at the shoulder sockets, but still the flying boat continued to come on down toward the water. It was Freddy who finally voiced the terrible fear that was mounting in his heart.

"They don't see our signals, or else they don't understand, Dave!" the English youth groaned. "That boat is coming down to land alongside and take us aboard."

"I know," Dave said in a choked voice. "What are they, blind? Once they're on the water the U-boat can surface and blow them to kingdom-come. But keep signalling, Freddy. We've got to make sense to them!"

It was simply a futile, heartbreaking effort, however. The flying boat came down until it was almost touching the surface. Then it flattened out slightly and headed toward the fast sinking Fulmar with throttled engines. Another moment and the craft had touched the water. Spray showered up both sides of the hull. Then the craft settled and came slowly toward them as the engines picked up revs. Dave let his aching arms drop to his sides and anxiously scanned the surrounding waters. There was no sign of the U-boat, but that fact didn't make him feel any better. Deep down inside of him he had the firm conviction that the under-sea menace was lurking near ready to strike at the first opportunity.

Then suddenly came Freddy Farmer's shrill cry.

"Over there, Dave, to the right! A periscope! The U-boat's going to try for the Catalina!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Missing Wings

Dave Dawson didn't so much as bother to turn his head and look in the direction Freddy Farmer pointed. The Catalina flyingboat had come to a full stop not twenty yards from the water logged Fairey Fulmar. Its pilot was keeping it heading into the wind with the aid of his engines and sea rudder. A hull door had been pushed open and an R.A.F. clad figure appeared in the opening with a casting line in his hand. Dave gave him but a single glance, then shoved a hand against the small of Freddy Farmer's back.

"We swim for it, and fast, Freddy!" he shouted.

The English youth shouted a reply but it was cut off short in the middle as he dived headlong into the water. A split second later Dave dived in too. He hit the water with arms and legs working furiously. Perhaps it was a matter of five seconds before he reached the side of the flying boat's hull, but every second seemed a soul torturing eternity in length. Every second he expected to hear the thunderous roar of a U-boat torpedo crashing into the Catalina. Every second he expected to be his last in this war, and in this world.

Then suddenly he and Freddy were at the side of the flying boat. Waiting hands reached down and hauled them scrambling aboard.

"I say, why the blasted rush?" cried a voice in Dave's ear. "We could have pulled you aboard dry as a bone. Here there, what the devil, man?"

The last was because Dave had bounced up on his feet and shoved the speaker roughly to one side. Without wasting breath to either explain or apologize Dave dashed along the hull cat-walk leading to the pilots' compartment. He went through the small compartment door like a twelve inch shell, fell over the chief pilot's shoulder and rammed both throttles wide open.

"Port rudder!" he screamed in the dumbfounded pilot's ear. "Port rudder, man, for Heaven's sake!"

Though still completely dumbfounded the pilot was a man trained for split second action. He jammed on port rudder and the roaring engines swung the huge craft around to the left. Panting and gasping for air, Dave turned his head and looked out the compartment window. What he saw froze every drop of blood in his veins, and made his heart stand still. No more than fifty yards away a white frothy line was being traced in the water and the front end of the line was heading straight for the Catalina.

He tried to shout out but the words clogged in his throat. He automatically reached out with his hand again and pressed it hard against the already wide open throttles, as though in so doing he might add speed to the flying boat that was slowly getting under way. And every instant of the time he kept his gaze riveted on the white frothy line that drew closer and closer to the flying boat. A second, an hour, or maybe it was ten years dragged by. The sea, the sky, and the whole world seemed to stand still. Nothing seemed to move save that deadly white line being traced in the water. It moved right up to the flying boat and then passed out of Dave's vision. He held his breath, closed his eyes, and awaited that last horrible second.

Then came sound. But it was the sound of an excited voice and not that of a world blasting explosion.

"Torpedo off our stern, sir!" shouted a figure that suddenly appeared in the compartment doorway. "Only missed us by inches. Came from dead starboard, sir!"

Dave wanted to shout, wanted to cry, wanted to get up and dance a jig of joy. He did none of those, however. Instead reaction set in and for a moment turned all of his muscles into so much limp rubber. He slipped off the back of the pilot's seat and flopped down on the floor boards. By the time he had been lifted to his feet the huge Catalina was clear of the water and arcing up toward the sky. Dave wiped sweat and sea water from his face and grinned crookedly at the pilot at the controls.

"That was the idea of my haywire actions," he said. "There wasn't time to explain."

The pilot grinned, reached out with one hand and pressed Dave's arm hard.

"Thank God you didn't take time to explain!" he cried. "We'd all be shark food now. You're Dawson, aren't you? I'm Featherstone, and my co-pilot here is Williams."

"Never so glad to meet two fellows in all my life," Dave said with a nod and a grin. "But, look, didn't you get my wig-wag stuff? Things went all haywire. I'll explain later, but right now contact the fleet and tell it to stand clear of this area. I don't know what's up, but I'm pretty sure Jerry is trying to spring a trap on us."

"Hold your horses, my lad!" Featherstone said as Dave started unconsciously pounding him on the shoulder. "You'll have me black and blue for a week. The fleet's standing clear, and has been for an hour or more. The Old Man didn't like the way your signal stopped so soon. According to our calculations you had no sooner reached the edge of the suspected area than your signal went off the air. The Old Man got the idea you had run into Jerry planes, so he sent us off for a look-see. As we came down I sent back word in code that there was not a thing to be seen but your plane in the water. What happened, anyway?"

Dave heaved a long sigh of relief and started to speak but checked himself as Freddy came through the compartment doorway looking very much like a half drowned rat. Dave made introductions all around and then opened his mouth to speak again. But once again he checked himself and gave Featherstone a hard stare. The flying boat's captain looked mystified for a moment. Then his face brightened and he laughed shortly.

"It's quite all right, Dawson, old chap," he said. "You won't be telling any state secrets. The Old Man acquainted us with the orders you received from Air Marshal Manners. Naturally some of us had to know, you see, in order to carry out our part of the assignment. Of course, though, if you'd rather not, then don't tell me a thing. I'll get it later from the Old Man's report."

"Oh, it's okay by me," Dave said. Then in a sudden excited voice, "Man, oh, man, am I slipping! That U-boat! We should have been hunting for it instead of standing here jawing!"

"Relax, Dawson!" Featherstone said with a good-natured laugh. "Really, man, give us credit for a little sense! I've been circling ever since we cleared the water and the crew has maintained a constant watch. Williams, here, too. See those headphones on him? Intra-plane communication, you know. What's the word, Williams?"

The co-pilot shook his head.

"Not the ghost of a sign," he said. "She probably went right down to sit on the bottom when she saw she'd missed us."

"And she'll probably stay there until dark," Featherstone added.

"Okay, okay, I'm over the jitters," Dave said with a gesture of one hand. "Well, here's what happened."

Beginning with the moment they opened their sealed orders Dave gave Featherstone a detailed account of exactly what had happened.

"Don't ask me what I think about it," he finished up, "because it sure has me in a flat spin. It stands to reason, though, that the Jerries knew more about our little trap than we did. Anyway, something went haywire."

Dave emphasized his words with a shrug and looked at Freddy Farmer.

"Did I leave out anything?" he asked.

"No, that was the whole story," the English youth said. "But, now that we're sure the U-boat's gone I think we'd better get back to Plymouth Base as fast as we can. The Fairey Swordfish had Seventy-Four markings, you know. And I got the number on the tail. I think the first thing we should do is check up on that plane at once."

"I agree," Featherstone said. "But just a minute, lads. I can't take you back to Plymouth. My orders were to take you back to the Old Man aboard the Aircraft Carrier Tornado. That is, if I picked you up, and I did. The Tornado isn't far off, and...."

"And we'll just be wasting time," cut in Dave. "Look, Featherstone, be a good guy and radio the Tornado's skipper. Tell him I'm requesting permission for you to fly us to Plymouth at once. Say that I have to report to Air Marshal Manners in person at the earliest possible moment."

The Catalina's captain looked dubious for a moment, then gave a little shrug of his shoulders.

"Right you are, then," he said and nodded at the waiting Co-pilot Williams. "The Old Man's wrath will be on your shoulders, not mine. And he's a lad with a sharp tongue, I can tell you. Go ahead, Williams."

Nobody said anything while the co-pilot got busy on the radio. Two minutes later he slipped off his headphones and looked at Dave with a faint trace of awe in his eyes.

"You must rate with the Old Man, Dawson," he said. "Or perhaps mentioning Air Marshal Manners was the bit of magic. Anyway, his orders were to grant your request at once."

"God bless you for making the suggestion, Dawson!" Featherstone cried. "Frankly, I've been praying the answer would be yes. We've been in the air a solid eighteen hours and a bit of rest and an odd spot of liquid refreshment at Plymouth Base won't make us mad at all. Right-o! Plymouth it is, and in a hurry. You and Farmer better go aft and get some dry duds on. The Sergeant Gunner will dig up something for you. And thanks again for that little bit of haywire

action of yours when you came aboard. Hate like the devil to get shot down by a torpedo, you know. Would be kind of fantastic, wouldn't it?"

"Also final," Dave said with a grin. "But if you want the truth, I was thinking only of my own skin all the time."

"Liar!" Featherstone snapped, but softened it with a smile and a look that spoke volumes. "Now, get back there and into some dry things. Both of you."

"We're gone," Dave said and pushed Freddy Farmer ahead of him through the compartment door.

A little over an hour later the huge Catalina flying boat slid down toward a landing in the mooring basin at Plymouth Base. Perched on an empty bomb rack amidships Dave and Freddy watched the basin surface rise up toward them. During the seventy minute flight they had not spoken more than a dozen words to each other. They hadn't for the simple reason there wasn't much to say. Both realized that they could hash over their close to death adventure until the cows came home, and still be no nearer to a correct solution. Then, too, the feeling of depression that had come with failure made the speaking of words seem futile.

True, it was not their fault that they had failed. They had carried out their orders to the letter. They had even gone beyond orders and attempted to crash into the lone U-boat and disable it at the cost of their own lives. Yet, in spite of all that they felt depressed; felt that they had slipped up somewhere and brought failure to what should have been a successful mission.

Such thoughts were rambling through Dave's brain when Freddy reached out and placed a hand on his knee.

"Chin up, Dave," the English youth said with a smile. "I've been thinking."

"Well, I haven't exactly been asleep," Dave grunted. "But what has your brain been chewing over, pal?"

"The whole crazy business," Freddy replied with a heavy scowl. "I've been thinking that all this started back at Adastral House. I mean, the business was doomed to failure long before we opened our sealed orders. In fact I'm sure of it. Because, why should that Fairey Swordfish suddenly start popping up into our lives?"

"Okay, I'll bite," Dave said. "Why? But speak words I can understand this time. That last has me all balled up."

"Well, I figure it this way," Freddy said after a moment's hesitation. "Some one knew, or found out that we weren't just a couple of replacements being sent to Seventy-Four. Some one also knew what our sealed orders were going to be. So when we took off in the Fulmar that some one tagged after us in that Swordfish. Being in a Seventy-Four plane, he knew that he could get in close and smack us down without much danger to himself. And...."

"And do it without killing us, though he came close in your case!" Dave interrupted. "I get your train of thought, now. A Nazi spy in Adastral House. Maybe he's actually on Manners' staff. The Jerries know everything that is planned. They just sit back and wait for you and me to go sailing off on our little adventure. A radio message in code to some U-boat near by, and everything's set. Yeah, I get it. Joe Saps! A couple of fall guys. That's you and me."

"Quite," Freddy said with a curt nod. "But don't you get all of it?"

"Huh?" Dave grunted. "Now what?"

"Go ahead and laugh at me, but here it is," Freddy said in a deadly serious voice. "Our little boy friend on the train coming down. Flying Office Steffins!"

Dave stiffened, gave Freddy a hard stare, but he didn't laugh.

"You sure are souped up on that guy, aren't you!" he finally said. Then with a half shake of his head, "But darned if you're not getting me thinking the same thoughts. Right! I've got the hunch that Steffins was the pilot of that Swordfish. He.... You know something, Freddy? The thing has suddenly hit me like a ton of brick. Yes, sir, I'll bet you any amount of dough you want to put up!"

"I don't bet unless I know what I'm betting on," Freddy said. "So why not tell me first?"

"Then pin your ears back and listen, my little man!" Dave said with tense excitement in his voice. "We didn't see Steffins again, did we? No. And here's why. The guy was waiting until he knew our sealed orders had come through before he reported to the Base. I'll bet you that he was reporting to Squadron Leader Hays just about the time we were taking off in the Fulmar. He probably had faked papers and all the rest of it. Well, he takes up a Swordfish for a joy hop. Once he's clear of the field he heads straight for where we're heading. He knows the U-boat's there. Probably saw it. So, bang, he cracks us down and heads back for Plymouth knowing that the U-boat will pick us up and take care of us for keeps. See? Smooth as silk. The tramp double crosses our plans, gets rid of us, and now he's safe in Seventy-Four Squadron all set to do more of his dirty work!"

"But he won't!" Freddy said grimly, and bunched his two hands into rock hard fists. "We're still alive and kicking. We also got the tail number of that Swordfish. They have records at the Base that Steffins took it up. We'll cook that chap's goose for him!"

"And how!" Dave grated. "Look, what we want to do is to sneak ashore and get in touch with Squadron Leader Hays as soon as possible and tell him the whole story. Then he can grab Steffins, and that will make at least one rat who won't jam up the works next time."

"Yes, if there is a next time!" Freddy said gloomily.

Dave started a wise crack but let it slide.

"Yeah!" he muttered and shook his head slowly. "For a couple of fellows in the Emergency Command we're doing swell. I mean, terrible!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pilot's Luck

Right after the Consolidated Catalina flying boat had settled on the surface of the mooring basin Dave went forward and explained their plan to Featherstone, though he didn't mention Steffins by name.

"So you and the crew go ashore, Featherstone," he finished up, "and Farmer and I will wait here a spell and then slip ashore: Just make believe that you are returning from a patrol, and sat down because you were running out of gas. I'll explain to Squadron Leader Hays when I see him."

"Right you are," the Catalina's captain said. Then after a moment's hesitation, "Sure there isn't something I can do to help catch the chap, wherever he is? I think I'd rather like to bash him one on the snoot, myself. I'm sure I would when I think of that torpedo that just missed us."

"Nix, nothing doing," Dave said with a grin. "If there's any slugging to be done Freddy and I will take care of it."

"And in tip-top order, too, I can tell you!" Freddy said over Dave's shoulder. "But thanks for everything you've done, Featherstone."

The Catalina's captain laughed.

"You've got that sentence the wrong way round, my lad," he said. "I'll remember you chaps in my prayers for the rest of my life. Well, we'll be off. Good luck, and if you do catch that murdering blighter, at least bash him one for me."

"A promise, pal," Dave assured him.

Dave and Freddy forced themselves to wait twenty minutes after Featherstone and his crew had gone ashore. That was as long as they could wait, however. Another minute of sticking there in the plane with countless thoughts, surmises, and speculations whirling around in their heads and they would have just naturally up and exploded. And so at the end of twenty minutes they sneaked ashore unseen and made their way to Squadron Leader Hays' office by a round about route. It was Dave who slid into the office first. But once he was inside he pulled up so short at what he saw that Freddy close at his heels banged right into him.

Automatically Dave regained his balance and continued to stare pop eyed at the officer seated behind the desk. It was the last man in the world he expected to see at that moment. In short, it was Air Marshal Manners.

"I say, *you*, sir?" Dave heard Freddy gasp behind him.

The Adastral House high ranker nodded, flashed them a quick smile of greeting and motioned with one hand.

"Come in, you two, and shut that door," he said. "I've been having a bad case of heart failure waiting for you. Isn't that 'Cat' boat out in the basin the one that picked you up? I didn't see you leave it with the pilot and crew. Fact is, I was just about to hunt them out and ask questions."

"We were on it, sir," Dave said, finding his voice. "But we stayed aboard as part of a plan. Look, sir, there's a Jerry spy here at this station. We know him by the name of Steffins. A few hours ago he took up a Fairey Swordfish, Number two-six-nine-seven. He shot us down, sir, and we have a hunch he returned here."

Dave stopped talking and his hopes sank as he saw Air Marshal Manners shake his head.

"No, he didn't," the Air Ministry official said. "That Swordfish plane was assigned to one Flight Lieutenant Barker who has been at this Base for the last six months. His mechanic told Squadron Leader Hays and myself that he was to take it up for testing this morning. The mechanic saw the plane take off and believed Barker was in the pit. Barker wasn't. Two hours ago they found Barker's body hidden in an old fuselage in the hangar. He had been stabbed through the heart. Murdered!"

Dave and Freddy stood there in stunned silence for a moment. Then the words fairly leaped off Dave's lips.

"And no replacement by the name of Steffins has joined this squadron today?" he asked.

"No one," Manners replied. "Nor has that Fairey Swordfish returned. It's long overdue right now, as regards fuel. So I think there's just one answer to that. After he shot you down he probably headed for the coast of occupied France. But enough of that for the moment. Sit down, you two, and tell me everything that happened. I know a little of it from a radio message the commander of the Tornado sent me. That's one of the reasons why I flew down here from London at once. And I can guess a little of the rest. However, I want to hear it all from you two. Go ahead, and don't leave out a single thing no matter how unimportant it may seem to you. Better start with the moment you left my office at Adastral House."

Some fifteen minutes later Dave and Freddy had given a detailed account of every minute of the time since they had left the Air Ministry in London. As ordered they didn't leave out a thing. They even related their own conversations, word for word as near as they could remember. Air Marshal Manners listened in silence right through to the end. He didn't interrupt once. He didn't even nod or make any kind of a gesture. He simply sat in the chair moving his steel blue eyes from one face to the other.

"And that's all of it, sir," Dave ended the narration for both of them. "There's probably a hundred other things we should have done. And maybe we made ... I mean, I made a mess of that meeting with Steffins on the train. Perhaps we should have made some kind of a report to you. But...."

"Take it easy, Dawson," Air Marshal Manners finally spoke up. "And you, too, Farmer. You two don't have to apologize for a single thing. Great guns, your attempt to crash that U-boat deserves the Victoria Cross in my opinion. No, you don't have to feel badly about a single thing. Fact is, I'm the one to blame for things going all wrong. At any rate I'm taking the blame. As for that Steffins meeting, it perhaps really didn't mean a thing. There's lots of lads who like to go around posing as officers. He may have been one of them. Then, too, he *may* have been Baron von Khole."

Both Dave and Freddy sat up straight in their chairs.

"Baron von Khole, sir?" Dave finally asked. "Is he a Nazi agent?"

Air Marshal Manners nodded and a look of smouldering anger came into his eyes.

"The best, and most deadly one in Hitler's pay," he said presently. "And a mystery man if there ever was one. What we know of the man you could write down on a piece of paper the size of a postage stamp. As a matter of fact, British Intelligence isn't even sure that von Khole is his right name. And nobody outside of a few in Germany so much as knows what he looks like. One of the reasons he has been so difficult to catch is his expert knowledge of make-up and disguise. He can make himself up to pass for a youth of seventeen or an old man of seventy. He speaks, reads, and writes a dozen different languages, and what he doesn't know about Hitler's method of waging unrestricted war isn't worth knowing."

Air Marshal Manners stopped talking and stared flint eyed off into space. There were a dozen questions hovering on Dave Dawson's lips, but he refrained from giving them voice. He sat with Freddy waiting patiently for the chief of the newly formed Emergency Command to continue.

"And unless I'm all wrong, and not even worth my salt to my country," the senior officer finally continued, "this Baron von Khole is behind all that has happened. I even fancy that he was the one who shot you down. He is an expert pilot and was in command of the Luftwaffe in the Polish campaign. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'd better go back to the beginning and start there."

The Air Marshal paused and lighted a cigarette.

"Shortly before I was put in charge of the Emergency Command," he said, "they had a bit of a spy scare at Air Ministry. As a matter of fact it was quite serious. Plans for two new types of plane were stolen, and also the plans for a new aerial machine gun. In addition to that, considerable information as to R.A.F. operations in England and in the Middle East got into the hands of the Germans. In other words it was discovered that there was a mighty big leak at Air Ministry. Well, to make the story short, British Air and Army Intelligence got to work like beavers. Wires were tapped, every bit of incoming and outgoing mail was censored, and everybody from the Chief Air Marshal down was watched like a hawk day and night. The result was positive proof and the arrest of three German agents actually in the Royal Air Force and assigned to duty at Air Ministry. They were tried and shot in short order."

Air Marshal Manners emphasized the last with a curt nod, and then puffed on his cigarette for a moment or two before continuing.

"Of course the activities of this mysterious Baron von Khole were well known to us long before this last round-up of agents," he went on. "Facts and what-not showed that he was the supreme head of all Nazi agents in England. It was also quite evident that since Dunkirk he and his gang had been concentrating on the Royal Air Force. Let me say right here that most of our airplane crashes in England during the last year were not accidents due to the fault of the pilots or the planes. They were due to deliberate acts of sabotage. And, of course, all on the order of this Baron von Khole.

"Well, when the Nazi agents working in Air Ministry were caught Intelligence gained information which it was believed would lead them directly to von Khole. It did, but in a round about way, and too late!"

"Too late, sir?" Freddy Farmer encouraged as the senior officer paused again.

"It is incredible, but the truth!" Air Marshal Manners continued as though he hadn't stopped. "There was a *fourth* spy serving as a Personnel Sergeant at Air Ministry. Intelligence didn't catch him in their round-up of the other three. And yesterday we gained definite knowledge that he was, and still is, Baron von Khole. Now, wait a minute before you ask questions. He was known as Sergeant Kinney, but there *used* to be a *real* Sergeant Kinney. The real Sergeant Kinney had been in the service for years. He lived alone in a flat out Golder's Green way, and had very few friends. Naturally, we'll never know the real truth until we catch von Khole and he tells us, which he probably never would. However, several months ago von Khole, probably after studying Kinney's mode of life, his way of doing things, and a million and one things about him, murdered him and took his place at Air Ministry. And he has been there ever since working side by side with the whole lot of us. *But* working for Hitler instead of for the King!"

"Boy, what a smooth artist he must be!" Dave breathed. "And even if he is a Nazi he's sure got plenty of nerve and courage."

"Plenty of both, and a whole lot of other things," Air Marshal Manners said grimly. "Much as we'd like to believe it, all Germans are not nitwits like their Fuehrer, Goering, and a couple of others of the inner circle. No, von Khole is clever, a genius in his work. Fact is, the only bad thing I can say about the man is that he is a cold blooded, ruthless murderer. That is perhaps the only thing he has in common with his superiors."

The Air Ministry official made a little gesture with one hand as though dismissing the subject and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"But I'm wandering in my story," he said. "Let's get back to facts. And they are not pleasant ones for me. A week ago I took on some extra clerical help on my staff. Sergeant Kinney was one of those sent to me. Yes, none other than Baron von Khole *went to work in my office*. How he did it still remains his secret, but he discovered everything pertaining to the new Emergency Command. The very fact that you had your little adventure today proves that he knew the contents of your sealed orders before they even left my office. He must have learned their contents yesterday. Last night my private secretary ... a man I've known all my life, and whom I would trust with my own life ... was murdered in my office. An hour later Intelligence came in to arrest Sergeant Kinney. A tip had led them to his house. There they had found code books and a dozen other things used by Nazi agents."

"But they didn't get Kinney, or this von Khole who posed as Kinney?" Freddy Farmer asked.

Air Marshal Manners made a wiggling motion with his hand like an eel scurrying away.

"Not that slippery one!" he said harshly. "As usual, he was a couple of jumps ahead of us. My sealed orders had already gone out, so I didn't do anything about checking or stopping them. I simply took the chance that everything was all right. As we three know, now, everything wasn't all right regarding your secret assignment! My not countermanding those orders nearly cost the lives of two of the bravest R.A.F. pilots I ever had the good fortune to meet. And so, as I said, I alone am taking all the blame for things going wrong today. It was nobody else's fault but my own."

"And to think I had him square in my gun sights!" Dave murmured softly. "But, tell me this, sir. Was Sergeant Kinney on duty the night you talked to all of us? Or the next day?"

The Air Marshal looked thoughtful for a moment, then sat up straight with a jerk.

"By the gods, no!" he cried. "He was on thirty hours leave. And I know what's in back of your question, Dawson. That chap, Steffins! By George, I guess that Steffins *was* von Khole."

"But you said he had courage!" Freddy protested. "And Steffins was scared pink when that Jerry plane strafed the train."

"I'm wondering," Dave grunted.

"About what?" Freddy demanded. "Good grief, you think that was part of an act, too? But why?"

"This may be crazy reasoning," Dave said slowly. "But somehow it makes sense to me. He tried to pump us, and didn't learn a thing. I think he knew that we weren't telling him the truth. Maybe that made him a little suspicious of us. So maybe he pulled that yellow belly stunt so that we wouldn't bother about looking him up at the squadron, here. Or when we didn't see him again we'd just put it down that he was too yellow to carry on, and we'd just forget about him. And yet there's another angle that just occurred to me. Maybe just as screwy."

"Well, let's hear it anyway," Air Marshal Manners said as the Yank R.A.F. ace hesitated.

"That strafing plane," Dave said eventually. "It came down and seemed to blast away at the rear car of the train. Maybe it wasn't even aiming at it. Fact is, I forgot all about checking on that when we reached Plymouth. What I'm getting at is, why strafe just the rear car? Me, if I had a few slugs left to slap at a train, I start up at the engine and rake the whole works. That Focke-Wulf plane didn't. I'm wondering if its pilot knew that von Khole was on the train, and his strafing was some kind of a message that didn't please von Khole at all."

"Perhaps," Air Marshal Manners said gravely. "Perhaps either one of your ideas is the truth. It doesn't help us much, now. Nor does it help much being pretty sure that your friend Steffins was actually von Khole. That, like some other items, is all so much water under the bridge, now. We've taken our beatings and that's that. What we've got to concentrate on now is the future. Our next move in this game of death against the survival of England."

The Air Ministry official stopped talking and a tingling silence seemed to hover over the room. Dave and Freddy waited breathlessly for the senior officer to go on. Defeat was behind them, but it was not final defeat. They not only felt it, but they could see it in Manners' face. No, they were not yet washed-up with Emergency Command. They both knew that Manners had another assignment for them. Another tilt against the Nazis and death. And it was all they could do to refrain from breaking the silence and begging Manners to tell them of their new assignment. Finally Freddy Farmer just couldn't stand the suspense any longer. He cleared his throat nervously and spoke.

"We're ready for any job you want to give us, sir," he said. "And regardless of *what* happens, we'll do better next time."

"Check!" Dave echoed with feeling. "You can count on that, sir."

Air Marshal Manners smiled but before he could say anything the office door was pushed open and Squadron Leader Hays came inside. The Commanding Officer of Seventy-Four seemed not to see the two R.A.F. aces. He looked straight at Air Marshal Manners and gave a savage shake of his head.

"Couldn't unearth a single clue," he said, tight lipped. "I've questioned every mechanic and pilot here at the field, but not one of them remembers seeing Flight Lieutenant Barker after eight o'clock this morning. I looked in his hutment but not a thing has been touched. Honestly, sir, I can't understand it at all. Why should anybody kill Barker and then steal his plane? He was the best liked officer at the field."

"No clue, eh?" the Air Ministry official murmured. "Well, on my authorization you can order a special investigation. Call on Air Intelligence if you want to. We lose enough pilots in the air without having them murdered on the ground. Do everything you think necessary, Hays, and report to me the minute you discover anything important."

"Very good, sir, I'll do that," the Squadron Leader said. "I'll appoint an investigating board at once. And ... I say, where did you two come from?"

The Squadron Leader addressed the last to Dave and Freddy as he saw them for the first time. Dave opened his mouth to speak, but Air Marshal Manners beat him to the punch.

"They had no luck on their special mission," he said quietly. "Matter of fact they were forced down off shore and were luckily picked up by a Cat-Boat. I ordered their return here at once. They're flying up to London with me right away, and rejoining their old Fighter Squadron."

Squadron Leader Hays murmured something that might have been an expression of sympathy and regret, but Dave wasn't listening. The verbal bombshell that Air Marshal Manners had suddenly exploded was still scrambling his brains. Returning to their old Fighter Squadron? Then they really were all washed up with the Emergency Command? Though their failure had been through no fault of their own, Manners wasn't going to give them a second chance? Washed-up? Through? Finished?

Dave looked at Freddy and saw similar stunned grief in the English youth's eyes. He looked at Air Marshal Manners and hot blistering words rose to his lips. He was too good a soldier, however, to let them fly off. He choked them back, and spoke them instead with his eyes. Manners seemed completely blind to the look he received. He stared back at Dave, then made a short dismissal wave with one hand.

"There's a Staff Lockheed Hudson on the line I came down in," he said. "You and Farmer go out to it and wait. I'll be with you in a few minutes, and we'll be off. Oh yes, collect your personal belongings and put them aboard. That's all."

It was the hardest thing he ever did for Dave to get to his feet, click his heels and salute smartly. He wanted more than anything else right at the moment to jump over the desk and shout what was on his mind right square in the Air Marshal's face. Of course, though, he didn't even so much as make a move in that direction. Training and the instincts of a loyal soldier held him back.

"Very good, sir," he said.

Then he and Freddy did an about face and went outside with heads up and shoulders squared ... but with the whole wide world very much blurred before them. Never since their very first day in the R.A.F. had their hearts ached so much, or their spirits sunk so low.

CHAPTER NINE

Vulture Eyes

"Do you think, Dave? I mean.... Gosh! I'm still whizzing around in circles. I thought sure Manners understood how things turned out as they did. And I thought sure he had another assignment to give us. I ... I don't know what to think. I wish I were dead!"

Freddy Farmer groaned, gave a helpless shake of his head, and leaned wearily back against the bomb compartment wall of the Lockheed Hudson. Their stuff was all aboard and they had been waiting for Air Marshal Manners a good half hour. Dave grunted, studied the finger nails on his right hand and absently started chewing on one.

"You and me both!" he finally grated. "Of all the let-downs this is tops. And right after his admitting that it was *his* fault! Sweet tripe! What do these brass hats expect? Miracles out of a hat like rabbits? Boy, did I want to toss his own words back into his teeth, with Squadron Leader Hays standing right there, too. Freddy, it was the rottenest trick ever played on us. It was just plain low down and mean. Praise a fellow, and then cut the world right out from under his feet. I don't get it. I don't get it even a little bit!"

"I was dead certain he was about to tell us of a new assignment when Hays came in," Freddy said, a baffled frown creasing his brows. "Something must have happened. Maybe something that Hays said. I can't even begin to guess, but it changed his mind."

"Yeah, he sure froze up on us like an Arctic winter," Dave growled. "So it's back to our old Fighter Command squadron, huh? Well, I say, okay. That suits me fine. And for two cents I'd take off in this crate right now, and let him walk back to London. I'd...."

"Too late to do even that, Dave!" Freddy cut in quickly. "Here he comes!"

The words were no sooner off Freddy's lips than Air Marshal Manners came in through the compartment door. He tossed a brief case he carried on an empty bomb rack and looked at Dave.

"My pilot's suddenly gone sick," he said. "Take the controls, please, Dawson. Get us off as soon as possible, and get lots of altitude as you head for London."

"Yes, sir," Dave said, and got to his feet.

He took one step along the cat-walk leading forward, then stopped and turned. He knew what he was about to say was childish, foolish, and the uncensored ravings of a sorehead. But for all the gold in the world he could not have kept the words back. The seething pot of justified anger within him had suddenly boiled over on all sides.

"Do you mind, sir, if I crack us up taking off?" he said evenly.

Air Marshal Manners stiffened up straight, gave him a blazing stare, and opened his mouth to speak. He held back the words, though, and looked from Dave to Freddy and back again.

"I see," he said. "Thought you caught on. Yes, I mind very much your cracking us up, Dawson. Now, you get forward and get us up in the air before I turn you over my knee. Chase along, lad, now. Explanations later."

"Then you mean, sir—" Dave cried joyfully and stopped.

"I mean get us into the air!" Manners snapped. "And hurry it up!"

"One Lockheed on the way!" Dave shouted, and dashed forward to the pilots' compartment.

In less time than it takes to tell about it he had the twin engines turning over and was taxiing to the far end of the runway. There he wheeled around into the wind, waited a moment or so for Freddy and Air Marshal Manners to come forward and join him, but when they didn't he opened up the throttles wide and sent the American built plane rocketing forward. Once the ship was clear he cranked up the wheels and continued prop clawing upward for altitude.

When he was above a layer of cloud and well out of sight of the Plymouth Base, Freddy and Manners stepped through the compartment doorway. Dave glanced quickly at Freddy only to realize at once from the wondering look on his pal's face that Manners hadn't told him anything yet. Then he looked at the Air Marshal and pinked a bit as the steady steel blue eyes bored into his. But almost immediately the Air Ministry official grinned crookedly and sighed.

"You certainly fumbled that one, lad," he said. "After all that's happened I was sure you'd understand. By George, son, did you think I was dropping you two chaps like a couple of hot bricks? Of all the crazy notions!"

"My error, I guess, sir," Dave replied sheepishly. "But it was sort of a bolt out of the blue that tossed me over on one wing. I mean.... Well...."

"Well, let's forget about it," Manners said. "The reason was simply that from now on I'm trusting no one but you two. Not that Squadron Leader Hays isn't the finest type of Englishman you could find. He is. And in addition he's a very good friend of mine. However, my idea was to create the impression that I've taken you off this special convoy mission, and am sending you back to your old squadron. We don't know where von Khole is. He may be in France or even in Germany. Then again he may be right back there at Seventy-Four again. The beggar's a blasted ghost, so I'm not taking any chances whatsoever of his finding out that you're still connected with Emergency Command."

Dave blew air out of his lungs and smiled happily.

"Gosh, do I feel reborn!" he exclaimed. "Sorry, sir, I was such a dope not to catch on."

"And that goes for me, too, sir!" Freddy Farmer echoed.

"Right you are, lads," Air Marshal Manners said with a laugh. "Just make sure you don't get any crazy ideas any more. I'll be through with you two just about the time the war's over. And I doubt even then. Right-o. Now...."

"Enemy aircraft!" Freddy suddenly yelled and pointed off to the east. "See it? A Messerschmitt One-Ten and heading our way!"

Both Dave and Manners snapped their heads around and spotted the Nazi plane at the same time. The craft was a couple of thousand feet above their altitude, but even as they spotted it the nose dropped and the plane came down toward them at terrific speed.

"Man the tail guns, Freddy!" Dave barked. "Here's our chance to pay back with a few slugs. We'll...!"

"No!" Air Marshal Manners said sharply. "No scramble with that plane. Get us down into those clouds, Dawson, and lose him. We haven't got time for a fight."

A wave of rebellion swept through Dave but he curbed it instantly. Something in Manners' face told him that the Air Marshal hated to run away just as much as he did, but that he had a very good reason for ordering it.

"Right, sir!" Dave cried.

Even before the words had popped off his lips he shoved the controls forward, pushed the nose down to almost the vertical, and sent the Lockheed Hudson wing screaming for the clouds. It was

not more than the matter of a few split seconds before they were plunging through the billowing mist, but even then he heard the savage snarl of the Messerschmitt's aerial machine guns, and the heavier, louder note of its twin 20-mm. cannon. And a split second after that he heard the yammering reply from Freddy Farmer's guns in the tail turret of the Lockheed.

As soon as the Lockheed was completely hidden in the depths of the cloud layer he pulled out of the dive, leveled off and banked due west. For some ten or fifteen minutes he flew on the instruments, twisting this way and that, but always in the general direction of London. And during all that time Air Marshal Manners didn't say a word. He sat like a statue of stone in the co-pilot's seat staring out forward as though his steady gaze might pierce right through the bank after bank of cloud mist that rushed toward them and was sliced and churned by the whirling propellers.

Then suddenly, perhaps a second or two before Dave would have climbed up on top for a quick look-see around, a blurred shadow came racing in from the right. It was no more than a shadow tearing in, and Dave only caught sight of it out the corner of his eye, but his sixth sense told him at once that it might be the Messerschmitt One-Ten.

"Dawson! Look out! There's...."

Air Marshal Manners' wild cry was just a waste of breath. Dave had already slammed the Lockheed over and around on wingtip in a wing shaking vertical bank. The terrific force of the turn cut off the rest of the Air Marshal's cry and pinned him up against the side of the compartment as though he were nailed there. Every muscle of his body braced, and his mouth open to prevent possible blacking-out from the turn, Dave hung grimly to the controls and prayed in his thoughts as he had never prayed before.

A lifetime of agony was his. He lived and died a thousand deaths. Then suddenly he felt the right wingtip shudder as something ticked it. His heart stood still and his whole body became bathed in cold sweat. Nothing happened, though. The wing stayed on and the Lockheed kept on whanging around.

"Just brushed us lightly!" Dave heard his own choking voice cry out. "Another inch and it would have been a sweet mess!"

"Great guns, they can't come any closer!" Air Marshal Manners gasped. "Blast him, anyway! I might have expected as much. Look, Dawson, get off the London course. Head east or west, but not toward London!"

Dave cut out of the turn, went into a shallow dive that took the plane down deeper into the cloud layer, then leveled off and banked due south. Once he was heading south he turned his head and gave the Air Marshal a questioning look.

"You expected something like this, sir?" he asked.

Manners shook his head.

"No," he said. "I meant that I *should* have. No way for us to find out, and we're not going to try, but I'm pretty sure Baron von Khole was in that Messerschmitt One-Ten."

At that moment Freddy appeared at the compartment door, and in time to hear the Air Marshal's words.

"Von Khole?" he echoed excitedly. "Good grief, sir, what makes you think so?"

"For one reason," Manners replied grimly, "because you can expect that blighter to turn up anywhere. For another reason, because I sighted that same One-Ten on the way down to Plymouth this noon. Spotted him soon enough to lose him before he could get close and give any kind of a chase. And for another reason, because now I happen to be the one man in all the world von Khole desires most to remove from it. Remember my saying Intelligence found code books and things at the flat of that poor devil, Sergeant Kinney?"

"Yes, sure!" Dave said excitedly. "And by the way, was the real Sergeant Kinney's body found? I mean, you're sure von Khole actually did murder him, and he isn't the real Sergeant Kinney, himself?"

"Whether von Khole murdered Kinney, or one of his bunch did it, we don't know," Manners replied. "But the real Sergeant Kinney was no dirty Nazi spy. Early this morning some of my men dug up the cellar of the place. They found a body nobody could recognize, but the old World War identification tag they found on the wrist belonged to Kinney. No, there've definitely been two Kinneys serving in the R.A.F. One, the real chap. The other, Baron von Khole."

"And you learned something from the code books and stuff you found, eh, sir?" Freddy questioned eagerly.

"Enough to worry the Nazis sick!" Manners replied with a curt nod. "The code books alone are the greatest prize of the war, as far as I'm concerned. I now know the code signal for every U-boat and surface raider the Nazis have in the North Atlantic."

"Hot dog!" Dave cried in a burst of exuberant enthusiasm. "It's practically in the bag! We can knock them off like clay pigeons, and make the Atlantic clear sailing for British convoys."

"No, it isn't going to be as easy as that," Air Marshal Manners said with a shake of his head. "They'll change those codes as soon as they can. But with so many of their craft at sea it will take a certain amount of time. A couple of days, at least. Having failed to trap that devilish raider and her wolf pack of U-boats this morning, our only hope is to trap her through the code signals

before she can receive a new set."

"But couldn't that be done in the matter of a few hours?" Freddy objected. "A Nazi plane fly out to her with the new code?"

"No," Manners said bluntly. "A new code that can't be broken down by the enemy in short order isn't something that you think up over night. True, every country has emergency codes, but even they need constant rearranging in order to fool the enemy. And the point is, I feel pretty sure that I've got hold of the Nazi's emergency code as well as all of their regular codes. As head of Nazi Intelligence in England it's only natural that von Khole would have a copy of every existing code."

"And leave them around for somebody to pick up?" Dave gasped. "Boy, that's just about tops for being dumb, I'd say!"

"It is," Air Marshal Manners agreed. "Incredibly stupid, but that kind of stupidity is a part of the German make-up that amazes one. Especially when you consider how thorough and clever they are about so many other things. You two lads are too young to have been in this world at the time, but it is a matter of confirmed history that before the entry of America into the last war, von Papen, the German ambassador to Washington, left a briefcase on a New York subway train containing a world of information regarding German sabotage and espionage activities in the United States!"

"Yes, my Dad once told me about that boner," Dave said. "Gosh, it's something like you'd read in a fairy story book!"

"The Germans are a strange race, for fair," Manners said dryly. "They lead the world in so many things, and trail it in so many others. Well, I think we've lost that beggar for good, now, don't you think so, Dawson?"

"Unless he's got cat's eyes, or some trick airplane engine detector on his ship," Dave replied. "Want me to go up on top? We've been heading south by east for a spell, now. Unless I'm all wet we should be just a bit off shore from Southampton. We can go up on top and find a hole and check."

"Then go on up," Air Marshal Manners ordered. "And if you're right, then so much the better. Find a hole and locate us, and then I'll give you further orders. But make it fast. Time is the most precious thing in the world to us, right now."

"Up she goes!" Dave cried and pulled the Lockheed's nose toward Heaven.

CHAPTER TEN

England's Prayer

No sooner had Dave stuck the Lockheed's nose up through the top of the cloud layer than he leveled off so that the belly was still in the stuff. At that same instant also he and Manners started searching the sun flooded skies ahead and to the left and right. Having scrambled back aft to his tail turret Freddy Farmer searched the heavens to the rear. There was no cause for sudden action, however, for there wasn't a single sign of a Nazi plane in the air. The Messerschmitt One-Ten had been given the slip, and given it as only a pilot of Dave Dawson's ability can perform such a feat.

"Good work!" Manners grunted and relaxed a bit in his seat. "Now find a hole if you can and spot exactly where we are."

Dave nodded, climbed up another thousand feet, and in a minute or so found a hole in the clouds. He peered down through and grinned happily.

"Not so far wrong at that, sir," he said and pointed. "There's Southampton. And we're about a mile off-shore."

The Air Ministry official took a look and nodded his approval.

"Top hole blind flying, Dawson," he grunted. "Right-o. Bear west and take us to Lands End. Sit down in the field just north of the flying boat basin."

Dave's heart sang a song of joy and the blood began to dance through his veins. At Lands End was the main base of the Catalina flying boats that escorted so many merchant convoys in from their danger filled trips across the broad Atlantic. At Lands End were some of the greatest heroes in the R.A.F. Youngsters no more than a couple of years older than himself who fought weather, Nazis, and everything else day and night that England's bottoms might come safely into port. Twenty or twenty-five hours in the air at a stretch was routine stuff for those lads. And for a single Cat-Boat, escorting a dozen merchant ships and Corvette, to battle ten or a dozen Nazi bombers single handed and drive them off, was something you didn't even mention except in your official flight report. Heroes and aces, every one of them, commissioned and non-commissioned officers alike. High adventure, unbelievable heroism, and death. Those lads at the Lands End Base took all three in stride, and without batting an eye.

"That's an outfit Farmer and I will be mighty glad to serve in, sir!" Dave suddenly blurted out.

"You're not going to serve in it," Air Marshal Manners said bluntly. Then as he stared unwinking ahead, "Fact is, by this time tomorrow, or sooner, every lad at that Base will be hunting for you,

and very eager to shoot you down. And their squadron will not be the only one out hunting for your hide. No, you're not going to like your visit to the Lands End Base!"

Dave gulped, and couldn't speak for a moment. On sudden impulse he turned his head and saw Freddy Farmer standing in the compartment doorway. The English youth's eyes were popping out like marbles on sticks and he was swallowing rapidly. Dave looked back at Manners.

"I don't think I get you, sir," he said with an effort.

"You will soon enough," the senior officer grunted. "You're in for a venture that will make this morning's doings seem like a solo flight in a training plane during peace time. But don't get all twisted up, now. The prayers of England will be flying with you, though the pilots of the R.A.F. will be hunting you down. It will be an important part of your job to see that they *don't find you!*"

"And how, if they're coming a-gunning!" Dave gulped. "But, sir, what...?"

"Later, at Lands End," Air Marshal Manners stopped him. "I'll... By George, I must be getting weak in the head, I'm forgetting things so. I'll take over the controls, Dawson. You and Farmer go aft and get out of those uniforms. In the flare box you'll find some civilian clothes. They'll fit. Put them on. Then stuff your uniforms back in the flare box. Stuff them down deep and cover them up with flare cartridges. Beginning with now, Dawson, you're Charles Lanier. And you, Farmer, you're Henry Devoe. You're a couple of aeronautical engineers recently escaped from occupied France. You don't know a dozen words of English, so look blank if anybody speaks to you. Got all that?"

"Yes, sir," Dave managed to get out as a befuddled haze swirled around in his brain.

"Oh, quite, sir," Freddy echoed weakly.

"Good," Manners said and motioned Dave out of the pilot's seat. "Just act dumb French and take your leads from me. I'd tell you my plan, now, but you might possibly give it away by an unconscious action. Now, don't misunderstand, lads. I have absolute faith in you both. However, as they say in your country, Dawson, I'm going to play this one close to the chest. What you don't know now won't hurt anybody. Fact is, it'll probably make it easier for me to play my part in the game. And by the way, if I act just a bit rude to you, don't pay any attention. This is an inspection flight on order of a ranking member in the Government with whom you have connections. I'm supposedly against such a waste of time, but am only obeying the orders of my superior. You understand?"

Though their heads were spinning the two R.A.F. youths nodded instantly.

"Right-o, then," Manners said and gave them a smile. "Get aft and into those civilian clothes. And don't go exploding with curiosity. You'll know all the details in due time. Goodness knows you'll have to be acquainted with them! Now chase."

Dave and Freddy scrambled aft to the flare box amidships and pulled out the assortment of civilian clothing inside. In less than five minutes they were a couple of French civilians, and their much loved and honored uniforms had been stuffed down out of sight. Dave looked at Freddy and grinned broadly.

"Well, your clothes look Frenchie," he said, "but I can't figure the nationality of that face you're wearing."

"Is that so?" Freddy snorted and wrinkled his nose in disgust as he looked Dave up and down. "Fact is I can't place either your clothes or your face. The nearest I can come is a touch of Japanese with just a slight Eskimo resemblance. And, frankly, that's said with apologies to both races. But, seriously, Dave, what in the world do you think we're stepping into this time?"

Dave looked toward the pilot's compartment and slowly shook his head from side to side.

"I just tossed my brain overboard," he said. "I gave up trying to figure out this puzzle. So help me, if anybody had told me I was going to run into this many blank walls since dawn I'd have told them they were nuts. Sweet tripe! Spies, stolen planes, secret orders, a swim in the Atlantic, bullets coming too darn close, mystery planes, French clothing, no speak the English, the R.A.F. after my hide, and.... Pal, that's a mess of fish right there. You cook it. I can't!"

"Well, I gather we're in for some flying," Freddy said with a puzzled sigh. "And that's something."

"Yeah," Dave grunted, and jerked a thumb forward, "unless he comes up with some more cockeyed unfinished business that sends us both to the bug-house for keeps. Oops! We're heading down. Guess we must be getting close. Luck, pal!"

"I'll jolly well double that wish," Freddy breathed and led the way forward along the cat-walk.

Air Marshal Manners had nosed the plane down and as the two youths reached his side and looked down over the nose they saw the southwest tip of England pointed like a crooked finger at the little cluster of Scilly Island and the broad rolling expanse of the North Atlantic beyond. Dave looked at the mooring basin with a dozen or more battle tried Consolidated Catalina flying boats at anchor. There were also two or three Short Sunderland flyingboats. Huge battle wagons of the air that in peace time serve England's Atlantic air lanes just as the mighty Clipper flyingboats serve American ocean travel by air. Just north of the basin was the airfield for land planes and amphibians. The hangar side was lined with twenty or more different types. And as Dave peered intently he saw several planes of American design. Bombers probably ferried from Nova Scotia last night. Right now they were receiving a check inspection before being flown on to England's active service fields for final installations and assignment to the ever growing armada of wings

that went hurtling across the Channel day and night to dump thousands upon thousands of tons of bombs down on Adolf's head and his bandit hordes striving to wipe humanity and civilization from the face of the earth.

Lands End Base! The jumping off point for their greatest aerial adventure. The jumping off point for glory, and for perhaps death, too!

"Well, I've seen better dressed Frenchmen, but I guess you look the part."

Air Marshal Manners' outspoken comment brushed the rambling thoughts away inside Dave's head. He glanced at his superior officer and gestured in a polite but blank sort of way.

"Pardon, mon Capitaine?" he murmured. "Ze Eengleesh, I speak no, yes?"

The Air Ministry official threw back his head and laughed.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "Couldn't be better. Be sure and carry it through no matter what anybody says to you. But I'll take care that nobody says very much. Well, hang on. Here we go down for the next to the last landing on this job, please God!"

Dave and Freddy exchanged muddled glances and steadied themselves as Manners flew the Lockheed across the field and then circled around into the wind and slid down the last couple of hundred feet to a feather-on-velvet landing.

"Do I hope to be able to fly like *that* some day!" Dave breathed without thinking.

"Shut up, you *Frenchman!*" Manners growled. "But thanks for the compliment just the same. On guard, now. Here they come."

At the sight of a Staff plane with Air Ministry markings landing, the commanding officer of the field and one or two of his junior officers hurried out to greet the new arrivals. The C.O. was a Wing Commander, and the row of ribbons under his R.A.F. wings was proof positive that he had not earned his rank by sitting in an office chair with his feet on the desk. He recognized Air Marshal Manners at once, and with his juniors saluted smartly.

"Well, welcome to Lands End Base, sir!" he said in pleasant surprise. "Had no idea you'd be popping down this way for a bit of a visit."

"Had no idea myself, Otis," Manners said and shook hands. "Not until this noon, anyway. These two with me are the reason. Couple of French aeronautical engineers who got out of France somehow. Seems they were able to pull a few right strings in the Government. Anyway, I was picked to tootle them about the country for a courtesy inspection trip. As if I didn't have a thousand more important things to do! Oh, well, you can't have a war without blasted politics, I suppose."

"Aren't you right!" Wing Commander Otis sighed and gave Dave and Freddy a polite but cold nod. "I take it they don't speak English, eh?"

"Not half a dozen words," Manners replied in a disgusted voice. "And I rue the day I learned to speak French. However, we'll be off your hands by morning. Meantime, you carry on with your work, Otis. I'll herd these two here and there and try to show them as little as possible. Any hush-hush stuff here you think I should steer clear of?"

"There's an experimental job in a flight hangar," Otis replied. "But.... Well, I mean.... That is...."

"That I wouldn't trust them out of my sight," Manners said as the other floundered for words. "You're right. Ten to one they're the real true French, but I'm a bit leery of anything that comes across the Channel these days. You never can tell, you know. Frankly, I raised merry Ned about taking them on this inspection tour, but the word came down from high up, and.... Well, that was that, blast it!"

"A bloody shame!" Wing Commander Otis growled and gave Dave and Freddy a look that wasn't even polite. "I'm free for a short spell, and I'll be glad to lead the parade, if you like. Matter of fact, I wouldn't mind brushing up on my French. I mean, what there is of it."

"Fine, splendid!" Manners cried. "That'll make two pairs of eyes we can keep on them. But first, I guess I'd better make introductions."

Manners half turned to smile at Dave and Freddy, and then went through all the flowery business of presenting them to Otis, and presenting the Wing Commander to them. The two youths bowed and beamed and spouted perfect French at a mile a minute clip. Otis returned the wishy-washy compliments in bad French, and with a pained look in his eye.

And then began two of the most cockeyed hours Dave and Freddy had ever spent in their young but adventure-crammed lives. With Wing Commander Otis leading the way they were taken on a round of inspection of the field and hangars, and then over to the flying boat basin. At every stop interesting details were explained to them in French by either Manners or Otis. And in turn they played up to their part by jabbering out excited comments and compliments. But it was a hard act to play because Manners and Otis exchanged helpless glances every so often. And little by little it was plain to see that Otis wished with all his heart that "these two young Frenchies who talked like lightning had never got out of France." In other words, Dave and Freddy had to almost gag themselves to kill a smile or an outburst of laughter in the wrong place.

Just before they moved on and away from the flying boat basin Manners pointed to a battle grey Catalina flying boat some one hundred yards from shore.

"You see that craft, Gentlemen?" he said in French. "That is the fastest flying boat in the entire

Coastal Command. And it has a record of which the entire Air Force is proud. The pilots and crew of that craft have twelve Nazi planes and a U-boat to their credit. It is of American design as you doubtless have noticed. I wish we had ten thousand like her. I've flown her myself, and she is a beautiful craft. Is that not so, Wing Commander Otis?"

"Quite right, sir," Otis replied. "That Catalina is our pride and joy. There isn't a ship here that can touch her for speed, or for standing up in bad weather. And now, perhaps you'd like to see the repair shops?"

Dave and Freddy nodded eagerly, but it was Air Marshal Manners who spoke first.

"You've done your job, Otis, old fellow," he said switching back to English. "Don't you bother with these two any more. I'll carry on with them. You get on back to your office. We'll walk a ways with you, and then see you later at mess. I'll explain to them that duty calls, and all that. They won't mind just so long as there's one of us to lead them around and let them stick their noses in here and in there."

"Sure you don't mind, sir?" Otis murmured. "Matter of fact I am a little behind on my patrol reports."

"Then by all means get on with it, man!" Manners said. Then turning to Dave and Freddy, he explained to them in French.

They let understanding light up their forced blank faces, and then went into a verbal song and dance telling Otis that it was quite all right, and ten million thanks for showing them so much. Otis mumbled some polite words in return, and then the trio walked part way back to the Base office. Finally Otis left them, and hurried away as though scared to death that he might be called back.

"By George, you two should be on the stage!" Manners chuckled when Wing Commander Otis was well out of hearing. "A dirty trick we played on real Frenchmen, because right now I think Otis is one man who hopes the Nazis keep France! He never was very strong for the Tri-Color anyway, but you two certainly finished him for good. The thing to do, though. The word will get around what pests you are, and I don't think you'll be bothered much later on. And that's exactly what I want."

"Why, sir?" Dave asked bluntly, but made gestures with his hands like a Frenchman in case Otis or somebody else might be watching from a distance.

Air Marshal Manners didn't reply at once. He half turned and glanced at the sun that was dropping down over the horizon like a giant ball of livid red flame. Then he glanced at his watch, and then at Dave and Freddy.

"Right-o," he said. "You two have certainly earned the whole story these last two hours. But walk up the shore with me just to make sure we won't be overheard. Take a good look at that sun, though, and let's the three of us pray that by the time it sets again tomorrow you two will have safely accomplished what in my opinion will be the most daring and dangerous feat of the entire war to date and probably in the future, too!"

Neither Dave nor Freddy said anything. They walked along the shore with their eyes fixed on the red ball of fire slowly sinking down out of sight below the Atlantic horizon. And in their hearts and in their very souls was the sacred promise that whether or not they ever saw that sun again they would exert every effort and make every sacrifice to accomplish successfully whatever the mission was that lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Death in the Dark

"This is a good place," Air Marshal Manners said when the trio had reached a stretch of sandy beach about half a mile from the Base field. "Let's sit down here, and act as though we're tired. Frankly, that's no lie as far as I'm concerned."

The three seated themselves on the sand and for a moment or so Manners stared thoughtfully out over the Atlantic as though carefully choosing the words he was about to speak. Dave and Freddy waited, but not patiently. Inwardly both were seething with excitement and curiosity. Neither, however, made so much as the beginning of an attempt to get the Air Marshal started. They knew that this was the last time he would force them to wait, so they grimly sat tight and let the torturing seconds tick by.

Suddenly Manners raised his right hand and pointed toward the west.

"Out there some eight or nine hundred miles," he said, "is a convoy of thirty-five British ships. The most valuable convoy ever to set sail for a British port. Its cargo contains tons and tons of war materials most vital to our immediate needs. Food stuffs, raw materials, medical supplies, guns of all kinds, a thousand crated airplanes made in the United States and Canada, oil, gasoline ... everything that we need so badly. I don't need to tell you the staggering losses that Nazi U-boats and surface raiders have already inflicted upon England's merchant marine. The whole world knows the great toll that has been taken. And the whole world knows also that England cannot hope to survive if such losses continue. And better than any country, save our own, Adolf

Hitler realizes that truth. For that reason he is going all out, regardless of the cost to his own forces, to force England to her knees and then crush her with no more emotion or pity than he would crush a fly."

The Air Marshal stopped talking, lighted a cigarette but immediately flung it away after a single puff.

"What that convoy is bringing to England," he continued eventually, "is not vital to our needs six months or a year from now. We need it and need it so terribly much *this week* ... the very *day* it can be unloaded at the docks. It is a large convoy, yes. And a beautiful prize for the Nazis to go after. That is true, too. And we are not fools enough to believe they have no knowledge that it is on the high seas and on its way. Naturally, the ships left different ports on the other side of the Atlantic, and at different times. Every precaution was taken to keep secret their dates of departure, the course each ship was to sail, and the rendezvous point far at sea. We have done everything save circle it with the ships of the entire British Navy. But that we could not do. Yes, every possible precaution has been taken to get that convoy through safely. But we know that every possible precaution is not enough. We know that the Nazis will bide their time and fall upon it when least expected. And so, it is up to us to beat the Nazis at their own game!"

The Chief of the Emergency Command paused again and in turn looked each youth straight in the eye.

"It was my Heaven sent prayer that we would accomplish that very thing this morning!" he suddenly got out harshly. "For several days we have known that the Nazis' fastest and most heavily armed raider, and their most daring and skilled wolf pack of U-boats, was being assembled for an attack on that convoy almost within sight of England's shores. Possessing that knowledge, and also knowing the location of their rendezvous area, we planned a trap for them. A trap with jaws made of British naval vessels and planes. You two were assigned to act as bait and to draw our boats and planes straight to the exact rendezvous point in that same two hundred square mile area. We know now that all our well laid plans went up in smoke. That the Nazis fooled us, and we failed to spring the trap."

Air Marshal Manners stopped once more, and Dave looking at him seemed to see the shadow of increased years steal across the man's face. The Yank wanted to reach out a hand and touch Manners as though to say that he too shared the bitterness of defeat that was in his heart. He checked the urge, however, and waited for the senior officer to continue.

"Yes, we failed miserably," the Air Marshal spoke again. "But even as we were failing, the gods were kind to us. They gave us the opportunity to make a second try. Those code books found in von Khole's flat near Golder's Green. Not until this morning did I have the chance to examine those books. Not until after you had taken off did I realize that a second chance would be ours in case we failed in the first. It's funny, in a way, when you study the situation. The Germans don't know where our fleet is, whether it's with the convoy or not, but they can probably find out. We don't know where the raider and her U-boats are, but *now* we can find out. The winner of this deadly game will be the one who discovers *first* the locality of the other's prize. And whether England wins or loses depends upon the skill, daring, and enduring courage of you two!"

Silence settled over the sands. There was not a sound save the soft hiss of the waves lapping the shore. Dave stared at them and in an abstract crazy sort of way felt that the sound was countless unseen demons of war and death jeering at Manners' spoken words. He took his gaze off the waves and looked at the Air Marshal.

"I can think of no greater reward, sir, than the chance to play my part no matter what it is, or costs," he said solemnly.

"And I can think of no better way of expressing my own thoughts too, sir," Freddy Farmer said in his quiet, steady voice.

The Air Ministry official smiled, and for a brief moment something seemed to glisten in each eye. Then his face was grave and his eyes stern.

"It may cost you everything!" he said in a hard tone. "But above all you must not fail. I demand it. England demands it. The whole civilized part of this world demands that you be successful. And now, here is the actual part you are to play. Down there somewhere off the coast of France is that raider and her under-sea wolf pack. Sometime tonight she will probably put to sea to maneuver into position to make her surprise attack upon the convoy just before dawn when the light is bad and the convoy's lookouts are staring into a rising sun. Between midnight and dawn you will make contact with that raider and her pack, locate her, and lure her into the waiting arms of British warships. That in a few words is *what* you will do, and here is *how* you will do it!"

Air Marshal Manners paused again to get his breath and to clear his throat.

"You remember that Catalina flying boat I pointed out to you when we were with Wing Commander Otis?" he said presently. "Well, that is the plane you are going to use. What I said about it is true. It's the fastest and best weather flying boat in the whole Coastal Command. It is completely equipped and ready for flight right this minute. The guns are loaded, bombs are in their racks, and food and supplies are all aboard. I happen to know that because it is a policy of this Station to have all planes ready for action whether they are scheduled for patrol or not. In other words, any one of the flying boats in the basin is all set to take the air, but that particular Catalina is the best of the lot. Sometime tonight you two will sneak out to it in one of the tenders moored to the edge of the basin and get into the air and away as fast as you can."

"Steal it right from under the noses of the guards, sir?" Freddy gasped.

"Just that," Air Marshal Manners said with a short nod. "But that won't be hard. If you noticed, that particular Catalina is farther out toward open water than any of the others. Also, the guards here are stationed at the enemy aircraft detectors instead of being stationed about the basin. You won't need to worry about them. Your toughest job will be to get up anchor, start the engines, taxi out to open water, and get off without a light showing. Searchlights, of course, will go after you, and maybe a couple of land planes or so. However, that will take time, and if you do your job well you'll be completely lost and headed for Lord knows where before any of them can pick you up."

"It's going to be close, darn close," Dave murmured softly.

"Exactly why I'm glad you two are tackling the job," the Air Marshal grunted with a faint gesture. "Yes, it will be close, and beginning with the moment you get her into the air you will be hunted high and low by every plane and flying boat the Station can spare. And by planes and boats from other squadrons, too. I say that because it is instantly going to become known that you are two of Germany's cleverest espionage agents who hoodwinked us completely by posing as French aeronautical experts recently escaped from the occupied zone on the other side of the Channel."

"But, sir!" Freddy objected and then stopped short as the senior officer made a sharp motion with one hand.

"Questions later!" Manners snapped. "Let me finish first. Don't worry; complete information about you will go out over the air to all listening stations. I'll see to that. However, the real reason your daring escape will go out over the air is because we want German radio stations to be sure and pick it up. And most of all, that raider's radio. We want the Nazis to swallow the story, and we think they will. You see, a couple of weeks ago, Intelligence did pick up two notorious German spies. They don't publicize feats like that, and for an obvious reason. When you don't tell the enemy you have one of their agents they naturally assume that the agent is still operating. At least for a certain length of time. Fact is, often when we pick up an enemy agent we send a few useless bits of information through to the Germans in such a way they believe he is still serving them. And oftentimes we get messages in return that lead us to other agents we did not even know existed. It's a tricky game, Intelligence, and dangerous, too. But I don't need to tell you chaps about Intelligence work!"^[2]

Air Marshal Manners paused to light another cigarette and to cast a casual glance about to make sure they were not being observed.

"Anyway," he continued at length, "to the English, and to the Germans we most certainly hope and pray, you will be regarded as those two German spies. The fact that you stole a Catalina from this Base will excite the Germans all the more. Particularly the raider's commander, if he picks up our SOS broadcasts, which he undoubtedly will. The Germans, of course know that this Base is in touch with that convoy. Also that planes from this Base will be sent out to meet it at a certain point and escort it in. Therefore they will assume that, having stolen the Catalina from here, you of course must know all the secrets about that convoy. And so, when you contact the raider its commander should fairly leap at the bait ... and, please God, sail right into the arms of the British Navy!"

"You're supplying us with copies of the codes to use, sir?" Dave asked.

"Of course!" the other replied. "I have them right here in my pocket. I'll also give you the exact locations of the various units of the Fleet now at sea. Once you have made contact with the raider and her wolf pack you will feed her as many lies as possible and bit by bit lead her into the arms of one of the Fleet units. But, here is the important thing, and pay strict attention. The Nazis will of course have their own planes out hunting for that convoy, so it will be up to you to contact the raider *first*, and establish definitely in her commander's mind that *you know where the convoy is!* Mind you! Nazi aircraft will also pick up your signals, and they will all come a-running to that locality. I don't know how much lee-way in time you'll have but during that time, however, you've got to lead the raider and her U-boats close enough to the British Fleet units for them to jump and finish the business. Well, there it is, lads. The toughest assignment I ever gave to any one. Frankly, you've one chance in a hundred of leading that raider into the range of British guns. And, frankly, you've got about one chance in a billion of coming through alive. It's only fair that I should tell you that. The instant you've betrayed the raider, and perhaps even before then, you'll have half the Nazi over-water Air Force on your neck. And that's not to mention the British lads who'll be looking for you right from the start. The only bit of advice I can give you is, *keep clear of all aircraft and hide in clouds as much as you can!* Oh yes, one more thing. Try first the regular code signals I'll give you, and if you get no response switch immediately to the emergency code. It is possible that von Khole's loss of his code books has been made known to the raider. It's possible but not likely because of the short period of time. Now, any questions?"

"It's really a suggestion, sir," Dave said slowly after a moment's deep thought.

"Then let's have it!" Manners exclaimed impatiently. "After all, it's your necks, you know. What is it?"

"It's about making sure the Fleet units learn the exact location of the raider once we sight her, and are perhaps jumped by enemy aircraft too darn soon," Dave said. "There's a second radio on every Catalina, so why don't we tune it to the directional finder wave-length the instant we spot the raider. Then if anything does happen to us the Fleet units will know her location and be able to circle her before she can head for the convoy in case a real Nazi scouting plane sends her the true location of the convoy."

"That's a good suggestion," Manners said with a frown, "except that...."

"I know what you're going to say, sir," Dave cut in hurriedly. "Except that we're supposed to have stolen a plane, and even the British are hunting us? Well, here's a way to get around that. You, through ways you know best, inform the commander of each Fleet unit tonight that they are to keep their sets open for that directional finder signal and to act the instant they hear it and plot our position. They don't need to know that it's coming from the supposedly stolen plane. Just let them think that you've got real scouting planes out after that raider. In short, the same idea as we tried to work this morning. It's simply to make doubly sure of nailing that raider and her wolf-pack in case Freddy and I run into bad trouble we can't lick."

"I doubt you two not being able to lick anything," the Air Marshal grunted and grinned. "But that is a darn good suggestion, Dawson. I'll do it, don't worry. I'll get word to those Fleet unit commanders in plenty of time. Well, Farmer, have you any suggestions to offer?"

Freddy shook his head and shot a side glance at Dave.

"He does all the talking for us, sir," he said. "He can't help it. A habit he can't break. However, I agree with him completely this time."

"The miracle has come to pass!" Dave chuckled. "The little man agrees with me! The best omen of good luck possible. We can't lose, now!"

Air Marshal Manners smiled, but in his eyes there was the glow of warm and frank admiration. And his heart was bursting with pride. Here indeed was the true expression of the unbeatable spirit of the Royal Air Force. With death awaiting them out over the Atlantic these two youths, with the minds, and skill, and courage of full grown men, were enjoying themselves in a bit of horse-play. Manners swallowed hard, then drew some papers from his tunic pocket and slid them across the sand.

"The codes and the locations of the Fleet units," he said as Dave closed his hand over them. "Well, I guess we'd better be starting back. It's close to mess time. Continue your act, and after mess ease outside whenever you think the time best. Play sleepy and heading for your quarters if you like. You probably won't be noticed, and most certainly not missed. Except by me. And my prayers will be with you every single second of the time. And.... God bless you!"

The Air Marshal's voice was heavy and husky as he finished. He looked the boys straight in the eye for a brief moment, then shook himself slightly and got briskly up onto his feet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Midnight Phantom

The dark of night had come again to war besieged England, and from the northern most tip of Scotland clear south to the Isle of Wight British eyes and ears were on the alert for any and all surprise moves by Hitler's devilish hordes on the other side of the English Channel and the North Sea. Men stood waiting at their searchlight batteries. Others stood ready at their anti-aircraft guns. And the night flying pilots of the Royal Air Force stood within jumping distance of their swift, deadly fighter planes. A whole nation of some forty five millions of people ready and waiting for the next trick Adolf "Death" would pull out of his bag.

At Lands End Base, however, there were two who were not waiting for "Satan," with his trick mustache and ever drooping lock of greasy hair, to make the next move. On the contrary they were waiting for the right time to make a move themselves. They were blended in with the darkness within a hand's touch of a light small tender tied up at the southwest side of the flying boat basin. They had been there for a good half hour virtually holding their breath every instant of the time, straining their ears for the slightest sound close by, and raking the darkness with their eyes.

"What say, shall we go?" Freddy Farmer presently breathed in Dave Dawson's ear. "There's nobody within a quarter of a mile, and that wind that's freshening may swing the Cat on her mooring line so's we'll have the devil's own job heading out toward open water."

"Okay it is," Dave breathed back and gripped Freddy's arm. "Down on your belly, pal, and into the tender. I've got her free. I'll feather paddle her out Indian style. Right! Here we go!"

Cautiously the two youths wormed inch by inch down over the lip of the basin wall toward the small tender. And then suddenly there came a sound that froze them stiff and turned the blood in their veins to ice. It was the muffled crack of a rifle shot. The muffled bark from a rifle obviously fitted with a silencer. And ages before the echo was gone an angry metal hornet buzzed squarely between them and buried itself in the wall.

In an infinitesimal period of time a million heart shredding thoughts leaped and raced through Dave's brain. The basin guard! They had not fooled the ever watchful guard at all! They had been spotted and a warning shot had been fired right between them. The next shot would find warm human flesh. What to do? Go on and be shot at like a helpless clay pigeon? Go on in the tender and suddenly have every searchlight in the place played squarely on them, and be riddled with British bullets before they could so much as fling up their hands in surrender? Or should they give up, now? Give up and reveal their true identities? Should...?

"No! No, we can't. We've got to carry on. There's everything at stake. We've got to carry on. We promised. We vowed to Manners, to England, and to God. We can't give up now. *We can't!*"

Dave did not speak the words aloud, but they boomed through his brain with all the roaring thunder of heavy cannon fire. Hardly realizing he was doing so he reached out and touched Freddy's arm.

"Never mind the tender!" he breathed. "We've got to get to that plane by swimming for it. Slide down into the water and swim under water as long as you can. Keep heading straight for the Cat-boat."

"Right!" came the hushed reply. "It's only sixty yards, anyway. But watch the slash going in."

Faint movement told Dave that Freddy was already on his way. He waited a few brief seconds until the English youth slid into the water without causing a ripple and disappeared. Then Dave slid down in with all the silence and swiftness of an eel. Yet a split second before the chilly water closed over him he once more heard the muffled bark of a silencer fitted gun, and a tiny twinge of pain rippled across the instep of his left foot. It was so brief and short in duration that he hardly felt it. Then he was underwater, air locked tightly in his lungs, and swimming straight out from the wall with every ounce of his strength.

With every stroke he took a hundred more maddening thoughts came to torture his brain. Was he heading for the Cat-boat? Where was Freddy? Was he all right? Was Freddy keeping true direction? Would they lose each other, lose the Cat-boat, and flounder about in the dark until they were spotted from shore and shot? Thoughts, thoughts, and more thoughts. And each one like the white hot blade of a knife cutting away a part of his brain.

Seconds dragged by, hours, weeks, and years. Finally, his burning lungs were on the point of bursting right out through his ribs. Blinding light danced before his closed eyes, and in his whirling head was the mighty roar of a world coming to an end. With a final desperate effort he pushed his way up toward the surface and got his head above water. For a few precious seconds he was forced to rest there slowly treading water until the blinding light passed away, and the roaring thunder faded down into silence.

Finally, his bulging eyes were back in their sockets and he could see. Dead ahead was nothing but water, and beyond the horizon marked by a few faint glimmering stars. He looked to the right and saw a huge darker shadow looming up. Then suddenly his straining eyes picked out a small object that seemed to be floating motionless on the surface of the basin. It was not five feet away and it was all he could do to refrain from letting out a wild yell. He curbed the urge and faintly breathed the name.

"Freddy?"

The small object on the water moved slightly and a whisper came stealing back to him.

"Right-o! What took you so long? This is it!"

Dave didn't answer. Instead he glided through the water until he was at Freddy Farmer's side. The English youth raised a hand and pointed above and ahead.

"Hull door, it's open," he whispered. "Manners must have slipped out and done that to make it easier for us."

"Well, thanks to whoever did it, anyway," Dave breathed back. "And I guess we've fooled those guards. Boy, does it give you a chill to be popped at by your own kind. Gosh, I...!"

"Tell me later!" Freddy hissed. "This water is what's giving *me* a chill. Come on, in we go. For goodness' sake, don't lose your hold and fall back into the water. It'll rouse the whole Station!"

"Okay!" Dave growled and pushed Freddy toward the flying boat's hull. "Don't you be greasy fingers either!"

Perhaps it was a minute, or perhaps it was two before the two youths were inside the Catalina flying boat, had the hull door shut and were up forward. Dave slid into the pilot's seat and reached for the engine switches, and starter buttons. He was about to snap and press them when a terrible thought crashed through his brain.

"Man, oh, man, are we starting off fine!" he choked out. "The mooring line, Freddy! Hop down and cast us free!"

"Well, can you beat that?" Freddy gasped and instantly ducked down out of sight and went forward to the gunner's nook in the nose of the hull.

A couple of moments later Dave felt the flying boat ride free. And an instant after that Freddy was back in the seat at his side. He reached for the switches and starter buttons again.

"If you've led a good life, pray hard, Freddy!" he said. "If you haven't, pray hard, anyway!"

No sooner had the last slipped off his lips than Dave whipped up the switches and jabbed the starter buttons. There was an eternity of silence. Then the silence was shattered by the whining grind of the starter gears. Then the port engine roared into life, and a split second later the starboard engine thundered into action. Fingers flying about in the dark, Dave adjusted fuel pressure, oil, propeller pitch and engine synchronization. And at the same time he applied the sea rudder and swung the huge craft a quarter turn and headed out toward open sea beyond the basin breakwater.

All that took but a matter of split seconds, yet to Dave and Freddy a thousand years seemed to

drag by. It seemed to them as though the Catalina was not moving an inch seaward; as though invisible hands were holding it back. And all the time the thunder of the powerful engines was enough to wake up the dead in China.

"She's not moving, Dave!" Freddy shouted. "There must be another mooring line we didn't see! There.... Oh, thank the Lord, we *are* moving!"

It was true. The huge flying boat had picked up speed and was now kicking frothy spray back up over the compartment window as the snub nose of the hull plowed through mounting rollers. And then, suddenly, as the big craft came up onto the "step," a beam of brilliant white left cut out at them from the right rear and filled the compartment with an eerie shimmering light.

"Now or never!" Dave shouted. "We've got to get off and shake that beam, or we're in for another swim. Work those fuel adjustments, Freddy! The port engine's lagging bad, and we need plenty of take-off speed!"

As Freddy got to work on the adjustments, Dave held the Cat-boat on a course dead ahead. Though the presence of the searchlight was proof positive their escape was now known to the entire base, it helped in guiding the craft by lighting up the waters ahead. A moment later the port engine started doing its full share and the flying boat thundered forward at increased speed. But at the same time a second searchlight beam, this one to the left rear, caught them, and they went roaring out toward open sea pinned perfectly in the crossed beams of light.

Dave waited until the craft had touched maximum take-off speed, then he virtually lifted the Catalina into the air and curved up and around to the east. The two searchlights followed him like two lighted fingers of glue. But a couple of moments later, when he had gained sufficient altitude, he suddenly shoved the flying boat down in a steep dive. No sooner had he dropped out of the searchlight beams than he pulled out of his dive, curved around toward the west and hauled the hull's nose up toward the star dusted sky high overhead. It was a near maneuver, and it was also successful. As soon as his eyes became accustomed to the change from brilliant light to inky darkness, Dave turned his head and looked down back. There were three searchlights, now, and they were frantically probing about just off the surface of the open sea.

"Right-o, very neat, my man!" came Freddy's voice. "But stop patting yourself on the back. Get us away from here, *not* high above it! They're bound to send off land planes, you know."

"Sure as shooting," Dave replied in a tone of apology. "What we do need is distance, and not altitude. Okay, my fine feathered friend. What'll it be, South Africa or South America, huh?"

"Further than that will make me feel much better!" Freddy replied. "Jeepers, it gives you the creeps knowing that your own comrades are after you, doesn't it?"

"It sure doesn't make a fellow feel happy," Dave said soberly and took a quick look at the searchlight beams that were fast falling far astern of the flying boat. "Fact is, if you want the truth from me, I don't feel so happy about any of this business."

"What's that, Dave?" Freddy cried sharply and turned his head to stare hard in the darkness. "You mean you don't honestly think there's a chance in the world for us to do the job?"

"No," Dave said. "Not that. We'll do it, or else. What bothers me is that it seems too easy. I mean, it's all cut and dried. We do this and we do that, and such and such happens. Just think back, pal. Did any of the jobs we've tackled ever go off like clockwork according to plan?"

The English youth didn't answer for a moment. He sat peering out the forward window at the star dust far ahead on the horizon.

"Okay, sleep, if you don't feel like talking," Dave growled after the silence had stretched out to over a minute.

"I was just trying to recall, that's all," Freddy said. "No, I can't think of single job that didn't run into a snag before we had it all tucked away."

"Well, that's what I mean," Dave said and automatically trimmed ship a bit finer. "On paper it doesn't look so very tough. True, we may run into a flock of Nazi planes, but we've met Nazis before. And we may hit some weather, or maybe get a plastering from the raider's anti-aircraft guns once she gets wise to us. Then, too, we may stub our toes come dawn, and run smack dab into a mess of British planes out hunting for us. And, boy, I wouldn't like that at all. However, it's not those kind of possibilities that bother me."

"What other possibility is there?" Freddy asked. "Heaven knows you've named enough to bother me, I fancy!"

"The unsuspected possibility," Dave said and banked slightly more out toward the broad bosom of the North Atlantic. "I mean, something that neither of us, or Manners, dreamed would happen, I can't name it. I've just got a hunch, that's all. You know, the old feeling?"

"I say, cut it!" Freddy groaned. "You and your blasted hunches!"

"Well, they've tinkled the bell in the past a few times," Dave said with feeling.

"Exactly why I say, cut it!" Freddy moaned. "Your blessed hunches always turn out to be fact; cold fact, with bullets for trimming! Let's talk about the weather and let the future bring what it will. I...."

"It's brought something already!" Dave shouted and pointed off to the right. "See those twin moving lights way over there? Those lights belong to an airplane, my little man. And between you, me, and the gatepost that plane belongs to the Royal Air Force. And the lad ain't out

joyriding, nohow! Hold your hat, I'm going down low just so's he can't spot our moving shadow against the stars. Yes, sir, Manners sure called the turn when he said they'd come a-running and fast!"

"Do I know what a wild duck in hunting season must feel like!" Freddy breathed as Dave throttled the engines to reduce the exhaust plumes to nil, and sent the Catalina sliding down toward the waters of the North Atlantic.

"Pal, you ain't even begun to feel things, yet!" Dave cried. "Know something? If we come through this session alive we'll probably be retired from the Air Force on a pension."

"Not likely!" Freddy said scornfully. "There's loads and loads of chaps who risk their necks just as much as we do. Stop fishing for another medal and a visit to Buckingham Palace!"

"Medal, my eye!" Dave snorted. "I don't mean we'll be retired as a reward for our glorious deeds. Nuts! We'll be retired on account of old age! Don't know about you, but I've already aged twenty years since we dived into the mooring basin. Get what I mean?"

"Oh quite," Freddy said with a chuckle. "And you're lucky. I've added thirty years, I swear! I.... Watch it, Dave! There's some kind of a surface craft right below us. Maybe one of our Channel patrol boats. Better pull out!"

Dave, however, had already seen the moving shadow of something down below them, and even before Freddy had finished shouting he had the Catalina leveled out of its glide and was climbing up and off toward the south. Luck or fast action saved them some tight moments, because a moment later a surface ship broke out its searchlight and started raking the heavens. Dave zig-zagged, however, and kept out of the beam and finally passed on beyond its range.

An hour later they were far at sea and high in the air and just under some patches of clouds. Dave switched on the automatic pilot device, and then took the copies of the Nazi codes and the data of the British Fleet units locations from his pocket. He smoothed them out and trained a single compartment light on them.

"Close to midnight, Freddy," he said. "And we've got some home work to do before we get going in earnest. So dust your brains out and get all this stuff down pat. After all, you've got to work the radio, you know. Besides, your German is twice as good as mine."

"Liar!" Freddy growled. Then with a sigh, "Oh well, just as you say, then. It's happened before. You get all the fun flying, and I get all the dirty work!"

"Brain work, chum!" Dave corrected with a laugh. "Me, I'm dumb. That's why I always have to take you along on these jaunts, see?"

"Next time don't feel you *have* to!" Freddy sighed and started digging into the mess of Nazi code signals.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Satan Flies West

Dawn sunshine rippled along 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 swells of the North Atlantic. He gave an angry shake of his head and impulsively took a tighter grip on the controls of the flying boat.

"That storm ahead looks pretty bad, Freddy," he said wearily out the corner of his mouth. "What do you think?"

Freddy Farmer stirred in the co-pilot's seat and glanced haggard eyed at the altimeter. The needle pointed to exactly nine thousand feet.

"We'll just have to hit it on the nose and pray," he said after a moment. "If we climb over it we might just as well go back to port and give up. I'm positive the raider's under it somewhere. Those signals were so weak I couldn't make head or tail of them. All we can do is take a chance we're right this time. If we aren't then...."

Freddy shrugged and left the rest hanging in midair, and bent forward to recheck the radio's adjustments for the umpty-umpteenth time in the last six hours. Dave nodded absently and kept his gaze fixed on the mountainous coal black clouds ahead. There was a dull throbbing in his head, his eyes smarted and ached, and his whole body felt stiff and sore. But what bothered him most was the bitter, empty feeling of helpless despair in his heart.

He and Freddy had been aloft in the Catalina for a good eight hours, and for the last six of those hours they had done everything within their power to make radio contact with the mystery raider and her wolf-pack of U-boats somewhere on the vast expanse of the Atlantic below them. Several times they had received code signals in answer to their call, but because of a static band the signals had been too weak for Freddy to understand. The very fact, though, that they had picked up bits of the same signals several times convinced them both that they had made contact. No definite proof, however, and hour after hour they had cruised about in the dark shrouded sky groping like a blind man in a strange room.

That alone was enough to fray their nerves and put them on edge, but to add to their helpless misery was the fact that they picked up spots of other signals they knew did not come from the raider. Some were in British code, and it was easy to guess that aircraft on the hunt for them were communicating with each other and their shore bases. And then there were signals in German code that were obviously being sent out from Nazi aircraft. Those signals worried them more than the fact they could not establish definite contact with the raider. The same question burned through their brains in letters of fire a foot high. Had scouting Nazi aircraft spotted the all important convoy and were they establishing contact with the raider? And were the raider and her wolf-pack already sneaking into position to pounce upon those precious cargoes destined for England?

Hours of groping blindly about in the dark. Hours when at any minute they might plow headlong into R.A.F. planes searching them out. Hours of heart crushing failure to achieve their all important goal, contact with the raider. Hours during which every tantalizing thought possible rose up to peck at their tired brains like vultures over a dead steer.

And, now, dawn! Dawn and light. Light that would reveal them to the pilots of other planes that might come across them in the air. The eyes of British pilots. And the eyes of Nazi pilots. Dawn and one last hope, a final prayer. That the mystery raider was hugging the area below that storm ahead, and the static created by the storm was the reason they couldn't contact the raider. One last hope. One last fight, not against aircraft, but against the raging fury of an Atlantic storm. If they could not find the raider somewhere in that storm area then their mission was doomed to failure. Time's sands were running out in the glass. If they did not find the raider this time, it would mean that the raider was nowhere about. That it was far away, in contact with a real Nazi scouting plane, and ... and perhaps in the very act of pouncing upon the convoy.

Dave shuddered and wiped sweat from his brow as the last thought whipped across his brain. Then almost instantly he gritted his teeth, got his chin up, and squared his jaw.

"Nuts to that storm!" he muttered. "This Cat-boat can take worse than that. We'll find that darn raider if we have to hunt it out from pole to pole. Got your safety belt fastened tight, Freddy? We're going to get a nice tossing."

"As tight as it'll go," the English youth replied. "I'll be okay as long as the wings stay on."

"They'll stay on," Dave said grimly. "This job is Yank built, and good. Make a check on our course. I want to head into that mess ahead in the direction of the nearest British Fleet unit to our position. The direction signals you last flashed out to the raider. I'm just banking on a hope she caught them and is heading that way, too."

"That would almost be too good to be true," Freddy sighed. "But hold your horses a minute and I'll make a definite check."

Freddy busied himself with his charts and navigation for a moment or so, then straightened up and nodded.

"Keep her as she goes, Dave," he reported. "We're right on the old beam, now. And..."

The English youth didn't finish the rest. He didn't for the plain reason that an invisible express train seemed to come roaring out of nowhere and crash into the right wing. The flying boat heeled over drunkenly to that side, shivered and shook from stem to stern, and then tried to drop by the nose and plunge madly seaward. Dave's face paled and the cords of his neck stood out like taut steel cables as he battled with the controls, and by sheer strength fought the flying boat up onto even keel.

"And that's the starter!" he panted. "Just a puff of air compared to what's coming. But I'm going straight in to the middle and then down as low as we dare. We may find a hole underneath that will give us enough visibility. When we find it, keep your eyes open. Don't close them for a second. And keep working that radio for all it's worth. Try every darn code in the book, including the emergency one. The instant you get a definite contact let me know."

"I'll let you know, never fear!" Freddy Farmer bellowed as a sudden roaring sound closed in from all sides to make the thunder of the engines little more than a murmur. "I'll let you know ... but it may be in the next world!"

Dave hardly heard the last, and he didn't bother to make any comment. He had no strength to waste trying to yell above the world of sound into which they had plunged. Every ounce of strength was needed to hold the controls firm, and keep the crazy crisscross tornado of wind from spinning the huge Catalina up on wingtip as though it were bit of torn paper in the air. The sun was now gone, swallowed up behind them, and the flying boat was rocking, and bucking, and pitching through a swirling world of slate grey and eerie shades of purple. Every so often the roaring of the wind would die away as though by magic. There would be only the powerful roar of their sturdy engines. And the craft would tear forward without so much as a tremor in either wingtip.

And then just as suddenly a coal black mass of cloud would zoom up straight in front of the nose of the hull, and the fury of the weather gods would crash in on them with terrifying force. A wall of slashing rain would fall down upon them, and it would be impossible to see an inch ahead or in any direction. The nose of the hull, where the forward gunner ordinarily sat, would disappear from their view completely. Tossed and heaved this way and that, they would hurtle onward completely blind.

A hundred times the flying boat would give a sharp lurch and Dave's heart would stop cold in fear

that something had given way, and that the Catalina was breaking up in midair. Or a hundred times the engine instrument needles would go on a crazy rampage about the dials, and either the starboard or port engine would cough and sputter for a second or two that was a whole lifetime to Dave Dawson's jangling nerves. But always, no matter what, the Catalina kept on valiantly fighting its way toward the center of the storm.

Finally a sudden calm and a flood of grey light told Dave that they had hit the center. He winked sweat from his eyes, sweat that had streamed down off his forehead, and took a look below. He saw an expanse of thin fleecy cloud that was traveling in a slow circle as the result of the whirling movement at the core of the storm. He shot a quick hopeful glance at Freddy, but the English youth had phones clamped to his ears and was working frantically at the radio. His face was grim and set, but there was a dull, defeated look in his eyes.

Dave turned front, throttled the engines slightly and nosed the flying boat down toward the layer of fleecy cloud. He could see gobs of black cloud underneath, but the stuff was not solid, and hope zoomed high in his breast. There were bound to be holes in the stuff. Holes through which he could look down into the calm area under the center of the storm. There, if any place, would be the raider. Stealing along in the calm center while the real fury of the storm protected her on all sides.

Would she be there? Would she be heading in the right direction? For a brief moment Dave was filled with the crazy desire to pull up out of his dive and ride on through the other side of the storm without so much as taking a single look for the raider. Crazy, insane? Sure! But if he did go on down, and the raider was nowhere to be seen, the bitter defeat might be more than his already singing nerves could take.

"Cut it, you dope!" he grated at himself. "If she isn't there, then she isn't there. What are you, anyway? A low down dirty quitter? No nerve to stick your chin out, and take it? Get down there, Dawson, and get down darn fast!"

The sound of his own voice helped. The crazy desire to quit and run faded away into thin air. His grip on the controls tightened and he held the Catalina in its downward plunge. In the matter of seconds he reached the layer of fleecy cloud. There he pulled out of his dive slightly, kept the nose down just a hair, and started circling about. The altimeter read three thousand feet. It was probably correct, but after what the craft had passed through, every instrument on the panel might be all cockeyed. And there were still black clouds below him. For all he knew they might be sitting right on top of the storm swept water. Death would have the last laugh if he should fly the Catalina right down into the wet stuff. No, the thing to do was to circle slowly and drop down foot by foot, and keep both eyes skinned for the first hole in the black stuff below. And, please God, he would be able to find a hole! If not....

He didn't finish the thought. At that instant something hit him a sharp blow on the right arm, and his own name was screamed in his ears.

"*Dave*, I've made contact! Positive this time. I got the raider's number signal as clear as a bell. She's close by, I'm positive. She wants a repeat on the convoy's location!"

Freddy Farmer's face was flaming red with excitement, and his eyes seemed to shoot out sparks as he yelled at Dave and continued to thump a fist on his right arm. Dave yanked his arm away and scowled.

"Hey, lay off!" he shouted. "But swell, Freddy! Give her direction X Dash M. That will take her out of this storm. She's moving with it now, that's a cinch. And it'll be tough for the navy boats to find her in that sea. The U-boats could scatter and skip away at will. Give her X Dash M direction signal and get her out into open sea. We'll go on back up for plenty altitude and pick her up when she comes out of the storm. Boy, I guess we're tops, huh?"

Freddy grinned like an imp but he didn't say anything. He was hard at work at his set again, sending out the misleading signals to the marauder of the high seas somewhere down there below the storm. For a couple of minutes longer curiosity, burning curiosity, forced Dave to continue circling downward searching for a hole that would give him a view of the surface of the ocean. However, before he could find a hole the sudden realization that he might spoil everything snapped him out of his trance, and made him pull the nose up, feed full fuel to his engines and start climbing the Catalina up through the center of the storm.

"Spoil things, and how!" he echoed the thought aloud. "If that raider should spot us, ten to one her commander would wonder plenty how-come we were so close. Use your head, Dave, and keep using it!"

"I quite agree, though I don't know what you mean," he heard Freddy shout. "A bad sign, though, when a chap starts talking to himself, you know. That tossing around didn't get you, did it?"

The English youth was grinning broadly and there was the old sparkle in his eyes. Gone was the haggard, worn out look. That they had made contact with the raider in their last desperate try had made a new man of Freddy. Dave grinned back at him and felt ten times better himself. Now they had something they could dig their teeth into. No more stumbling around hoping against hope, and meeting with defeat at every turn. Once they reached high altitude and spotted the raider when she came out beyond the rim of the storm, everything would be all to the merry. True, maybe whirlwind action lay just ahead, but that was okay. It would be action with a purpose, not useless unfinished action.

"I'm okay!" he said to Freddy. "I mean, no more goofy than usual. But I do feel tops, now. As soon as we sight that baby send her a course correction and get her headed once again toward that

Fleet unit. And once she's on course get set for anything."

Freddy arched an eyebrow and looked puzzled.

"Meaning exactly what?" he asked.

Dave shrugged and made a little gesture with one hand.

"I feel a million times better," he said, "but I've still got that old hunch the unexpected's going to suddenly pop up with a bang. Gosh, Freddy! Just suppose this ship you've contacted isn't the raider at all!"

The English youth paled but almost immediately he shook his head vigorously.

"Impossible!" he said bluntly. "I got her call signals as clear as anything. Don't worry, she identified herself by code. She's the raider, all right. And at least we've got a full hour."

"Full hour?" Dave echoed and looked blank.

"Certainly," Freddy replied. "From the convoy's position I radioed him the commander knows that he can't get within striking distance at least for an hour. So that gives us a full hour to work her dead away from the convoy's route and into the hands of the Navy. If only the Nazi planes don't show up. That's what worries me. That they'll show up, and things will go wrong, and the murdering blighter and her steel fish will still be able to get at the convoy. I don't want to return to port if that happens, Dave."

The two exchanged looks, and Dave impulsively reached out his hand and pressed Freddy's knee.

"Neither of us will be returning to port if things go all wrong, Freddy," he said in a steady voice. "We're armed, and if the Navy and Fleet Air Arm lads don't show up in time, then you and I'll fight the whole lot of them alone ... and keep on fighting to the end. Now, pull up your socks, my lad, and stop thinking crazy things. In another ten minutes we should be taking our first look at her. Hang on, now. We're going to be tossed around a bit, but not as much as before. I'm going to climb up through to the top instead of barging right through to the outside. We'll miss the bad part, I hope."

With a nod for emphasis, Dave gave the Catalina's engines full throttle and steepened his climb up through the comparatively calm area in the center of the storm. Near the top, at an altitude of some fourteen thousand feet, they ran into some rough air. The flying boat bucked and quivered and threatened to fall off on one wing and plunged down. There was a real pilot at the controls, though. An ace pilot, and he fought the mad actions of the plane tooth and nail. And he won! Engines laboring, due to the excess strain, the flying boat finally prop clawed up through the last of the storm clouds and into a world flooded with golden sunlight.

"That's the nice girl!" Dave cried and affectionately patted the controls with one hand. "Manners and Otis weren't shooting any line when they said you were good. You are, and plenty more!"

"Good grief!" Freddy gasped. "Have we actually been down in that stuff?"

Dave turned his head to see Freddy peering downward out the compartment window. He took a look, himself, and unconsciously gulped and swallowed hard. Below was an angry mass of boiling black cloud. It seemed to extend to the four horizons and completely blot out the waters of the North Atlantic underneath. A whirling black mass that changed to brown, then grey, then an eerie purple streaked with lacy white. And then black to a turbulent, seething black mass again.

"Sweet tripe!" Dave breathed in awe. "And the wings are still on? Freddy, don't put that storm in your report, if you ever write one. Nobody would believe you. And you couldn't blame them. Well, we're out of it and above, anyway. So three cheers for us.... I mean, this Catalina. Now, to get more altitude and start eye hunting for that raider. Boy, if our good luck will only continue to hold out."

"It's got to, and it's going to!" Freddy said firmly. "Just don't give it another thought. Just skin your eyes and I'll skin mine. And I'll bet you five pounds I spot her first."

"A bet!" Dave shouted happily and swung the Catalina around toward the west. "I know I'm going to lose, though. Heck, with those sharp eyes you've got, you could read tomorrow's newspaper from here! And I don't mean maybe!"

After that the two youths lapsed into silence, and each bent forward and eagerly fixed his gaze on the western rim of the savage storm and the rain blurred stretches of the Atlantic they could see far beyond. Their spirits were high, and their hearts were light. The job was still to be done. The task was still to be accomplished, yet somehow they felt they had reached the home stretch, and that their goal was almost in sight.

It was a wonderful feeling that filled their fighting hearts and tingled their blood, but somewhere up on high the gods of war shrilled in high glee, for they knew something that neither Dave Dawson or Freddy Farmer or so much as even dreamed. The war gods knew that death was close to those two R.A.F. aces. Close, real close. The matter of only a few feet. And even as they strained their eyes for their very first glimpse of the Atlantic raider, death moved one step closer, and another, and another....

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sky Doom

Angry black storm clouds swept far to the roar of the Consolidated Catalina flying boat. Brilliant sunshine bathed the craft in its warm glow from the hull nose clear back to the tail, and from wingtip to wingtip. Below and just ahead heaving seas caused by the passing storm were slowly subsiding. Patches of white foam were fast disappearing; dissolving into thin air under the steady rays of the sun.

"It should be soon, Dave," Freddy presently broke the silence in a strained voice. "And if it isn't, I swear I'll blessed well blow my topper!"

"Keep your shirt on, pal," Dave grunted good-naturedly. "We can travel plenty fast, remember. That raider is in the water, not in the air with wings. It'll take time for her to get clear. How about trying a check on her?"

"I did just a moment ago," the English youth replied. "The signals were clear as a bell. She's traveling under forced draft, and her commander begged me not to lose touch with the convoy. He also wanted to know if British navy boats and aircraft were escorting the convoy."

"And you told him?" Dave murmured.

"Same as the first message I tried to get through to him, of course," Freddy said in a slightly hurt tone. "No escorting aircraft as yet, as the convoy hasn't reached the rendezvous point. And that there're only two Corvettes leading the merchant ships."

"Beautiful, if he only swallows it, which I guess he's done," Dave said with a chuckle. "Boy, what a nice surprise that guy's going to get! He figures that he's going to sneak up on the unprotected rear of that convoy and go through it like hot coals through snow. Instead, though, he's going to plow right into a mess of screaming shells from British navy guns, and depth charges, and bombs, and everything else. If only they can ring those U-boats before they duck down deep and skip away."

"The boys of the Fleet Air Arm will take care of that," Freddy said confidently. "They'll be up aloft, and they'll spot the raider long before she spots them. They'll give the range to the gunners on the ships, and then dive bomb the U-boats before they hardly have time to stick their noses under."

"Well, you sure make it listen good," Dave grinned. "And I'm keeping my fingers crossed that you're right. *Eureka!* Pay me the five pounds, Freddy! Look off down there. Just to the left of that patch of cloud scud. It's a ship. It's our raider, Freddy! See? See? Her U-boats are all on the surface. See those globs of grey in fan shape formation a quarter of a mile astern of her. Freddy! That's her, and no kidding about it!"

The English youth didn't utter a sound. He hunched forward and sighted along Dave's trembling pointed finger. Then he saw her, too. Saw the wolf-pack of U-boats running at top speed on the surface astern of the raider. Smoke from the raider's single funnel was streaming back low over the stern of the craft. A clear indication that she was getting every ounce of drive out of her propellers. She was low in the water and rather than ride up over each roller, her sharp bow cut through it like a knife and sent sheets of frothing water mounting high over her forecastle. A ship of speed, and deadly fighting power, yet ugly and repulsive looking even though you did not know of the mission of murdering destruction on which she was bent.

"And there you are, you dirty sea rat!" Dave grated through clenched teeth. "Think you're on your way to hurt England, eh? Well, you've got another...."

Crack!

The bark of the gun was like the world exploding apart to Dave and Freddy. And even as the sharp sound came to their ears they both saw the tiny hole and mass of cracks that appeared as though by magic in the forward window. For a brief instant they both stared at it as though hypnotized. Then as one man they whirled around in their seats and gaped aft.

If the bark of a gun and a bullet hole in the forward window surprised them, then sight of the figure clutching the gun stunned them completely. He wore the uniform of an R.A.F. Flying Officer, but the uniform was splotted with dirt, and grease, and oil. He wore no cap and his hair dangled down over his forehead. On the right cheek of his not too bad looking face was an ugly gash that ran straight up and down. A few tiny drops of blood seeped out the lower end and dribbled down to the line of his jaw and dropped off to stain the front of his tunic. Apparently he had stowed away in an aft compartment of the plane.

Ten thousand exclamations surged up to Dave's lips but for the life of him he could not speak a word. His throat was bone dry, and his tongue was as big as a baseball bat in his mouth. It was the same with Freddy Farmer, and it seemed almost to be the same with the man holding the gun, for he said not a word either. He simply stood braced on the cat-walk leading aft, a cruel twist to his lips, a burning look of hatred in his eyes, and the Luger in his hand held rock steady and unwavering.

And then sound exploded from Dave Dawson's lips.

"*Baron von Khole!*" he cried.

The man with the gun stiffened slightly. Startled surprise and annoyance flashed across his face. Then suddenly he relaxed, smiled tight lipped, and made a short little bow from the waist.

"But, of course," he said in perfect English, as though talking to himself. "That swine, Manners, must have spoken to you. Anyway, you are correct, my young friend. I don't mind admitting it, *now!*"

"And we first met you as Steffins!" Freddy cried as he suddenly found his own tongue.

The German agent flicked a glance at the English youth and nodded faintly.

"Splendid!" he said with a chuckle. "You two children really aren't fools, are you? You have brains, and you use them. Yes, that is true. I met you as Steffins."

"Steffins, the yellow belly!" Dave blurted out before he could cut off the words.

A cold deadly look leaped into the Nazi's eyes, and his finger crooked about the Luger's trigger seemed to tighten a hair.

"You are asking for death sooner than I had planned it, little boy!" he spat out harshly. "No one who desires to live even for a minute should call me a coward. That little affair on the train was as I planned it."

"And the strafing plane was some kind of a signal for you, too, wasn't it?" Dave shot out the question.

"*Donder and Blitzen!*" the German exclaimed in a whisper. "It is too bad you do not belong to German Intelligence. Yes, we could make good use of you. It was a signal, yes. And you can probably guess why. That doddering fool, Manners, has probably told you the whole story."

"I know what you mean!" Freddy cried. "That rotten business you were doing in London. The diving plane was a signal that your hide-out in London had been found, and that they were after you!"

"My, my, never have I met such clever little boys!" von Khole said with a marked sneer. "However, that's just about correct. It was a warning. So that is why I did not report to Squadron Seventy-Four. But it wasn't necessary, anyway. *Don't*, my young Dawson! Don't be a foolish child and think you can move faster than I can shoot!"

Dave had moved slightly in his seat, but he froze stiff as the Nazi's gun muzzle bored straight at a point between his eyes. A smarting retort rose to his lips, but common sense made him choke it back. So long as they kept the German talking, so long would they have the chance to do something about their predicament. *Predicament?* That was indeed putting it mildly. Not since that day in war blasted France when he and Freddy had first met had they been in such a tight corner as now.^[3] And never had death been so close and so certain. No, their only hope was to stall for time. For while there is time there is hope, and while there is hope there is life.

"So you didn't report to Plymouth Base, eh?" he murmured and forced a puzzled note into his voice. "Then how in the world were you able to steal that Fairey Swordfish plane and follow us down to that rendezvous area for the raider and her wolf-pack of U-boats? You sure must have taken plenty of chances."

"Yes, you certainly must have!" Freddy cried eagerly and twitched in his seat. "Ouch, my elbow! But tell us, von Khole. How in the world did you manage that?"

The German's eyes narrowed with suspicion, but when he saw the eager and excited looks on the boys' faces he relaxed and smirked in triumph. He drew himself up straight but didn't take the gun off them for a single instant.

"There is nothing too difficult for Baron von Khole!" he cried in a loud voice and thumped his chest with his free hand. "It was nothing, that little bit at Plymouth. It was so simple. I merely made myself up as a mechanic and walked in through the main gates and past the stupid guards. A question here and there, and I learned of a plane that was going to be tested. I hid in the hangar and took care of the pilot when he arrived! I saw you two little ones take off. Of course I already knew the contents of your sealed orders, and I had made arrangements for the raider and her U-boats to be elsewhere. However, I had decided that Manners should be made to realize what a fool he was to think he could outwit us Germans. So I arranged for one U-boat to remain. A single U-boat to remain and sink the very first British warship that came to the spot. And so...."

"And so that idea fell flat," Dave interrupted with a grim nod.

Von Khole shrugged.

"You were lucky," he grunted. "And the U-boat's commander was a fool to come to the surface before you were in the water. But it does not matter, now. Your precious Air Marshal Manners knows what a fool he made of himself. And by the by, you two owe me your thanks. I could have killed you very easily, you know. But we Germans do not like to make war on mere boys ... unless we are forced to."

The deadly undernote of the last sent a chill cutting straight through Dave's heart. Von Khole didn't have to write him a letter to explain that the moment to "make war on mere boys" *had now arrived!*

He covered up his inner feelings however with a beautiful Bronx cheer.

"Says you, von Khole!" he jeered. "You owe us that kind of a vote of thanks. I had you in my sights cold, and you know darn well I did. I could have shot the pants right off you, and with both eyes shut, too."

"And you didn't?" the German echoed in mock surprise. "How strange! Or perhaps it was that

your guns jammed at that very crucial moment, eh? I have heard that sort of explanation many times."

"It was my fault!" Freddy Farmer blurted out, and moved some more in his seat. "I was the one who stopped him. And I was a blasted fool for doing it, I can tell you. Rubbish to what you think! Dawson could have shot you down as easy as pie."

Von Khole nodded his head in mock patience.

"Well, well, what a shame!" he sighed. "And what a shame, my young Dawson, we'll never have another chance to see who is the better pilot. Yes, too bad, but one cannot expect everything in war, you know."

As the Nazi finished the last he leaned forward slightly and shot a quick glance down over the bow of the hull. Regardless of orders not to move, Dave turned his head and took a look himself. His heart leaped up into his throat when he saw that the raider had altered her course, and with her wolf-pack of U-boats in tow was steaming at full draft *due north*! He turned back and shot a quizzical look at von Khole. The German accepted the look with a smile and a nod.

"Yes, your little game is over, my young ones," he said. "There is work, great work for that raider to perform, and so she is hurrying on her way."

"What's that?" Freddy cried and spun front in his own seat to look. "Good grief, it can't be! What made that raider change her course? She headed directly for...!"

The English youth choked himself off and turned back to stare wide eyed at von Khole. The Nazi laughed out loud at the horror and misery on Freddy's face.

"Did you think this was the only airplane in the world?" he cried in a taunting voice. "Do you think all German pilots are asleep? *Himmel!* What fools to even hope you could be successful! What dunces to even think you could outwit me, Baron von Khole. Mere children! Bah!"

The Nazi agent made as though to spit as he spoke the last, and his whole face flamed red with withering scorn and contempt. A thousand cannons began booming in Dave's brain. He trembled from head to foot with the furious desire to leap at von Khole, and the heck with the Luger pointed his way. But with all his raging fury he still retained his common sense. And so he stayed right where he was.

"I get it," he said suddenly. "Your scouting planes have known the raider's position all along, huh?"

"But naturally," the German said. "And the way that ship is now headed means that *our aircraft have sighted your precious convoy and have communicated its position to the raider!* True, you contacted her first. I suspected that you probably would, but I didn't care. I decided to wait until you had actually sighted her and then put an end to your little game. From this moment on she will receive the true location and course of the convoy. She will close in and strike at the proper moment. The raider, her U-boats, and our long range bombers. It will be a great victory for Der Fuehrer, and a crushing blow to your doomed England. *Himmel!* Do you think I would have stayed hidden aboard this flying boat listening to you two children jabber about the British Fleet units and the wonderful things they were going to do, if I did not know for certain that this moment of triumph would arrive? But of course not. I only wish I could see the face of your naval ship commanders as they wait *and wait* for a raider to come sailing into their gun range. A raider that will be hundreds of miles away, and her work well done, before they even start combing the ocean!"

The Nazi was almost screaming by the time he finally came to a pause. Dave, looking at his flushed face, spittle drooling mouth, and popping eyes, knew that he was not looking at just one man but at a living symbol of the whole rotten to the core Nazi breed. Just as Air Marshal Manners had said, "Clever, cunning, and a genius at his work, but a black hearted, ruthless murderer."

"Your raider will not even get in sight of that convoy!" Freddy cried, his face white and strained. "It's well guarded. I can assure you of that."

"Now, can you, my little fellow?" von Khole sneered at him. "You are completely wrong. Perhaps you do not know it, but you *are!* Until the rendezvous point is reached, only two Corvettes are guarding that convoy. That is another stupid blunder on the part of your willy-nilly superiors. They decided to let the convoy come across with but two Corvettes to protect her until close off shore, instead of sending out naval ships to a rendezvous far at sea. But, no. They decided to spread their navy ships about the ocean and trap our powerful raider and her U-boats. Clever, they thought. Fool the Germans completely. Ah, yes! They thought it was a wonderful idea. Well, you see what a wonderful idea it turned out to be? Long before the convoy reaches the rendezvous point with your Catalinas and your destroyers it will be at the bottom of the Atlantic. Every ship. *All of them!*"

For a second Dave thought Freddy was going to hurl himself right out of the seat and lunge for the Nazi's throat. Instead, the English youth suddenly threw back his head and roared with laughter. Von Khole's face went dark, a scowl creased his brows, and a puzzled glint came into his eyes.

"So, you laugh when your countrymen are about to die?" he snarled as Freddy subsided a little.

"My countrymen die?" Freddy shot at him. "Why, you balmy Jerry, if they do, it will be from laughing. Laughing at you, and your blessed Fuehrer, at the whole lot of you silly Nazis. Shall we

tell him, Dave?"

Freddy looked at Dave and winked the eye turned away from von Khole. Dave had no idea what the act was about, but he played up to it instantly. He shrugged and made a little gesture with his hands.

"Why bother?" he grunted. "Let him find out for himself."

Freddy pursed his lips, half turned and gave von Khole an accusing look.

"I say, let's stop playing with this stupid game," Freddy said. "I jolly well fancy you know all about it. Good grief, man, you *must* know if you're as clever as they say you are."

"I think you are talking in riddles," the Nazi said in a wary tone. "And I do not like riddles. What is this interesting thing you feel positive I should know?"

Freddy gave an exasperated shake of his head.

"The convoy, of course!" he snapped. "Its arrival! What else, my dear fellow?"

"Arrival?" von Khole echoed in a harsh voice.

"Certainly!" Freddy snapped at him again. "It docked at English ports early last night. All this business is simply an attempt to remove your wonder raider and her school of tin fish out of this blasted war once and for all."

"You little lying swine!" the German hissed as his eyes clouded up with thunder heads of berserk rage. "Do you think I'd believe that for an instant? No, my little boy. Your precious convoy has not made port, yet. And it never will! I can see that you have learned some things from your American friend, Dawson, here. He has taught you how to bluff. But I am one you cannot bluff."

"Okay, have it your way," Dave said, catching on to Freddy's effort to stall for time, and keep stalling. "You know your own codes, don't you? Your aircraft codes?"

"But naturally," the German said. "What of it?"

Dave lifted his hand enough to indicate the main radio fitted to its panel in front of Freddy Farmer's seat.

"Then get to work on that thing, and check," Dave said in a defiant tone. "Call your scouting aircraft and find out if they've spotted a big convoy. Yes, I said *big* convoy. Go on! Contact them and find out how many ships there are in the convoy *you think* that raider's headed toward. Go on, I dare you!"

Baron von Khole raked Dave's face with his eyes as though he were attempting to look right into the brain and read the truth there. Dave returned his stare and grinned a challenge.

"Farmer and I know that we're all washed up, von Khole," he said. "You beat us to the punch before we could guide the raider to within range of the British warships. Okay, you win that one. But if you think there's any big convoy waiting to be picked off, you're all wet. And I mean, all wet!"

The German continued to glare at them out of half closed eyes, and Dave kept the taunting grin on his face though his heart was pounding like a trip hammer against his ribs. Perhaps von Khole's next move would be the break that he and Freddy needed so desperately. If the German took up the challenge and bent forward to take the head phones from Freddy and use the radio the movement would bring him close. Please, God, close enough to make a wild grab for that Luger. It was their only chance. To overpower von Khole and get back on the job. The raider and her U-boats were moving northward fast. She had to be stopped. She *had* to be stopped! Please, God, make von Khole move closer ... move just a couple of feet closer!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

High Adventure

One, two, three seconds ticked by as Dave kept his eyes locked with von Khole's. A conglomeration of expressions flitted across the man's face. Four, five, six seconds! Anger, wonder, suspicion, and scorn showed in the German's face. He made as though to move, checked himself, and remained where he was. Seven, eight, nine seconds!

And then Dave wanted to weep with rage. Von Khole smiled and shook his head.

"No, my little fools!" he said with a dry chuckle. "I am not as stupid as that. You would like to grab for this gun, eh, as I reached for the radio? Bah! I can see the desire in your faces. But that is not why I know you lie. You, my little Farmer! Your bluff was almost convincing. Perhaps it even would have convinced me if you had not made that slip of the tongue when you first saw that the raider was heading north. Ah, yes! You were about to say she was heading directly for the convoy, when you cut yourself off. Your radio? I shall have plenty of time to use it later. Right now it amuses me to see the misery and the defeat in your faces."

As the German stopped talking a strange sensation began to ripple through Dave. It was as though something were definitely wrong with the picture. It was as though von Khole were hesitating for some mysterious reason. As though he wanted to act but couldn't make up his mind

whether to act or not. Dave knew that the Nazi intended to rid himself of them both. He was positive that von Khole had a bullet for each of them in that Luger held steady in his hand. Yet the man seemed in no hurry to shoot. Instead he was waiting. Why? Waiting for what? Dave stared hard at the Nazi's face but there was absolutely nothing there to give him an inkling of what was going on in the brain behind it.

Suddenly Dave thought of the two shots that had been fired in the dark back at the Lands End Base. Two shots that sounded as though they had come from a rifle fitted with a silencer. Had that been the case, or had shooting across water given him that impression? And, also, he and Freddy had found the hull door of the Catalina swung wide open. A split second later he was sure he knew the truth about that incident.

"You fired those shots at us from the mooring basin!" he blurted out. "You were already in this flying boat, and you fired from inside through the open hull door so that the flash would not be seen ashore!"

"Splendid, splendid!" von Khole cried. Then with an annoyed toss of his head, "And I am ashamed of myself. I am a perfect shot, but I was not last night. I missed you both completely. However, the darkness made accurate shooting impossible. Too bad I missed. It would have been quite a shock for your wonderful Air Marshal Manners to find you two dead, and this Catalina flying boat stolen *anyway!*"

"You certainly don't like that guy, do you?" Dave said to keep the Nazi talking.

"The swine has caused me much trouble!" von Khole bit off savagely. "But I will have plenty of time to deal with him when this little affair is finished."

As the German spoke the words his eyes left Dave's face for a brief instant and he shot a scowling glance at the radio panel. That glance made Dave's heart loop over. Was the radio the reason why von Khole was hesitating in pulling the Luger's trigger, and waiting? If so, why? Dave wracked his brain for an answer to that one, but there was none to be found.

"How the heck did you know we were going to use this Catalina?" he asked quickly as a sudden look of anger leaped into the Nazi's eyes. "And as far as that goes, how in thunder did you know we were at Lands End Base? Of course you were in that Messerschmitt that tried to trail us?"

"Yes, I was in that plane," von Khole said absently.

"But that was a Nazi plane!" Freddy exclaimed. "And... Wait! I get it! You flew that Fairey Swordfish to occupied France and returned in a Messerschmitt to trail Air Marshal Manners down from London. You had got word he was heading for Plymouth?"

"Correct!" von Khole snapped. "I am informed of everything as soon as it happens. We intercepted your aircraft carrier's message to Manners saying that you two had been picked up. I decided to remove the real menace to my future plans, Air Marshal Manners! However, he reached Plymouth before I could meet him in the air. Too bad. However, there is tomorrow, and the next day, and lots of days after that. I have promised myself that Air Marshal Manners shall feel my bullets cutting into his swine hide. And I do not break, a promise to myself!"

"But I lost you cold as we were returning to London!" Dave said with a puzzled frown. "And, Mister, we darn near washed each other out in those clouds. Another foot the wrong way and it would have been curtains for the lot of us. Parachutes wouldn't have done any of us any good with those two ships smacking each other at that speed. But it wasn't until *after* that that Manners ordered me to head for Lands End. I said you maybe had cat's eyes, and you certainly must have had them then. Did you actually trail us to Lands End Base?"

The sudden beam of vanity that lighted up von Khole's face sent a warm glow of new hope surging through Dave. If he could only keep the Nazi talking for a little longer. If he only could! A wild, crazy plan had come into his head all of a sudden. There was just about one chance in six billion that he could carry it out successfully. But the odds against him didn't matter. It was a chance, and that was the all important thing. But he must keep von Khole talking on. Praise the dirty rat. Flatter him! Do anything just to keep him talking!

"No kidding?" Dave pressed his question in an awed tone. "Did you really and truly trail us down to Lands End Base?"

The German laughed softly and shook his head and gestured with his free hand, palm upward.

"No, because I didn't have to," he said. "I have brains, and so I simply used them. I realized that Manners must know I was in the Messerschmitt. I realized that he would of course change his course, and not head for London. Then where would he head? Back to Plymouth? No. Then where? It was obvious that he would head for another Coastal Command Base. That he would head in the opposite direction from London. And that would be? Toward Southampton, of course. So I flew in that direction, myself, and circled about until I saw your plane. And when I saw that you were heading west, the answer was simple. Where else but Lands End? So I went to Lands End, myself!"

"In a Nazi Messerschmitt?" Freddy Farmer gasped before he could check himself.

Von Khole gave him a reproachful look, and shook his head sadly from side to side.

"You stupid English!" he groaned. "You do not have the imagination of a fly. But of course not. I stayed in the clouds for a bit longer and worked back over land between Southampton and Lands End. Then I pointed my plane northward with the controls set for level flight, and jumped with my parachute. By the time I reached earth the Messerschmitt was many miles away. And a time

bomb in it eventually blew it into a million pieces so that it would never be recognized for what it really was. Soldiers rushed me when I landed, but of course I carry identification papers that nobody would ever question. I told them that my plane had caught fire in the air and that I had been forced to jump. I even told them I was on a special courier mission, and...."

The German paused to laugh heartily.

"What stupid swine, the English!" he cried. "Be polite, be the gentleman, and they will believe anything you say. The soldiers took me to their commanding officer where I repeated my story. He believed me, also. And he actually loaned me his car in which to continue my journey. *Himmel!* After the war I shall write a book on the English. It will be the funniest thing ever written. Anyway, I abandoned the car just before I reached Lands End, and made the rest of the way on foot. The field guards saluted me as I walked past them, and that was all there was to it. And now...."

"Not quite all, von Khole," Dave spoke up quickly. "There's still the most mysterious part of it all that I can't figure. I mean, how in heck did you find out that Farmer and I were going to steal this plane? Or maybe you just watched us, and guessed, huh? That sure was a bit of smart guessing, is all I can say."

"Quite!" Freddy echoed. "It's almost unbelievable!"

The Nazi spy snorted in scorn.

"Guess?" he said sharply. "Of course not. I saw Manners talking to you on that strip of sandy beach. I simply listened to what he told you, and learned everything."

"You listened?" Dave cried. "Hey! Don't try to stuff that one down my throat. There wasn't anybody within two hundred yards of us. And don't say that Manners bellowed at us through a megaphone, because that's out, too. What do you mean, listened?"

"Not with my ears, with my eyes, my simple one!" the Nazi clipped at him. "For years I have been an expert lip reader. I hid in the shore grass a good quarter of a mile from where you sat, trained a powerful pair of binoculars on Manners' face and read every word he spoke to you. After that I simply watched you two every instant of the time. *Himmel!* It was child's play compared to lots of other tasks I have accomplished for my Fatherland."

"Well, I'll be cow-kicked!" Dave breathed in frank admiration. "Lip-read every word Air Marshal spoke! Boy oh boy! Did we have two strikes on us before we even got started!"

"What?" von Khole echoed with a puzzled frown. "Two strikes? You speak of labor trouble in the United States?"

"No," Dave said. Then with a grin, "Brooklyn Dodger trouble when Ernie White of the St. Louis Cards is pitching against them. But skip it. What happened to your face? Did you run into a door that wasn't shut?"

Baron von Khole scowled and impulsively reached up and touched his cut cheek with his free hand. It was not until then that Dave saw that the German had a beautiful goose egg on the left side of his head.

"I can thank you for that!" the German said sharply. "You and this cursed plane that bucks like a wild horse. About two hours after your take-off a movement of the plane hurled me out of my hiding place aft and I struck my head on one of the bracing girders, and a bolt end cut my cheek. But it is nothing."

A glimmer of truth suddenly flashed through Dave's brain.

"Yes, I remember that tough air pocket we smacked into," he said with an understanding nod. "It bounced Farmer and me around plenty, too. It was just before we sighted those signal lights of some craft down on the water."

The German seemed to look blank for the tiniest part of a split second. Then he nodded his head vigorously.

"Yes, it was shortly before then," he said. "But it's nothing. And now, my little boys, we have done enough talking, you and I. There is more for me to do, and unfortunately for you, you are in my way. I cannot waste any more time. What happens, must happen."

Dave looked blank, but his brain was clicking over at lightning like speed. The truth, and he was sure it was the truth, was as clear as high noon in his brain. Yes, he knew, now, why von Khole had hesitated using the Luger, and had waited, casting expectant glances at the radio every now and then. The reason was because the Nazi was worried. Worried about what messages Dave and Freddy had sent and received *while Baron von Khole was out cold from the crack he received on his head*. And the man *had* been knocked unconscious. Dave knew that for a certainty. He knew it, because he had lied about sighting signal lights from a boat below them. *There hadn't been any signal lights!* They hadn't even sighted a boat!

Yes, von Khole had delayed action because he was worried. Ten to one the man had only gained consciousness when the Catalina was climbing up out of the storm to make eye contact with the raider. He didn't know what had happened during the hours he was unconscious. He knew, of course, that radio contact had been made with the raider, but who else had Freddy contacted over the ether waves? British planes? British Navy ships? The Nazi didn't know. He had no way of knowing. So he had delayed and waited, hoping that the radio might start crackling, and he could snatch the phones from Freddy Farmer and perhaps gain an inkling of what had transpired

during his unconscious hours.

However, the radio had remained silent, and the Nazi did not dare wait any longer. Whatever his next move was in his devilish game, he had to get on with it, and soon!

The blood began to pound at Dave's temples, and for one awful instant every muscle and nerve in his body seemed to turn into water. He wanted to look at Freddy, but he didn't dare take his eyes off Baron von Khole's face. Gone was the smirk, the scorn, and the look of delighted triumph from the German's face. It had become set, hard and cruel, and the light of a born killer glowed in his eyes. Dave knew that it was only a matter of split seconds. Perhaps not even that length of time. He tried to speak, but the horrible moment froze his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Then with desperate effort he tore his eyes from von Khole's face and shot a quick glance out the side compartment window.

"Planes coming!" he cried in a hoarse voice.

Von Khole stiffened and half turned his head. In that infinitesimal split second of time Dave Dawson staked his life, Freddy's life, and the success or complete failure of their mission, on a single lightning-like action. With every ounce of his strength he shoved forward the foot he had eased up to rest against the control column of the plane. The mighty effort rammed the column forward, and sent the craft lurching down by the nose. As a result the tail surged upward and the cat-walk practically fell away from under von Khole's feet.

The German half toppled over backwards and then seemed to rise right straight up in the air. A horrible curse of rage spilled from his lips, and the Luger in his hand barked three times. His backward movement however had tilted the gun barrel upward and all three bullets ripped harmlessly through the roof of the compartment. Then the German crashed the top of his head against the strong cross brace girder of the top section of the fuselage. Even above the howl of the engines Dave heard the sickening crunching sound. Baron von Khole's eyes went glassy. Then they closed shut, and he tumbled down on the cat-walk, limp and still as a wet dish rag.

"At him, Freddy!" Dave screamed and hurled himself backward out of his seat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Atlantic Madness

Dave's cry to Freddy Farmer was just a waste of breath, for the English youth was already out of his seat with all the speed of a bullet leaving the muzzle of a gun. And it was also a waste of effort for either of them to dive down on the limp Baron von Khole. The German was completely unconscious and the deep bleeding cut in the top of his head made by contact with the fuselage girder was proof positive that he would remain unconscious for a long, long time to come. Just the same, the two fighting aces of the Royal Air Force took no chances. They took the Luger from von Khole's limp fingers, and then trussed him up tight with a length of spare mooring line.

"Beautiful, Dave!" Freddy panted as they got to their feet. "I never dreamed you had that in mind. I saw you inching your foot up but it didn't even dawn on me that you were trying to get it braced against the control column so that you could shove the nose down and spill him off his feet."

"Thank goodness it didn't even dawn on von Khole, what I was up to," Dave said with a big sigh. "But just a tap would have laid him out cold. He was still a bit punch drunk from that other crack he got on his dome."

"And to think he's been aboard and hiding aft all the time we've been in the air!" Freddy said in a slightly shaky voice. "Good grief, it gives a chap the creeps! I..."

"Let it ride, and stop thinking about it!" Dave snapped and vaulted back into the pilot's seat. "Get going on that radio, and see if we can get that raider to change her course. If we can't, then there's just one thing left for us to do."

Freddy Farmer didn't bother to ask what that was. He leaped into the co-pilot's seat and went hammer and tongs at the radio. Dave hauled the Catalina out of the dive into which he had kicked her with his foot, and climbed her up and around in the direction of the steaming raider and her flock of U-boats. Every second the raider kept on steaming northward he was filled with a great desire to yell at Freddy for speed, and more speed. But he knew that the English youth was doing his level best to reestablish contact by radio.

And then, when perhaps a year or two had dragged by, Dave suddenly looked out the window on Freddy's side of the compartment, sat up straight and yelled.

"Too late, now, Freddy!" he bellowed and rapped his pal on the arm with his free hand. "She won't listen to us, now. There's planes coming, and they're Nazis. Get aft to the tail gun. Action coming up, and coming up fast!"

Freddy Farmer jerked up his head, tore off the earphones and shot a look out the window. In practically a continuation of the general movement he started scrambling out of the seat.

"It's going to be hot, Dave!" he shouted, but there was no note of fear in his voice. "Hot as blazes. But what about the raider? We can't let her get away from us! Blast von Khole from breaking into our party. The Fleet planes and...."

"Skip it!" Dave barked. "Too late for that stuff, now. It's up to us, Freddy. Keep them off our tail as long as you can. I'm going down and dump our eggs on that raider. If we can't sink her maybe we can at least cripple her. Get aft, pal, and give the bums jumping blue blazes for the good old Royal Air Force!"

Freddy Farmer hesitated a moment, snapped a quick glance at the raider they were now fast overhauling, and then gripped Dave hard on the arm.

"Right you are, old thing!" he shouted. "You plaster her, and I'll jolly well plaster them! See you sometime, somewhere!"

"I'll be there, pal!" Dave cried as Freddy ducked aft.

Jerking his head front Dave fastened his gaze on the raider, shoved the control column forward and sent the Catalina thundering down in a long dive. Even before he had lost a couple of hundred feet of altitude he heard the savage ear splitting chatter of many aerial machine guns going into action. Their sound told him they were German guns. Then an instant later he heard the sharper and louder chatter of Freddy Farmer's guns giving answer.

"With Freddy back there picking them off, we're as safe as in church!" he muttered through set lips. "There isn't a guy in the whole Royal Air Force who can shoot like Freddy. He...."

Br-r-r-at!

The smack of a burst of bullets slapping against one of the compartment windows cut off Dave's sentence as though with a knife. He swallowed and instinctively ducked.

"And there's some lug flying for Hitler who isn't so bad himself!" he breathed and ruddered sharply to get out of the line of fire.

As the movement took him around slightly he caught sight of the raging ball of fire tumbling down out of the air toward the sea. He couldn't tell the exact type of the plane, but he knew that it was German. Freddy Farmer had scored first blood.

"And that's only the beginning, you tramps!" he howled and ruddered back toward the raider. "So why don't you guys get wise and go on home? Freddy...."

For the second time in as many minutes sound choked off the rest of what Dave was about to say. This time it was not the crack or slap of German aerial machine gun bullets. It was louder, and deeper, like the earth trembling bark of a gigantic dog. And even as the thunderous sound came to his ears he caught sight of the flame centered globs of ugly black smoke that appeared just off the right wing. And a snap, glance downward at the raider and her U-boats told him what he already knew. The German boats had broken out their anti-aircraft guns and were trying desperately to finish what the attacking long range German sea raiding planes had started.

The sky raking fire from below blasted Dave's last hope that they might still be able to fool the raider. A slim, crazy hope in view of the fact that those aboard the raider could most certainly see him roaring down at them. However, he had clung to that hope, crazy as it was. But now it was gone. Now it was a fight to the finish. German planes, U-boats, and a heavily armed sea raider against a lone R.A.F. Catalina flying boat of the Coastal Command manned by two stout hearted, do-or-die youths still in their teens.

"Okay, you've got the idea!" Dave shouted at the raider. "So here we come with the old one-two punch."

As the words rushed off his lips, Dave steepened his wing howling dive slightly, then took one hand from the Dep control wheel and grabbed the bomb release toggles especially fitted to the side of the compartment so that the pilot could still release eggs in case the bombing officer was killed during an action. One hand gripping the Dep wheel, and the other gripping the bomb release toggles, he sent the Catalina rocketing down lower and lower, straight through a sea of bursting, roaring flame that rose up from the guns of the raider and the U-boats.

Split seconds whipped by. He felt the Catalina buck and tremble as bits of archie shell crashed into her. He heard the steady chatter of Freddy Farmer's guns aft, and he saw two more balls of flame go tumbling seaward off to his right. And then it seemed as though the hull nose of the Catalina was going to smash right down into the black smoke belching funnel of the raider. He was so close he could see the white faces of the raider's crew crouched behind their guns and frantically striving to bring their weapons to bear right on him. He even saw some members of the crew banging away at him with machine guns, and even rifles.

He heard and saw all those things as in a dream. Then in the last split second to spare he hauled the nose of the Catalina up out of its mad dive. The instant it came up level and was rocketing forward at terrific speed he yanked back a brace of bomb release toggles. No sooner had he dropped his eggs than he pulled back on the Dep wheel control, dropped the right wing slightly and went careening around and up toward the sun flooded heavens.

No sooner had he started up than his sharp eyes caught the flash of German wings cutting in at him from an angle. His free hand flew to the forward machine gun trigger button on the stick. He booted the Catalina around a bit more at the same time, and then let go with his forward guns. Through a blur he saw that the German craft was a Junkers Ju 88, one of the most deadly type of raiders Hitler was sending against British convoys. It had both bomb power and great fire power as well. It was nothing to fool around with, and Dave didn't waste time fooling. He plastered the nose of the craft, and forced the pilot to turn away. That was the German's fatal mistake. It gave Dave a belly shot, and he took full advantage of the opportunity. He gave the Junkers everything.

And a split second later it was all over for the plane and its crew. It exploded in a billion flaming pieces that seemed to go arching out toward the four horizons.

"My regards to Satan!" Dave howled at the top of his voice. "You'll be seeing him before I do, and how!"

That off his chest, Dave hauled the nose even higher and plowed straight for a long range Focke-Wulf 187 twin engined job that was trying to cut down under Freddy Farmer's withering fire from the tail turret of the Catalina. That too was a bad maneuver on the part of another one of Goering's little boys. Dave's slashing burst practically cut the Focke-Wulf in two. It stopped dead in midair as though it had smacked straight into an invisible brick wall. Then it buckled in the middle, and started slowly spinning seaward.

"Cheating on you, Freddy!" Dave shouted. "But the shot was too good to pass up. I...."

Dave stopped short as the whole sky seemed to suddenly turn into a sea of blinding red, and orange, and yellow. The Catalina shook and trembled as a thunderous blast of sound rushed in upon it from all sides. For one horrible heart stopping second Dave thought that an anti-aircraft shell from the raider or one of the U-boats below had scored a direct hit on them and that the Catalina was going up in flame. In the next instant he saw the truth; saw the mighty sheet of flame off to the left that was sliding straight down to the sea leaving behind a towering column of oily black smoke and flaming bits of debris. A second look at it and his heart burst with pride. Freddy hadn't even been paying any attention to the Focke-Wulf trying to get in at him. Instead he had ignored it for bigger game. The largest and most powerful of Hitler's aerial sea raiders. A mighty four engined Focke-Wulf "Kurier." The so-called Flying Fortress of the Nazi Air Force with tremendous bomb, and cannon, and machine gun fire power. And Freddy Farmer had brought it down. Sent it hurtling down in flames never to fly again in this war, or in this world.

In spite of the showers of death that were still whining and howling about the Catalina as it prop-clawed up for altitude, Dave threw back his head and laughed.

"And I thought *I* was taking a Nazi away from under your nose, Freddy!" he shouted aloud. "Heck! I should have realized that you couldn't be bothered with small fry. What a man, what a man!"

Nodding his head in vigorous emphasis, Dave cut out of his zoom, curved around on wingtip to throw off the aim of another Focke-Wulf trying to cut in at him, and snapped a glance down at the water. What he saw brought a yell of wild joy to his lips. Flame and smoke were belching up out of the raider's vitals amidships. And a bit astern of her two U-boats were lunging helplessly in a whirlpool of frothy water. But his joy was short lived. Though the raider had been hit, and was obviously afire, her engines were still doing their work. She was still cutting through the foam flecked rollers at top speed. Even as Dave realized the truth the belching smoke and flame diminished considerably. The raider's crew had got the bomb fire under control, and the raider was still hurling tons of anti-aircraft steel skyward.

At that moment Dave felt rather than saw movement at his side. He snapped his head around a bit to see Freddy Farmer scramble over and into the co-pilot's seat. The English youth's face was paper white but there was a wild determined look in his eyes.

"Rear gun ammo all gone!" he shouted before Dave could ask the question. "There wasn't half enough aboard! What did they think we might have to fight? A few training planes? It's up to you, Dave! You hit her once. Now hit her again and finish the blighter, and be-darned to these Jerry buzzards whizzing around us. Go on, Dave! Go on down and get her good this time. It's our last chance. You'll never have time to make a third bomb dive on her!"

"Last chance!" Dave echoed and shoved the Catalina's nose almost down to the vertical. "Last chance! And we'll make it final for that baby, too!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wings of Victory

As though the very air were greased the Catalina flying boat went streaking down at the raider. Dave felt her tremble and vibrate from hull nose to tail, and from wingtip to wingtip. He felt parts of the plane let go. A brace girder or perhaps a strip of her fuselage covering, but he didn't give it a second thought. This was the last dive on the raider. This time he would release every bomb in the special hull racks. This time it was the raider, or the Catalina, and maybe both.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he suddenly shouted inanely at Freddy. "Is that shooting I hear?"

"A beautiful day!" Freddy shouted back automatically. "Oh, my, no! That's not shooting. Just some old geezer in the next room rattling his evening paper. And I say, Dave, could we stop for a bite to eat? I'm famished!"

At that instant a shell from the raider's forward gun seemed to explode right on the hull nose of the Catalina. There was a mighty roar of sound, and a cloud of vivid red flame. Then the flying boat was down through it and still going.

"Like fish?" Dave yelled out.

"Hate it!" Freddy cried and made a face.

"Too bad!" Dave yelled. "Chances are that's all you're going to get, pal. Fish, and all kinds!"

"Right-o!" the English youth echoed. "But get that blasted raider, first!"

Freddy Farmer's remark ended the bit of by-play between them. The raider was looming up large below the nose of their diving plane, and the air all about them quivered and shuddered with a terrific bedlam of sound. So great was the din, Dave could hardly hear the screaming howl of the Catalina's over-revving engines. And although he held a thumb jabbed against the trigger release on the Dep wheel he could not hear his forward guns firing. He could only see the stabbing jets of flame that spewed out from the nose and streaked down toward the raider.

A mighty power dive straight down into a whole world exploding sound and flames. Time ceased to exist. Time stood still. A hundred thousand crazy, inane thoughts raced across Dave Dawson's brain, but they were forgotten almost before they were registered on the screen of his mind. And then suddenly the raider was once more directly under the nose. Another instant and the Catalina would go hurtling in to its own doom. In that last remaining instant Dave pulled out of the dive, roared straight along the entire length of the raider and pounded down the last load of the flying boat's bombs. And then like before he was once again zooming up and away.

This time, though, it was different. The American built flying boat had taken a terrific beating from Nazi guns. It had taken enough bullets and screaming fragments of anti-aircraft shells to break up a half dozen planes. Yet it still held together. Still held together and valiantly climbed upward, though it shook like rotten timber under strain from nose to tail, and though both engines coughed and sputtered, and threatened to quit cold in the very next second. Dave could sense the flying boat failing in its mighty effort to keep on going, and an icy hand closed over his heart as he wondered just how long she would last. How long before she would break up and they would go tumbling down into that inferno of gunfire below?

As a matter of fact he felt as though a miracle had actually come to pass. The miracle that Freddy and he still lived. The miracle that they had been able to hold off the Nazi aircraft this long, and to have been able to make that last do-or-die bomb dive on the raider. A Catalina was not a bomb diver. That wasn't her job. But this old girl had proved that she could tackle anything when necessary. The ship of ships, but she was doomed. Doomed just as sure as there was the golden blue of the heavens above and the raging fury of war below.

"Did it, Dave, did it!" Freddy's voice suddenly screamed in his ears. "Right on the topper this time. Look, she's heeling over! No, she's coming back up on even keel. But she's really on fire this time, and she's losing headway fast!"

Even as the English youth screamed the words Dave was staring downward at the raider. Though still plowing sluggishly forward, the raider didn't look much like a surface ship any more. She looked little more than a narrow stream of fire that bulged out slightly in the middle. About her sides water boiled and foamed white. And in the next instant there was a blast of red and a sheet of flame up toward the bow. The raider seemed to stop dead and rear up by the prow. She settled back almost immediately and continued to stagger onward like some wounded beast of prey half lurching and half walking toward its hole.

"The U-Boats!" Dave heard his own voice cry out hoarsely. "Look! They're starting to scatter. They're quitting the raider cold. Running away from her like so many rats. And we haven't any more bombs left. Darn those rats! If only there were British planes around to give us a hand. If only..."

At that exact instant came the mighty blast of worlds colliding. Red fire and clouds of smoke seemed to completely envelop Dave and blot out all else. The Catalina lurched drunkenly off onto the left wing. In the next instant it seemed to roll completely over. Instinct and instinct alone caused Dave to grab the controls with both hands and fight to get the craft back onto even keel. Yet, no matter which way he moved the Dep wheel and control column, the Catalina continued to roll over like a huge tired bird.

Then, as though by magic, the red fire and the smoke cleared away, and they both saw the jagged hole in the hull nose. Hole? There just wasn't any hull nose left! And as Dave looked out to the left he saw the left wingtip let go and go sailing off into oblivion. With a part of its lifting surface gone, the Catalina began to lurch and stagger crazily about in the air. No matter what Dave did with the controls it just didn't seem to make any difference.

"A direct hit on us!" he heard his own voice faintly. "The bums. They had to get in one last lucky shot!"

"The raider's stern gun!" came Freddy Farmer's voice through the terrible din of sound that still raged on all sides. "I saw the flash just before it hit us. We're sunk!"

"We will be darn soon!" Dave panted and struggled with the controls to counteract the flying boat's crazy maneuvers.

However, for all the good it did him, he might just as well have walked out on the wing and patched up the damaged tip. The Catalina just wasn't flyable any more and she was flip flopping seaward at an alarming rate.

"Cold meat for those Jerry planes!" Dave said savagely. "They'll have great sport picking us off like a helpless clay pigeon, now. Okay, do your darnedest, you vultures. We got some of you first, and your raider is junk ticketed for the bottom of the Atlantic. Go on and..."

Dave cut himself off short, gasped and hunched forward to gape down at the water. It looked as though a couple of dozen subterranean volcanoes had let go and were belching their fury up to

the surface of the Atlantic. The area covered by the crippled raider and her wolf-pack of U-boats was virtually alive with mounting columns of water and flame. Even as Dave gaped downward the raider disappeared completely in a mighty geyser of foaming water and flame and smoke. An instant later when he saw it again the raider was broken in two pieces and plunging down under the waves.

"Dave, *the Fleet!*" Freddy shrilled and pounded him on the shoulder. "They're shelling them. And look. Planes. *Our* planes! From the Fleet Air Arm. They're giving those U-boats everything. Just look, will you! Nothing can live in that sea, now! We win, Dave. *We win!*"

Not quite sure whether he was alive or dreaming, Dave stared down at the holocaust of war being created on the surface of that part of the Atlantic. Hundreds of shells were raining down to explode among the fleeing U-boats and turn the waters into an oily froth. Shells from British battleship guns still out of sight below the horizon. And hundreds of bombs were dropping down upon the U-boat flotilla from the planes of the Fleet Air Arm. Dave looked up at the sky filled with British wings and could hardly believe his eyes. Flight after flight of them had appeared as though by magic. As though the heavens had split apart and the Fleet Air Arm ships had come tearing down through. While the bombers concentrated on the U-boats below the escort fighters tore into the Nazi planes swarming about the helpless Catalina and practically shot them out of the sky with their withering bursts of fire. In less than nothing flat, bombs were not only tumbling down into the Atlantic, but Nazi planes as well.

"*Our* planes?" Dave shouted when he found his voice. "But how the heck did they...?"

He didn't have the chance to finish the question. At that instant a lone remaining German plane wheeled in close and let fire at almost point blank range at the stumbling Catalina. Dave saw it coming out the corner of his eye, and sight and action were one for him. He let go of the Dep wheel, lunged out and hooked Freddy about the neck and then ducked forward and down. The compartment windows gave way like tissue paper before the furious blast of bullets. A sound akin to that of somebody tearing a strip off a tin roof filled Dave's ears as the shower of bullets raked the instrument panels and turned the thing into a shambles.

"Hey, what the dickens!" came Freddy's choked cry as the youth struggled to free himself from Dave's bear hug hold.

Dave let go and straightened up. So did Freddy, and the English youth's face turned from beet red to paper white as he saw the instrument panel.

"Good grief!" he got out in a tight voice. "I'd have been punched full of holes, Dave, if you hadn't grabbed...."

A short sharp explosion to their left cut off Freddy Farmer's voice. Almost instantly a spear of fire shot down across the shattered front window. Then in the next split second there was an unearthly whine and something glistening sliced right down through the anti-aircraft shell blasted hull nose. Both boys turned their heads quickly to look, but both knew instinctively what had happened.

It was Dave who shouted the truth.

"Port engine's exploded, and the prop blades have let go!" he cried. "And the wing's on fire."

"And we're too low to jump!" Freddy echoed. "Blast it! What more hard luck is going to pick on us?"

"We'll soon find out!" Dave yelled and hauled back on the control column with every ounce of his strength. "One ocean coming up! Brace yourself, Freddy, and be set to scramble out fast. She's so full of holes she'll probably sink like a rock as soon as we touch. I'm going to try and belly flop us in, but I can't guarantee a thing, pal!"

Freddy Farmer made some reply to that, but Dave didn't catch what it was. The blood was roaring in his head as he exerted the very last ounce of strength to get the Catalina's shell blasted nose up so that they would not crash head on into the water. It was like trying to pull over the side of a building. His lungs felt ready to burst. His arms felt ready to snap right out of the shoulder sockets. And a weird conglomeration of colored stars danced and spun around before his eyes. He couldn't see anything. He could only feel the heartbreaking sluggish upward movement of the plane.

He was positive that the nose was not coming up enough, and his heart stood still in his chest as he waited for the sickening, terrifying sound of the shell battered nose crashing straight into the water. Then suddenly the compartment roof seemed to drop down to hit him a stunning blow on the top of the head. He heard Freddy yell as though from a thousand miles away. Then in the next instant unseen iron fists pounded and pummeled his body from head to toe. He tried to hang onto the Dep wheel for support but his hands were wrenched free. He had the crazy sensation of sailing head over heels off into space. Then just as suddenly all movement stopped, and for an instant his ears heard no sound but that of gurgling water.

Water! The very thought of the word cleared his brain. His head ceased pounding and the dancing colored lights faded away from in front of his eyes. He turned impulsively and saw Freddy Farmer sitting bolt upright, blinking stupidly, and clutching a broken section of the radio panel between his two hands. Dave reached out and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Drop it, Freddy!" he barked. "It came loose and the darn thing's no life preserver. You okay?"

The English youth stopped blinking and gaped down at the section of panel he held in his hands

as though it were some strange and mysterious discovery. Then he shook himself and dropped the section of panel into the water that was pouring onto the compartment floor.

"I grabbed the panel for support," he choked out. "It must have come free, and...."

"And did!" Dave cut him off. "Now, out on the wing, pal. This thing's going to be an express elevator headed down in darn short order, I'm afraid. We've got to get out on the wing so's we can jump clear. Now, up with you, Freddy!"

The English youth scrambled up onto his seat, then wiggled out through the compartment window and onto the forward hull. Bracing himself as best he could, he reached back to give Dave a hand. The Yank started out through the window, then suddenly checked himself and shook Freddy's hand free.

"Oh my gosh!" he cried. "Von Khole!"

"Hey!" Freddy screamed. "Where the...?"

By then Dave had ducked back into the compartment again. Freddy saw him through the bullet and crash shattered window. Saw him plunge aft along the cat-walk and then go right out of sight under a couple of feet of water that was rising fast. A moment later Dave reappeared spouting sea water and clutching the limp form of von Khole in his arms. He waded forward along the cat-walk and hoisted the Nazi's head and shoulders up through the window.

"Catch hold, and pull him through, Freddy!" he shouted. "He's still breathing."

The English youth didn't bother to argue. He grabbed hold of the German and pulled him through onto the forward hull hatch. A couple of moments later and Dave was through the window and standing beside him.

"Don't say it, Freddy," Dave growled. "I didn't do it to save his rotten hide. He's a present for Manners. Besides, we couldn't let him drown even if he is a Nazi. Here, give me a hand undoing these ropes. I can keep him afloat better if his arms and legs are free."

"Of all the crazy, balmy idiots!" Freddy growled, but there was a warm glow in his eyes as he bent over to fumble with the water soaked knots. "With the bus liable to sink like a rock any second, the blighter goes fishing for a Nazi. Next time do it for me, but try and come up with Adolf, himself. I ... Watch it, Dave! She's settling fast. Come on! Up on the top center section of the wing. She may not go completely down under, yet."

Dave didn't waste breath making comment. His head was swimming and he had hardly the strength left to move. Somehow, though, he and Freddy managed to hoist the unconscious von Khole up onto the top center section of the wing between the mangled engines, and then scrambled up there themselves. No sooner were they up there than they stretched out flat and panted for air, and fought back the waves of black oblivion that tried to engulf them.

The roar of aircraft engines came faintly to Dave's singing ears. He turned his head as much as strength would allow and looked up through a whirling mist at a brace of British planes circling around overhead. He saw a hand waving from one of the planes, and he tried to raise his own hand to wave back. But the strength just wasn't there. His hand fell down on Baron von Khole's limp figure. He curled his fingers in water soaked uniform cloth, and then the half sunken Catalina was lifted skyward on the crest of a swell, and Dave had the crazy belief that he was flying again.

When he next opened his eyes it was to find himself in a hospital bunk. There was a strange motion to the bunk. Then suddenly he knew that he was in hospital bay aboard ship. He turned his head to see Freddy Farmer in the next bunk. The English youth's eyes met his and they both grinned broadly. Then Freddy Farmer heaved a deep sigh.

"Well, thank goodness you've regained consciousness!" he exclaimed. "Now, perhaps you'll shut up and not talk so much. Man, what a gabber! I couldn't get a word in edgeways, and mind you *I* was conscious every minute after they took us aboard."

"Talking?" Dave mumbled. "Me? What do you mean, took us aboard? Where are we?"

"Aboard the cruiser Hampden," Freddy replied. "She came up and lowered a boat and took us off the Cat-boat just in time. But every blessed minute you've been aboard you've done nothing but babble out all the details of the show. Thank goodness a German ship didn't pick us up, is all I can say!"

Dave started to gulp a question, then saw Freddy Farmer look up and grin toward the other side of his bed. He turned over to stare up into the smiling face of Air Marshal Manners.

"You, sir?" he gasped. "How did you get here?"

"By plane, of course," the Air Ministry official said with a chuckle. "Heard you two had done the job and had been saved. I couldn't wait for you to come ashore. Flew out in a Cat-boat to give you two my blessing, and all that sort of thing. Don't let Farmer pull your leg too much, though. You didn't rave much in your sleep. Mostly about von Khole, anyway. You...."

"Hey, von Khole!" Dave yelped and sat up straight in his bunk before anybody could stop him. "What happened to him? Last thing I remember I had hold of him!"

"And from what they tell me, here aboard," Manners said with a chuckle, "it must have been quite a hold! Took two sailors to pry him loose from you. But don't worry. He's safely aboard, and put on ice, as they say in the States. And still alive, of course. To tell you the truth, Dawson, I've never received such a welcome present in all my life. I owe you a debt I'm sure I'll never be able

to repay."

"Maybe it would have been okay to let him drown," Dave murmured. "But somehow I think it would be better to let the whole world know about his trial, and what comes after. Particularly for Adolf to know. Funny, but I guess maybe that's the real reason I did save his hide. Just to let Adolf know for sure that we got his ace rat."

"Well, we've got him, and he'll do no more damage in this world," Manners said grimly. "Now, if there's anything...?"

"Say, there *is* something!" Dave blurted out. "Maybe you can tell me, sir? How in heck did the ships of the Fleet and the Fleet Air Arm planes show up so unexpectedly? Things popped so fast that we didn't have a chance to contact them. But there they were, Johnny on the spot. I don't understand that."

Air Marshal Manners chuckled and looked at Freddy.

"Farmer understands perfectly," he said. "I know he can explain."

"*Freddy?*" Dave shouted and turned around to stare at his pal. "Hey! What's all this about?"

The English youth blushed to the ears, and looked as though he wanted to sink right down thorough the bunk out of sight.

"Well, good grief, I had to do a little something to help!" he said in a fussed voice. "You were doing practically everything, you know. So ... Well, remember when I said, 'Ouch, my arm'? That was to cover up what I was trying to do. The second radio under the seat. When von Khole wasn't looking I simply slipped my hand down and tuned the set to the directional finder wave length. The Fleet operators picked it up, and came a-steaming. And got there in time, thank goodness!"

Dave blinked, gulped and then grinned broadly.

"If that doesn't beat anything I've heard!" he cried. "And me sitting there dumb as an ox, not even guessing. I ... Aw, gee! And I thought I was the great hero. Doggone it, guy! You've got to cut out making me come in second all the time. You've got to let me be the big noise, at least just once, or I'll quit and find me another pal who really *is* dumb!"

"Well, I fancy there's no choice between you two heroes!" Air Marshal Manners said as they all stopped laughing. "The convoy is safely on its way to port. Nothing can harm it now. England will never forget what you two have done today. Not only England, but the entire civilized world. And if there is any request you want to make, state it and I give you my word it shall be granted."

Dave scowled thoughtfully for a moment, then brightened and looked at Freddy.

"I've got one, but go ahead and state yours first, Freddy," he said.

The English youth looked blank and shook his head.

"Can't think of a blessed thing," he said. "What's yours?"

Dave grinned at Air Marshal Manners.

"It's a request you can grant easily, sir," he said. "Me, I'd like to be assigned to a land plane squadron for a while. I'm sure fed up with falling into the water."

"Me, too!" Freddy cried. "Oh, but definitely, sir!"

THE END

[1] *Dave Dawson in Libya.*

[2] *Dave Dawson with the R.A.F.*

[3] *Dave Dawson at Dunkirk.*

A Page from **DAVE DAWSON, FLIGHT LIEUTENANT**

Suddenly, without the slightest sign of warning, the inky darkness of night was shattered apart by a thunderous roar of sound and a seething ocean of red, yellow, and orange flame that came boiling upward from the ground. The plane bucked, and shivered, and lurched crazily forward. And for one horrible second a mighty invisible force tore Dave Dawson's hands from the controls. Head whirling, and his lungs seeming to burst out through his ribs, he fought with every ounce of his strength to keep the plane from plunging wildly downward.

Freddy Farmer! Where was Freddy? Did he get through? Was Freddy all right? The radio! Was it working? Would that secret signal come through in time? Darn the blasted thing! Would it never speak, and....

At that instant a planet of fire rushed up out of nowhere. It seemed to crash straight into the nose of the plane and explode in a roar that split the very heavens apart. Dave felt as though unseen steel claws were tearing strips of flesh from his bones, and hammering his brains to pulp. He didn't know what it was. He didn't know what had happened. He only knew that he was spinning

head over heels down into a limitless void of roaring thunder and boiling flame.

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