

Sky-Bait



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Old High Hat was an ace and knew his sky-stuff. But when a Yank war-bird uses strange tactics—

LIEUTENANT MARK RIVES came to the American front at a time when our first few squadrons were using the beautiful Nieuport "28" as their vehicle of boomeranged destruction. This single-seater pursuit ship was the finest-looking craft that ever trailed a long graceful stern through hostile clouds. But aside from looks it had little else to recommend its usage.

In a dive, the 28's wing linen had a bad habit of quitting the panels, and carrying away the ribs too. Its 160 h.p. *monosoupape* motor, a red-hot rotary, sounded like all hell turned loose. However, it had more bark than bite. This single-valve—per cylinder—engine hogged "live" gasoline. It put a certain goodly speed into the 28 too. Yet, with all its noise, speed wasn't the "160's" big idea. No; what that devilish whirling spray was doing was this: it was working toward a systematic end—the pilot's end.

First, the "160" would manage to lodge a few pints' weight of spent lubricating oil in the heads of one or more of its nine whirling cylinders. This weight of oil, revolving at high speed, would presently set up a tremendous vibration. Then the gleeful *monosoupape* "160" would yell merrily on

a higher and happier note. The damage was about to be done; that vibration should break the gasoline feed-pipe, and fire would do the rest. Strange, and you won't believe it, this Nieuport 28 wasn't a German invention. It was French.

Of course this motor had other and quicker ways, such as searing its cylinder walls through intense heat. The cylinder so seared would seize its piston and then the whirling heller could boot the whole works—cylinder, piston and casserole—into furthest and vertical space. Still another method, not unknown to "28's," was to have the entire motor separated from its fixation plateau-plate and dropped back to Mother Earth.

As an effective article of war, the Nieuport 28 was a darb from Germany's point of view. As they saw it, our offensive—with such aircraft—was the best defense they could have. They felt fine about the whole thing. Their aces were made aces quickly; and all the Hun flyer had to do was be on hand when a "28" went berserk, and then ask credit for the kill.

One of the happiest Huns to wax fat on 28 diet was the bird, a free-lance flyer, known as the High Hat. This gay cloud cavalier wore a high silk

tile behind a higher windshield; and the war—thanks to Nieuport 28's—seemed to be furnishing him with a good time, a merry life, and a long one. For months he had worn and tipped that high top and gotten away with it. Also, he had bagged a fast and heavy take of Allied planes; and following each kill, if the chance were opportune, High Hat would do the gentlemanly thing and make his report to some one of our front-line dromes. When he came with this in view, he came at the most unexpected times. And, as a rule, he'd drop the note with a New York Times or Boston Globe. Too, his very good correspondence was strictly in fine American, which is vastly different from the very best English. Some said that High Hat was the son of an old American family. Maybe, but at any rate he was game, quick and entertaining. Also, a killer.

SOME of High Hat's notes were worthy of greater consideration by those in command; they were full of good advice. For instance, more than once, High Hat suggested that all our pilots should carry a box of matches handy. This, he said, would enable the 28's pilot to burn his ship where and when he desired, without the anxiety which—as High Hat figured—most certainly must have attended the waiting for the darned thing to go off under a man. High Hat also thought that a hand-grenade, with a quick fuse, could be thrown under the gas tank in such a manner as to dislodge the front end of the plane without waiting for vibration to do the trick.

But Headquarters, if that department ever received the notes, ignored his advice. "Don't think"—High Hat wrote—"that we don't feel for you boys. We do; but this is war, and if such ships must exist—thank the Lord, you, and not we, are sitting atop the time fuse. Maybe I know more about these Nieuports than any of you Yanks or French—I've watched so many of you get it And I always watch; the thing has a strange attraction for me. I'm curious by nature, and I just can't fight when I know there's going to be an explosion and fireworks.

"Please do not eliminate the use of 28's for a few weeks, however. By the end of that time I should have Von's record smashed. Got my sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth yesterday. Both were Nieuport 28's. Each man, when I jumped him, had

his head in his cockpit looking for trouble—from within. But, as I before said, this is war, and their greatest trouble, much to their surprise, came from without"—humor and much fun, that!

"He's curious, is he?" Mark Rives mused when this last note was read at mess. Curiosity was the old stuff that killed the cat. I know all about curiosity and curious people. My uncle Paul used to be a sleight-of-hand performer when I was a kid; and I used to travel with him in summer. Lord! how the hicks were taken down the line through curiosity, while curious. Curiosity's bad stuff." Time, in time's strange way, went right along.

Lieutenant Mark Rives, in spite of Nieuports, had lived several weeks on the front. More than once, he had seen High Hat in action. And the day that this enemy gentleman had brought down "Swan" Davis, Rives had seen the doings. At the time, going to the rear with motor trouble, Rives was out of the fight. But the High Hat hadn't pumped lead into Davis, all the way, as was the habit of some adversaries.

For a short while, High Hat and Swan had milled "round and round." But only for a short while, and then the "160" motor had gone bad. Davis' machine-guns lost their synchronization, and his propeller got shot away. He went into a spin. Soon, fire came out red, and Swan was done. But High Hat had merely been curious; and Rives noted it. The Hun had circled, but not shot at, the falling plane. "He's just a good enemy, that's all," Rives had told the squadron. "That High Hat bird's white. But, of course, he's on the wrong side, and must be got..."

WHEN Rives wasn't on patrol, he spent heaps of time at rifle practice. He had all the ex-cans from the kitchen tied high in the roadside trees. And from a kneeling position, he banged away at them by the hour. "Going to be the tin-can ace, eh?" he was kidded.

"Don't be too curious," he'd come back. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Who knows? And who cares?" And that's about all there was to it. But he got mighty handy with the infantry piece.

There came a time when Nieuport 28's were washed out on the front. This was shortly after Major Raoul Lufbery came up with the visit in red, made a decision that only the bravest of the

brave could have made, threw off the shoulder straps and stepped over the side, in preference to cremation within his 28's cramped cockpit. Lufberys weren't plentiful. Better that our men should not fly at all than that they lose any more through useless sacrifice. Next came the Spad 220, and our pursuit outfits took a new lease on life. The 220 Spad took pursuit out of the red.

High Hat wrote that it wasn't fair. "You didn't give me a minute's warning," he sent down in his next jottings. "And these new Spads are too practical, too matter-of-fact and too business-like. What's a poor curious guy to do now? We'll have to work for our chest medals after this. Oh, for one more 28! Just to make an even eighty for me. Have a heart."

There was one lone 28 still in the squadron's hangar. The C.O. had held it out when the rest were sent back on the turn-in. Rives, at evening one day, went to the C.O. "Major," he asked, "can I make one more hop in a 28?"

The major looked at Rives as though he thought that the boy might be—oh, just a little balmy. "Do I get you right, Lieutenant? Did you just ask me to allow you to hop a 28?"

"Yes, sir. I want to go out and appease High Hat's vanity. I'm an expert on curiosity, sir. And I know that I can hold that gentleman's interest if I can attract his attention with bait."

"Bait is right!" the C.O. emphasized and laughed. "Look here, Lieutenant; High Hat had months of joy with 28's. If he didn't get enough of them, it was his own fault. But he isn't going to get any more. Request washed out, Lieutenant. Ask me something easier next time." Rives went away kicking stones.

Two days later the major was relieved from command and replaced by a colonel who must have known lots of important people, but little about air. Rives made his request anew. And the colonel said, "Sure, hop to it. Fighting's our business."

"I want to go out alone, when I'm ready, sir. This flyer we call High Hat works alone, too. I don't want any outsiders to egg in on the show. Of late the High Hat has been delivering papers here at sunset."

"Delivering papers?" the new C.O. asked. "You mean it?"

"Yes, sir. High Hat carries the New York

Times and *Boston Globe* fairly regular to us."

"How about the Los Angeles *Examiner*?" the colonel asked. "I'd like to see an *Examiner*. Haven't had one, you know, since I left the Coast. Try to get one for me, Lieutenant."

Rives went directly to the sergeant in charge of hangars. "Sergeant," he said, "will you knock the dust off that 28 and make her ready for flight?"

The non-com was a hard guy. He said, "Lieutenant, why don't you get somebody to knock the dust off your brain? You mean to tell me you're going to hop one of those falling torches when you don't have to?"

"Just this one time, Sergeant," Rives told him. "And you boys will be proud of me. Then—"

"Now look-a here," the sergeant said through the side of his mouth, "you're getting a strange name in this outfit. You go off shooting tin cans when you should be improving your machine-gun work. Man, your luck's going to ravel out if you don't watch your Ps and Qs and Huns. I'm not afraid to talk turkey to you, Rives. You're a good kid. Your eyes ain't got no green in them. You can listen to reason; and I'm the guy to tell you when you're foolin' the thing. Now what's the idea, eh?"

In the end Rives took the sergeant into the deep shadows and talked long and ardently to him. Slowly the sergeant's face lighted as though a match were concealed in his large mouth. He finally cheered. "That's a darb! We'll get right to work on that 28 now. I have the sheet isinglass to make a big windshield, too."

"And," Rives asked as they trundled the Nieuport into better light, from deep in the hangar's rear, "are you sure you can make this ship fly hands-off?"

"It's the one thing that these 28's can do and do better than any other ship on wings," the sergeant said. "They are sweet handling crocks, when it comes to stability alone. And we'll not only rig her so's she'll fly hands-off, but I'll promise a feet-off job, too. Of course, with feet off she'll turn to the left a bit, but mighty slowly."

"That will be jake," Rives agreed. "Make her hands-off and feet-off, at full throttle, and this hangar crew wins five hundred francs, laid on the work bench just before I take off."

"This gang," the sergeant said, "would carry

a ship into Germany for five hundred francs.”

BY noon the next day Lieutenant Mark Rives had flown that 28 five times—just around the field—on test hops. At the end of this time the riggers had made adjustments that fulfilled the sergeant’s every promise. The plane flew itself with hands and feet taken from control-stick and rudder-bar; and Rives was set to go. Then, till along toward sunset, he waited and grew impatient. When the first signs of evening rode into the sky the crew brought the 28 to the starting line and prepared for the moment of Rives’ say-so. A little later the lieutenant came from his quarters carrying several things, and among these things was a high hat. The onlookers laughed. “When High Hat meet High Hat,” they asked, “what’s going to be the answer?”

“Don’t be too curious,” Rives kidded back. “Watch yon sky just after our paper boy arrives . . .

“Start the motor, Sergeant. When she hits right, leave her idling till I get set to shove off. It won’t be long.”

It wasn’t long. By the time the *monosoupape* “160” had warmed up and then, in turn, been idled, to loaf on its selector, a small, distant spot appeared in the northeast. This, no question, was High Hat.

Lieutenant Rives swung a long leg into his cockpit. The mechanics threw the shoulder-straps across his back, and he was away in a cloud of dust. The climb wasn’t fast. He didn’t care to go directly into the clear sky from the drome which High Hat was nearing. Rives wanted to meet the Hun after the latter had sailed by and tipped the high dip. It would give him—Rives—some altitude. High Hat performed as usual. Passing the drome, he zoomed, hung on his prop for a second or two, and then Straightened out. Next, far overhead, he spotted the Nieuport. He flew wide and went out for altitude. High Hat was interested.

Rives flew back and forth across the sky as though this were just a fine evening for a quiet flight, and as though he were the boy to enjoy it. Never once did he act as though the enemy plane had been seen. And, very likely, High Hat thought that he was doing a fine job of jumping when he came down on Rives’ tail at about 7,000 feet. That

crazy Rives!

The hearts of the watching outfit came into their mouths when, with High Hat hardly a hundred feet astern, Rives, kneeling on his seat and facing the oncoming enemy, removed his own high tile and waved. The curious enemy, fanning his rudder, weaved his ship right and left and held his fire. No doubt he marveled at the Nieuport’s free flying. Maybe he suspected trickery. But, at any rate, he was game. He stalled in above Rives’ rudder till less than fifty feet of sky showed between the two ships. His upper position, of course, gave the German peace of mind. At any time he could terminate this curious truce and bag another 28.

The Nieuport, banging away like the guns of doom, held her course. Rives continued to kneel, and hold his audience. By then the flying had brought both ships directly over the Yank drome. You could see Rives pass a waving hand over the silk hat which he held. Then, from that hat, he took something and dropped it in the cockpit. He passed the hand across again and, extracting a second large object, dropped that thing from view. And a third. And a fourth. The curious enemy, a wonderful flyer, was now almost lapping wings with the American; and his curiosity had him hanging half out of his cockpit, high hat removed.

Next, with his final *beau geste* and a showy wave of the hand, Rives drew forth the piece de resistance of all legerdemain: the wildly kicking rabbit. You could see it kicking from the ground. You could see the Hun place both hands—free of his own controls—high above his head and applaud.

Then, with a short toss, Rives tossed the kicking rabbit into space. Surprised, aghast, perhaps, the Hun leaned out to watch the animal fall to the rear of the winging ships. . . .

And in that second, when High Hat’s attention was diverted, Rives reached into his cockpit and brought out the rifle.

High Hat went the way of the rabbit.

“Shucks, no, it wasn’t a real rabbit,” Rives later said. “I couldn’t do that to any animal. It was a rabbit skin filled with springs. Took me a week to make it.”