

**From His Perch High in the Heavens, Dale Newsom Plays a Hunch and Slams Down to Crush a Grim Canal Zone Conspiracy!**



Carefully the two officers removed the torpedo

# THE POWDER KEG

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**L**IEUTENANT DALE NEWSOM was afraid that his suspicions had been aroused too late. Why hadn't he investigated that mysterious flash of light along Culebra Cut, when he had flown over the Panama Canal from Colon to Panama City? Considering all the whispers of sabotage that were current in Colon about the *Monarch*, which was on its way through the Canal this very minute and said to be heavily loaded with munitions, he should have been wider awake.

But maybe it wasn't too late. Now, Newsom was flying his Vought-Sikorsky V-

150 back over Culebra. He was looking down intently, trying to spot the place in the woods where he had seen that flash of light on his outward flight. That flash of light, he suspected was caused by the sun reflecting on a pair of binoculars.

"If some 'accident' were planned for the *Monarch* about here," Newsom thought, "it would certainly be timed to the second. And if I hadn't spotted that flash, I'd be lazing along over Cristobal this very minute, instead of dashing back to check on a sudden hunch!"

Dale Newsom, still following his hunch,

sped on above the *Monarch*, circling her tightly, looking down. The ship still had a mile or more to go before reaching the spot where he had seen that flash which had disturbed his thoughts and stirred his imagination.

"It'll probably turn out that I've simply got a touch of fever," he said aloud. "Hell, maybe I am nuts."

And yet, he didn't like the way the people on the *Monarch* behaved. His close, scrutinizing glance revealed no women. No passengers. The crew seemed to be almost a skeleton one. White faces were turned up at him. But nobody waved. And never, during the many times he had circled over a ship at sea or in the Canal, had everybody failed to wave at him. It was a natural thing to do, to wave at a flyer, he thought. But maybe he was only imagining it.

Either the men aboard the *Monarch* knew that something was due to happen and that his plane might spoil it, or hurry it; or else they were afraid that something would. Newsom wondered how many of her crew had crossed or were crossing the Isthmus on the little railroad.

It was such a little thing on which to base his belief. But the feeling was growing stronger every second in him that something was wrong. The fact that nobody waved, that those on the *Monarch* who watched him seemed as tense as he himself felt. Naturally, they all knew his job, knew that he was one of the Canal's winged guardians. Maybe it was his presence alone that made them tense with apprehension. But what about the flash of light he had seen, and the source which he hadn't spotted from the air. Perhaps he should have reported it by radio to Major Kingsley. But what could Kingsley tell him, not being here? If Newsom were wrong, the major might prefer him to go on his own, without orders. It would free Kingsley of the responsibility.

NEWSOM cursed himself for his disloyalty. Kingsley was like all the rest of them. He wouldn't shirk responsibility. On the other hand, he wouldn't expect any of his juniors to shirk.

Grimly, Newsom banked away toward the spot where he had seen the flash of light. The *Monarch* was approaching the spot now. At the very least, he could circle above it until the *Monarch* had passed, in order to satisfy his own fears. He would circle above it, and keep a sharp watch below.

Newsom was flying at an altitude of a thousand feet when he reached the spot that started his suspicions. His ship was throttled down as far as it could be and still maintain flying speed. He began to circle over the area. Every nerve in his body was like a bowstring. He thought he could almost hear each twanging. The growling of his motor kept time with the shrilling of his frazzled nerves, and seemed to be saying:

"You're hot on something, Newsom. Play your string out! Play your string out! Play your string out!"

Yes, that's what the motor was saying, as though to assure him that his judgment was more than just a hunch. But what was he looking for? Another flash of light? Nobody would pull such a dead give-away again. But if something were planned against the *Monarch*, there would be some movement his keen eyes could detect. But if his eyes were not sharp enough—

Now, Newsom did something he had not done since morning, and he cursed himself roundly for his stupidity. Carefully, he trained his own binoculars on the area he had studied so carefully on the flight to Cristobal. The glasses brought the jungles right up to his eyes, so that he could see the ground in places, and especially the small, cleared region where the lone man had been eating breakfast.

He saw the man again, but not for long. His head came into view for a split-second, then it ducked back out of sight—like the

body of an animal darting back into a burrow! Suddenly, Newsom knew that that was exactly what had happened. He couldn't see the burrow, now that the man had vanished. But he didn't need to. He dropped down until he was flying just over the trees, looking to see where the man had vanished to. But he knew only that when he had ducked back, it had been toward the Canal.

At that moment he caught another movement in a place that wasn't quite clear to his sight, because there were tree limbs, all leafed over, covering the area. But men were there, and they were not in uniform. Instinctively, Newsom knew they had no right to be there.

In a matter of seconds, the *Monarch* would be directly opposite that hint of movement! No time to ask questions, to balance the ledger of reason. No chance to ask himself what chances he was taking with his own career. He only knew that those men had no right to be there. They had never been reported, nor had their location been mentioned in reports. Why? Because they had been clever, masking what they did.

Staking everything, his own future, perhaps even that of his country on a hunch that, to him, was no longer a hunch, Dale Newsom tilted the plane's nose down and set his guns to chattering. He might be killing innocent men, might be slaughtering Panamanians, but he didn't think so. Those men were certainly not supposed to be here, that was a cinch.

A bullet hole suddenly appeared in his wings, and that was all the proof he needed. Whatever was going on down there, he must keep those men busy until the *Monarch* had passed. He was being fired on and that told him enough. Now he would simply cover that area with a hail of steel-jacketed bullets until the *Monarch* had proceeded safely past.

He flew back and forth over the spot. He did tight loops above the place, to keep from taking too much time to turn and come back.

From five hundred feet he dived straight at the spot, loosing his bullets, letting his guns do their best.

**A**NOTHER bullet hole appeared in his wings, when he pulled out, and that bullet decided something for him. He looped at an altitude- which anyone would have said spelled sure suicide. But he had to. If anyone were left alive down there who could shoot at him, that was one too many. For one man, properly equipped, could destroy the *Monarch!*

How slow the *Monarch* was, he thought. But then, every man aboard her must know that the racketing of his guns spelled danger to the ship. There was reason enough for them to slow down now. And yet, the bow of the *Monarch* was coming opposite the place he was strafing. The weight of such a ponderous vessel could not be halted quickly.

Back and forth, stripping leaves from the trees, blasting their tops to pieces, hosing the entire area and turning it all into a sieve, Dale Newsom sped his bullets. And then, for a time, he circled over the place. No bullets were being fired at him now, as nearly as he could tell. He flattened out directly above, to give the gunner a chance. But no chance was needed. Dale Newsom could see sprawled figures down there, figures of men whom he had shot at times without number. He must have made sieves of their bodies.

"Right or wrong," he told himself grimly, "I've done it now! If a mouse is alive down there it's no fault of mine."

Now, sure that he had blasted everything down there to Hades, he swept out over the *Monarch*, circled her tightly, and waved to the men on deck.

But Dale Newsom did not catch his breath until the *Monarch* was approaching Pedro Miguel. Then, his face grim, he headed west again for Colon, and Coco Solo, and Major Kingsley. He did not know it, but he had aged ten years since his take-off this morning. For

he knew that gloriously right, or hideously wrong, he had killed several men. It wasn't good to possess such knowledge. Yet, if he hadn't, more men might have been killed on the *Monarch*, and after her destruction, millions might be killed because Uncle Sam would have been drawn into the European war! But, at present, he wasn't aware of that.

And there was still a possibility that he had been murderously wrong. There was only one thing to do about it. And when he circled over his own field and saw a stalwart, soldierly figure marching out to the apron where he must give a full accounting, he knew that Kingsley already knew—knew at least that he had been using his plane's guns. And Kingsley, responsible for what his fliers did, must also feel the weight of a dreadful responsibility.

Dale Newsom made a ragged landing, but he scarcely noticed that. He taxied up to the apron, swung her about and ran his motor out. He was wondering how he could possibly do the routine thing, after he had slain human beings on a hunch. Then he jumped from his pit to look into the gray face of Major Kingsley. He saluted, and Kingsley, meticulously returning the salute, spoke just one word:

"Well?"

Dale Newsom reported exactly what he had done. When he told of his failure to report that flash of light by radio, he saw disapproval—mingled with something else—relief perhaps?—on the face of Kingsley. When he admitted that he hadn't asked for instructions, he was sure of the look of relief. And when he told of those sprawled figures, the face of Kingsley went grayer still.

"You've got to take me there, Newsom," said Kingsley, in a voice the Yank pilot scarcely recognized. "There's no place where a plane can land, so we'll have to go by tug. I'll order one. . . ."

LIEUTENANT and Major stood side by side in the prow of the tug as it sped along the calm surface of Gatun Lake. Neither had a word to say. Reaction was setting in, and the feeling that he had made a ghastly mistake kept growing in Newsom. Everything around him was so peaceful. A gentle breeze played over the face of the water, and the odor of the ageless jungles tickled his nostrils. Newsom did not dare look at his superior. When he said, "About here, sir," his voice did not sound like his own, but like that of a stranger, a very hoarse stranger. The tug drifted up to the bank, its screw in reverse in order to cut its headway. Newsom and Kingsley jumped ashore. In a moment, they would know, the lieutenant thought.

Newsom, dread consuming him as he realized he must soon look upon his own handiwork, went first. He led the way to a camouflaged pit, dug straight down into the rock beside the Canal. The pit had been masked to view from flying planes by overlapping trees, but it was no longer true. Newsom was seeing what havoc machine-gun bullets could cause. There were dead men at the bottom of the pit. But still Kingsley said nothing. Newsom turned, pushed back down the slope, back down to the place where he had seen a man dart like an animal into a burrow. He found the burrow, and it, too, was camouflaged. Grimly they walked into it and down a narrow steeply slanting tunnel which lead to the level of the pit floor.

Newsom led the way in, the footfalls of Kingsley firm at his heels. The young lieutenant stepped in among the dead. There were four of them, dressed in civilian clothes. Bullets had plowed into them, over and over again. Kingsley went over to the wall of the pit nearest the Canal.

"Have a look, Newsom," he said grimly, "and thank your stars for being right! They must have brought it in a piece at a time for months, against just such a moment as the passing through of the *Monarch*! And what do

you say now about the efficiency of our patrols? Our protection against sabotage?"

But Dale Newsom could not grin. He could only feel horror rise in him. For in the wall of the pit was a metal contrivance such as he had often seen in his own country's submarines. It was a torpedo tube, complete with torpedo! He did not need to look further to know that the tube led into the Canal well below the waterline, but not too far below it for the launched torpedo to miss a big boat. Even a ship like the *Monarch*!

"They meant to launch her," said Kingsley, almost in a whisper. "Then, in the excitement, they'd let water into the pit from the Canal. We could look right into the pit and never even guess it was anything but a natural pit filled with seepage. The water would erase all traces of their work, and they could do it all over again somewhere else, if and when we cleared the Canal again!"

Kingsley and Newsom faced each other squarely now.

"And since that was their plan, Newsom," said Kingsley, "why don't we finish it for them?"

Carefully, the two withdrew the unfired torpedo and rendered her harmless, even while the waters of the Canal swirled about their feet, spouting in through the erstwhile "tube." Finally, they lowered the silver fish into the rising water, which was swiftly covering the dead in the pit—the dead bodies of the secret agents. Their nationality did not matter, could not matter, when Uncle Sam was not at war.

"We have to be quiet, of course, Newsom," said Kingsley. "These spies wanted their work to remain secret, and so it shall remain. You've done a great thing, but you can't even get credit for it."

"I never want to hear about it, sir," said Newsom. "I wish I could forget it."

KINGSLEY, with the water about his knees now, glared into the eyes of Newsom. The younger man stiffened and felt himself growing even older than he had felt when he had been none too sure of the truth about what he had done.

"You must not forget it!" said Kingsley. "Not for a second! For what has happened once, can happen again! Only I hope that you always be right, for if it turns out that you are not—"

"Then, on the chance that I may not be, I am to exercise greater care, I suppose?" Newsom asked.

A tight grin touched the grim lips of Kingsley.

"Newsom," he said, "just what do you think is the answer to that?"

"I understand, sir," said Newsom. "I'll be more careful in the future. Shall we be going, sir?"

Kingsley nodded.

"After you, Lieutenant, after you! And if you've been wondering whether anyone might find your victims, and start to talk—"

"I know, sir," Newsom said, nodding. "The forest grows fast. In a few days there will be leaves to cover those I shot. Moreover, that tube which leads into the pit from the Canal will bring plenty of hungry fish."

"Exactly! Now let's get out before we have to stay with our late friends! And hurry! You need rest. Tomorrow is another tough day. It may be even tougher for you than this one. But if it is, I know at least one flier I won't worry about!"

Quickly they walked out, and left the would-be wreckers to the jungles which, in their time, had erased far greater tragedies.