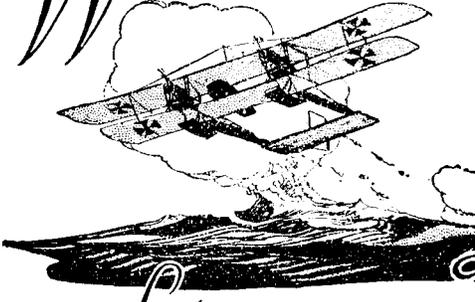


Within the Three-Mile Limit



by Arthur Tuckerman

AWAY up forward Steve was bawling orders to a couple of sweating sailors who were hammering away at an airplane float.

The Ben Hur had been rolling lazily in an oily sea for a week, some miles off the Belgian coast, and already the crew were beginning to chafe under the period of inaction. Just three weeks previously Steve Bennett and I had been assigned together to the Ben Hur. Steve being a Canadian boy and I hailing from a little border town in Maine, we hit things off together pretty well.

As luck would have it, we were posted together as pilot and observer for Seaplane 29 on board the Ben Hur. She is one of those cumbersome craft known in the British navy as mother ships. She carried a brace of airplanes on her foredeck and offered them a kind of motherly protection when they winged their way back to her after the day's work.

As I strolled up from below decks I noted that it was a gray day and there was a gathering mist on the horizon. The wavelets were plashing against the Ben Hur's blunt bows, and screaming seagulls circled about her stern, trying to pick up odds and ends which were being dumped through one of the starboard port-holes.

Steve was livening things up on the fore-deck as usual as I approached him.

"Anything doing to-day?" I shouted above the clang of the hammers.

"Sure!" he cried. "McNaughton's given orders for us to take up the Gum Shoe in half an hour. There's a report that a German destroyer flotilla is cruising around off Zeebrugge, so we're going to look 'em up."

The prospect did not seem very thrilling, but after seven days' hanging around mid channel doing nothing, the orders were a godsend.

Steve turned to resume his rapid-fire comments on the sailors' working methods. They were repairing a part of No. 29, the big seaplane familiarly known to the crew as the Gum Shoe. I believe she bore the name because of the big black floats on which she rode the water. When she was in the air they looked like an enormous pair of feet encased in rubber overshoes.

On the quarter-deck I met McNaughton, senior officer, and he rapped out the day's orders.

"You're to go with Bennett as observer," he said. "Make for Ostend, and if there is any sign of an enemy flotilla return immediately, the Dover division

wants news.”

I saluted and went down to the cabin.

When I came up ten minutes later, clad in oilskins, the sailors had finished their job and the seaplane was swinging from a crane over the port bow. She was lowered slowly and struck the water with a splash.

Steve and I clambered into her cockpit and he switched on the motor. She was running like a dream. A few minutes later we were circling over the Ben Hur.

“She climbs like a snail,” yelled Steve behind me. “She won’t do more than two thousand in ten minutes. She’s the worst bus for climbing I’ve ever struck!”

“You should worry,” I retorted. “Anything to get away from that ship. I would have cut loose in a kite-balloon if they had given me the chance.”

Steve is a great fellow for grumbling. They say that when he trained near Portsmouth he was given charge of one of the one-hundred-miles-an-hour Ruffets, the little machines that made the Germans sit up when they were first tried out on the front. Since then he has been terribly particular about his mounts.

As we approached the Belgian coast the mist grew thicker around us. Below lay the dreary sand-dunes, dotted here and there with scrub, and once in a while a shell-stricken cottage, desolate remnants of what had once been Europe’s happy play-ground in the far-off days before the war.

A few miles west of Ostend a German A. A. battery spotted us, but we were well above six thousand, and they failed to get our range. Mist is very deceptive to the gunners. We swung inland over the Zeebrugge canal, a silver ribbon shining through the mist, and veered out again to mid channel. The fog began to thicken around us: thousands of minute

drops of moisture settled on our oilskins.

“We had better fly lower,” I shouted, “if we are to see anything!”

Steve cut off the motor and swung the stick over, and we swooped down to a few hundred feet above the sea. Even then we could not see the surface at all, so we dropped softly onto the smooth waters. After skimming along for a few seconds we stopped.

“It’s hopeless,” Steve growled. “Any fool but McNaughton could have known that there was no use sending us up for observation in a fog like this. Good Lord—”

Startled at his sudden ejaculation I asked him what was the matter. He pointed the compass before him.

“This confounded thing isn’t working properly. I had an idea it wasn’t when we were leaving the coast-line half an hour ago, but I wasn’t quite certain.”

I suggested that the best thing to do would be to turn around, fly straight back to the coast, where we could get our bearings.

“That’s all very well,” he answered, “but there is a slight breeze; we may have drilled out of our course several points. Still, it’s the only thing to do. Trying to find the ship in this mist would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

As usual I gave in. Steve always runs the show; the middies aboard the Ben Hur call him the boss.

So we switched her on again and went roaring back about twenty feet above the water. After we had been flying for forty minutes I turned around in my seat to speak to Steve.

“This scheme to rediscover the Belgian coast seems to have gone wrong.”

“There’s no use turning back, we’ll stick to it,” he yelled. I turned back to my map-reading. Under the circumstances it was not of much use, but it gave Steve the

impression that I was doing something, anyway. There are times when the observer feels reminded that the pilot regards him as a useless piece of baggage; on the other hand I've heard observers say that the pilots are only their chauffeurs.

So that is how it all began.

After two hours' steady flying without any sight of land, the six big cylinders ahead of us suddenly quit work, the tractor screw swung lazily for a few moments, and we dropped onto the waters again. Steve took off his goggles and stared about him; the fog was lifting slowly but revealed nothing.

"Not a drop of gas left," he said. "I didn't come up equipped for a distance record. We can sit here peacefully till something drifts up. There's a British T. B. D. flotilla cruising around near here, they sent a wireless to the Ben Hur last night. They will probably pick us up."

"Oh, sure! And there's a German destroyer flotilla hanging around in this vicinity, too; maybe they will pick us up. Think how glad they'd be to get hold of a nice new seaplane with two young men from the Naval Air Service in it. It would be Ruhleben camp for us!"

Steve took a filthy old pipe out of his pocket and jammed some baccy in it.

"Things will turn out all right," he said, puffing away. "You forget the golliwog is with us," and he pointed to a fiendish-looking little doll he had tied on one of the interplane struts. Some queen in Winnipeg had sent it to him.

I never knew Steve was superstitious, but he put all his faith in that golliwog, just as thousands of other young fellows in the armies of England, France, and Russia are decorating their grim armored cars and fighting aircraft with some strange little figure, or perhaps a faded bow of ribbon, just a mascot from

some girl they left behind.

We had been sitting there about half an hour when we detected to starboard the soft splashing sound that water makes against the bows of a swiftly moving ship. As we gazed in that direction a small destroyer loomed up out of the mist.

"She's not one of our lot," said Peter tensely.

"And she's not German, either," I cried. "Look at the flag she flies—she's Dutch!"

"Holy smoke! If we're inside the three-mile limit they will try to grab us for internment!"

Steve made a valiant effort to restart the motor, but failed. The destroyer uttered a hoarse whistle and hove to. A red-haired youth appeared on the bridge with a megaphone.

"You are within the territorial waters of Holland," he shouted. "It makes for us the duty to seize your flight-machine. Please to come nearer!"

Steve stood up in his seat.

"If we could get this darn machine to move we'd clear out of here; we wouldn't be waiting around here to make you a present of her!" he yelled.

The Dutchman disappeared from the bridge like a jack-in-the-box. A few moments later a small boat was lowered and was rowed toward us by a couple of stalwart sailors. The red-haired youth was standing in the bows as it came alongside of us, he held the end of a hawser in his hand. He spoke affably in spite of Steve's sarcasm.

"I am obeying the ordering of my government," he said apologetically. "To you I offer my regrets, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "What is your plan?"

"We shall tow you to Maasluis," he said. "There you are in the hands of the authorities."

"How far is the place?" demanded

Steve disconsolately.

“Four kilometers yet from here.”

“Great guns!” cried Steve. “So that’s where we are, just off the Dutch coast! We must have passed the Maas light in the fog.”

The Dutchman smiled. “If you will come on board the Oranje Nassau, she is at your disposition.”

“Nix,” said Steve, “I stick here at the wheel of my own boat. Jim, you go and join the Dutch treat!”

“I’ll stay here with you,” I murmured, thanking the Dutchman.

“As you will,” he said, and proceeded with the help of the sailors to fasten the hawser around the nose of our beloved Gum Shoe.

Never was there such a voyage! The little destroyer puffed and wheezed, and we slid along behind her, sluing from right to left while Steve made brave efforts to steer with the air rudder. After we had nearly capsized for the fourth time he got tired of it.

“What’s your hurry?” he bellowed, standing up in the rocking cockpit. “Slow down your infant Mauretania, I can’t steer at the end of this blamed rope!”

Obligingly the Oranje Nassau proceeded at a more cautious rate.

Thus we entered the harbor of Maasluis. Little tugboats with stolid gaping crews puffed around us and sirens shrieked.

“Ye gods!” groaned Peter, “we’re a regular circus. I hope there aren’t any movie men about. If any of the boys get hold of this we’d never hear the end of it!”

Once ashore, we underwent a long examination in a cheerless government building. Steve, bringing to the fore his smattering knowledge of international law, insisted that as we had been on the water’s surface when first seen, we should have the status of a ship and be allowed to

depart after “coaling” within the prescribed twenty-four hours. It was an ingenious plea, but he couldn’t slip it over on those Dutchmen, they were too cute. They merely nodded gravely and continued to write massive documents, which they proceeded to stamp all over with important-looking seals.

The long and short of it was that at five o’clock that evening we were comfortably installed in an internment camp several miles away.

Our new place of residence was a small Dutch town of about ten thousand inhabitants, situated on low-lying plains and transversed by numerous canals. The narrow, cobblestone streets were spotlessly clean, and lined with neat but dull little white houses. Steve and I were bored to death in a few hours. We were allowed a certain amount of liberty, but were obliged to remain in the town, as we had both refused to go on parole.

Every day was much the same. In the mornings we strolled around the fortress camp, or sat in the stuffy little smoke-room and wrote letters; in the afternoons we went on short hikes in the vicinity, accompanied by a solemn Dutch guard, who bothered us little. Every now and then we made a trip to the seashore several miles away in a noisy little steam tramway, but always under escort.

As time passed, Steve grew more and more annoyed at our predicament. So did I, for that matter, although I didn’t say so much about it. To make matters worse, we got news of great activity in the air services, which made us long for freedom.

On one occasion we trained back to Maasluis to have a last look at the old Gum Shoe. When we reached the shed where she had been interned, Steve made a rush for the golliwog, which was still grinning hideously from between the

planes. He took it down and wrapped it tenderly in a piece of paper.

“Our luck will turn now,” he said. “Just wait and see!”

One morning about three weeks after our visit to Maasluis we were sitting under the trees beside the canal which ran by the gates of our camp when two smartly clad naval officers approached and saluted us.

“You are Mynheers Bennett and Holt?” inquired one.

“That’s our number!” said Steve, rising from the bench.

“The commandant at the harbor would hold converse with you this afternoon. A car will call for you here at three o’clock.”

Steve, as usual, was inclined to argue and question them as to why we were wanted, but foreseeing a possible release from internment, I shut him up.

The car called for us at the appointed hour, and upon our arrival at the harbor we were greeted by a short, fat individual with a kaiser mustache and effusive manners. A large seaplane tied to the quay attracted our attention. Its wings bore the black crosses of the German air service.

The fat man introduced himself as Captain Van der Hooven, of the Royal Dutch navy. He explained to us that the German plane had been captured in Dutch waters a few days previously; the pilot, suffering from great exhaustion, had been removed to a hospital many miles away. The Dutch naval aviators, being unfamiliar with the new type of seaplane, were anxious to experiment with it, and observing its resemblance to a certain make of British machine, he thought that we might perhaps explain its working to them.

“I call that pretty cool, sending for us to solve their puzzles for them,”

muttered Steve to me; then he turned to the Dutchman. “I should be glad to see what I can do,” he said.

We went on board the plane; it was a tremendous machine, with two giant motors mounted forward, and it embodied some new ideas.

“This is a new one on us,” I remarked. “They would give a lot to have it at Portsmouth!” Steve darted a quick look at me, then continued his inspection of the controls. Steve told the captain that he would like to try her out. He pointed out that the controls were similar to some of the admiralty biplanes.

Two mechanics appeared with a number of cans of gasoline; but I noticed that when they had put some in the tank, about enough to take us ten miles, Van der Hooven stopped them.

When Steve started the twin motors roaring I believe you could have heard them six miles off. Van der Hooven and I climbed into the spacious cockpit, Steve mounted the pilot’s seat, and we started off. She was very slow in the getaway, but once in the air Steve said she answered the controls perfectly.

We circled over the harbor and then headed out to sea. We were up for a quarter of an hour.

“Mynheer Bennett is a magnificent pilot!” cried the little Dutchman enthusiastically as we went ashore. “If he will only have the goodness to come here the day after to-morrow I will have young Lieutenant Sluysdaal, one of our best flight men here, then he can take him up and explain the machine.”

“Sure!” said Steve. I thought I detected a mischievous glint in his eye.

That evening in the little cafe on the market place, where we sometimes spent an hour after dinner, I was surprised to run across an old friend, Charley Forest, war correspondent of a Chicago

newspaper. He was making a trip through Holland to study wartime conditions before sailing for America from Rotterdam. We sat down and ordered drinks as I told him of our predicament.

After we had talked about old times, Steve suddenly turned to him and said in a low voice:

"I think we've got a possible chance of making our escape from here; that is, if some one will do just one thing for us I believe my scheme would work."

"Fire away!" he said. "Let's hear your plan; you can count on me."

At three on the appointed day Steve and I were down at the harbor awaiting the arrival of the Dutch officers. Captain Van der Hooven came at half past three, accompanied by a slim young fellow in uniform whom he introduced as Lieutenant Sluysdaal.

We proceeded to the airplane sheds, where we went through a long examination for the young man's benefit. Then they dragged the German seaplane out of the shed and pushed her down the slipway onto the water. I started to climb on board.

"One moment!" cried Van der Hooven sharply. "There is no need for you to go, Mr. Holt; Mr. Bennett and Sluysdaal can go together for a short flight."

I glanced quickly at Steve, and he came to the rescue. "We can't test this machine properly with only two aboard; Lieutenant Sluysdaal must see how she behaves with three up."

"Then I will accompany you," Van der Hooven answered blandly.

"There is not the need to trouble Mynheer Holt!"

"If it's all the same to you," Steve said, "I'd rather have another man with me who understands this machine in case of motor trouble. Mr. Holt has had

considerable experience with high-powered motors."

I do not know whether Captain Van der Hooven was a thought-reader or not, but he seemed very suspicious that afternoon. He twirled his mustache and fussed around the airplane. When the boys came with the gasoline he only allowed them to put three gallons in the tank.

"That is plenty," he remarked. "We must not let you get too far away!"

He laughed and seemed immensely pleased at his little joke.

The afternoon was cold, and it took several minutes to start the motors. Sluysdaal and I climbed in behind Steve, and we skimmed away across the harbor and up into the azure sky.

It was a glorious day, and our hopes were high. So far all had gone well with our plans, although once or twice the fat Dutchman had nearly upset everything; but we had held the upper hand.

Above the roar of the twelve cylinders Steve explained the working of the control to Sluysdaal, who nodded vigorously, and seemed to take it all in. We headed straight out to sea over a fleet of fishing smacks with sails gleaming in the sun.

As we passed the light-ship, two miles out, the airplane suddenly began to sway violently from side to side, we gripped the sides of the cockpit to keep ourselves from being thrown out.

"Rudder control broken!" Steve yelled as he cut off the power and we slid crazily down to the water. When we had stopped he stood up in his seat and hailed a passing dingey. "I think the wire is broken somewhere aft by the tail," he explained. "If you and Sluysdaal will row back in this boat maybe you can see what's wrong."

Two small boys came alongside,

their craft full of glittering fish. Sluysdaal explained to them what we wanted, and we stepped into the tiny boat and were rowed back to the great spreading tail of the airplane.

Close examination did not reveal any defect in the rudder wires.

"I think these bolts need tightening," I suggested. "I'll get a spanner, I saw one in the cockpit." We rowed back to the front of the machine, and I jumped on board to get the required tool. The Dutchman sat down in the boat to wait while I searched for it.

Quick as lightning Steve switched on the motors. If they had choked we would have been done for, but they roared obediently, and we shot away, having the dingey rocking in our wake, the tail plane just missing her by a hair's breadth.

We headed straight out to sea, keeping only fifty feet above the surface. Just ahead were two buoys about one hundred yards apart, they marked the entrance to a channel. A small motor-boat was rocking idly on the waves between them. As we skimmed alongside of her Charles Forest rose and waved to us.

"Hello, boys! So the frame-up worked all right, I've got your gas here in the boat."

There were ten cans of gasoline piled up beside him. He handed them up to us one by one and we emptied them into the tank, all the time keeping a sharp lookout for approaching craft; but there were none in sight. Steve produced that golliwog again and tied him to one of the struts. "Here's to good luck!" he said.

"They must have been suspicious of you when you hired this boat and loaded it up with gasoline," I remarked to Forest.

"No," he laughed, "I told 'em I was going for a little trip to Maarken; they're used to that around here. Well, good luck,

boys." He waved his hat as we started off. We spiraled up to five thousand feet and set a northwesterly course toward the coast of England.

Time went by without incident; once in a while we saw a liner or a patrol boat far below us, but the Channel is no longer the crowded, traffic-laden waterway it was in pre-war days. Steve was gayer than I had ever seen him before; as he expressed it, the idea of our returning to headquarters in a German seaplane was "an absolute yell."

Twilight came and went, and still the faithful motors roared their noisy song, and the propellers whirled around on each side of us.

Then darkness came, and I switched on the electric lights, illuminating the altitude indicator and numerous dials on the dash before us. It was half past eight when we first discovered the white cliffs of the Kentish coast dimly ahead. We figured out that we were not far from the port of Dover.

We decided to make for the airdrome at Shoreham some seventy miles southward; we would cover the distance under an hour. We dropped down to an altitude of a few hundred feet and veered south along the coast line.

The night breeze stung our cheeks as we hurled through the air at ninety miles an hour. Presently a large town with twinkling lights appeared below us.

"Dover harbor!" I cried.

And then a great shaft of light swept the skies and suddenly lit up the wings of our airplane in its ghastly glare. Events followed with incredible rapidity.

Boom! Boom! The anti-aircraft guns of the Dover station spurted vivid sheets of flame from behind the darkened cliffs.

"My God!" cried Steve, "they've spotted those crosses on our wings!"

Look!"

I gazed at the great black crosses painted on the ends of the planes, now brightly illuminated and standing out in grim contrast to the whitened fabric.

"The fools think we're Germans!" I yelled. "Go up higher, quickly!"

Just then a shell struck us on the right, ripping a jagged hole in the canvas and splintering two of the struts to matchwood, the lower plane crumpled up like paper, and we plunged down, down, into the inky blackness.

When I opened my eyes I found myself in a cot at the end of a long white room lined with rows of similar cots. Figures in white were moving silently to and fro.

Painfully I raised my head and saw Steve sitting up in the next bed, drinking something out of a cup which a pretty, fair-haired nurse had just handed him. His head was bandaged, and I thought he was looking very weak. He glanced at me over the top of his cup.

"Hello, old man," he said. "Glad you're coming around all right. Do you know what caused our downfall?"

"What was that?" I murmured feebly.

"Why, that confounded little golliwog thing fell overboard in mid-channel. I remember missing it before we got to Dover, but didn't pay much attention at the time."

Then Steve did something which almost made me have a bad relapse; he turned to the little nurse sitting beside him and kissed her. No half-and-half business about it. Steve always did things thoroughly when he wanted to.

"Her mascot didn't do its duty properly," he explained, "so she came over herself to take care of me for good."

"She looks as if she'd be the best mascot you could possibly have," I answered just a trifle jealously; then, feeling tremendously discreet, I turned around in the cot and faced the blank wall on the other side.