

Suddenly a queer pain
shot through Rickey's
head



ACES WITHOUT WINGS

By LEW MARTIN

*The C.O. of the Twenty-seventh Attack Squadron knew his guns and planes—
and wouldn't take orders from a Medico!*

MAJOR "Hank" Rickey, Commanding Officer of the Twenty-seventh Attack Squadron, U.S.A.A.F., located on the outskirts of Yungning, China, mopped his glistening face with a sheet-sized bandanna and leaned back in his desk chair.

"I've been around, and plenty," he grunted, "but this heat tops anything and everything. Man, it's hot enough to melt the hub right off the prop boss!"

Captain Smart, who was adjutant, best friend and rear gunner for Rickey, looked up from a mess of papers with a grin.

“Hot?” he echoed. “What are you going to do when summer comes, Hank? And speaking of summer, have you thought any more about that hinted offer of that job at G.H.Q. with colonel’s rank and pay? You could do with a nice vacation, Hank.”

Rickey’s brows came together to form a solid black line, and there were tiny specks of fire in his steel gray eyes.

“Do I catch a note of eagerness to get rid of me?” he demanded. “A desk job at G.H.Q., huh? Not in a million years, my boy. Not while there’s a front line and Japs on the other side of it.”

“There’ll be a front line for quite a while to come yet, Hank,” Smart murmured. “And you’ve been pushing it pretty hard. Not that you aren’t as good as you ever were, but—”

“But—*nuts!*” Rickey snapped. “When I figure that I’m no longer any good, then I’ll quit. I cut my eyeteeth on an airplane. I learned to smoke in one. And I learned to drink in one. Don’t worry! I know what I can do and what I can’t do. So change the subject!”

“Okay,” said Smart with a faint grin. He tapped a paper he held in his hands. “We’re getting a new medico. Flight Surgeons, they call them now.”

“A new one?” Rickey echoed sharply. “What’s wrong with Doc Withers? He’s been out here in China for ten years. Knows this country, and what you can catch from it like a book. That’s official?”

“Signed, sealed and all the rest of it,” Smart replied with a nod. “A Lieutenant Digger—G.H.Q. says we can expect him today.”

“Digger, huh?” Rickey growled. “Nice name for an undertaker. Okay, he can arrive. But if he’s got a lot of new and fancy ideas about pink pills and castor oil—”

RICKEY let the rest slide, emphasized it with a curt nod of his close-cropped head. Smart grinned and felt a little sorry for Lieutenant Digger, whoever he was. Major Rickey was one of the old school who had been able to step right into the new school and keep pace with the best of them.

He knew his airplanes and guns like nobody’s business. He had proved that in the Philippines and in Java. He was continuing to prove it as C.O. of a squadron on the China Front. He was good, all right, but there was one thing he couldn’t take. As he termed it—“This new tangled fuss and feathers business.”

Were he stationed in the States he would have been over his head in boiling water long ago. But he was way out in China, and red tape and rules and regulations hadn’t reached that far yet. But Smart knew that they would sooner or later. And so he felt a little sorry for his old friend.

“Well, I hope he’s a good poker player, anyway,” he said. “I could do with a little competition. I feel like a bandit with you birds.”

“You *are* a bandit!” Rickey growled. “Why last night—”

He didn’t finish. At that moment came the sound of a plane outside. They both got up and went over to the office window. A twin-engined bomber was just starting to slide down for a landing. It was a bomber right enough, but it contained the two bands of white about the fuselage near the tail to mark it as a Headquarters ship.

“That must be Lieutenant Digger arriving, now,” Smart murmured. “And in case you’re worrying, Hank, Doc Withers knows about the change. He got his orders this morning. I think he’s kind of glad to be going back to Base at Chungking.”

“I’m glad for him,” Rickey grunted and squinted at the landing plane. “He’s had enough of it out here. Besides, Doc’s no chicken. Well, let’s go see who it is—and make him feel at home.”

They went out of the office and across the dusty sun-baked drome to where the twin-engine job was taxiing up to the line. When the props stopped turning over, the side door opened, and a youth in shoes, shorts and shirt stepped onto the ground. He saw Major Rickey instantly. A smile flashed across his tanned face, and he raised his hand in salute to the edge of his pith helmet.

“Major Rickey?” he said. “I’m Lieutenant Digger, reporting for Flight Surgeon duty.”

A combination of emotions raced through Rickey as he took the salute and extended his hand. He almost had the feeling that he was shaking hands with his son—if he’d had a son.

Young Digger wasn’t a day over twenty-five by his looks. As a matter of fact, he looked even younger. He was of medium build, average height and so forth. But his tanned face still seemed to show some of the original baby pink complexion, and he wore thin gold-rimmed glasses.

“Welcome to the hottest corner of the world, Digger,” Rickey said warmly. “Must have been a warm trip. Come on over to the mess and have

something tall and cool.”

“In a half hour, if I may, sir,” the young flight surgeon reported. “First, though, could you detail some men to give me a hand? I have some equipment aboard, and the pilot is supposed to return to G.H.Q. at once.”

Rickey frowned, then shrugged.

“Okay,” he said. “This is Captain Smart, adjutant, and most everything else around here. He’ll give you a hand, and bring you over to the mess when you get through. Welcome again, Digger.”

RICKEY nodded at Smart, then turned on his heel and hurried away. He didn’t know just why he hurried, but he did. He suddenly wanted to get away from young Digger. There was something about the kid that he couldn’t fathom. It gave him a queer feeling inside. And it made him mad that he couldn’t accurately analyze the feeling.

It was almost two hours later when Smart came into the mess alone. He was smiling, but he was also trying very hard to suppress the smile. A little bell rang in Rickey’s head, and he gave him a hard stare.

“Okay!” he grunted. “What’s the latest dirty story from G.H.Q.?”

“It’s perfectly clean,” Smart said, dropping into a chair. “And I don’t think you’ll think it’s funny. Young Digger has brought along enough equipment to start up a small base hospital. I couldn’t even recognize half of it. He said it was apparatus to be used for the weekly check-test.”

“Weekly check-test!” Rickey exploded. “What in thunder are you talking about?”

“Just what I said,” Smart replied. “A new ruling. All pilots and observer-gunnery are to be check-tested once a week, and every week. A flight surgeon like Digger is to be assigned to every front-line squadron from here to Iceland, and back. Frankly, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Rickey snarled. “So the idea is to knock the Japs on their ears with trick gadgets and pill bottles?”

“No, not exactly,” Smart said gravely. “But the Japs will be able to knock us on our ears less if we’re in good shape every time we go after them.”

“Who says we’re not in good shape?” Rickey demanded.

“Nobody, and keep your shirt on,” Smart soothed. “That’ll be Digger’s job. And, speaking of

Digger, here he comes in the flesh. Go easy with him, Hank. He’s new, and only just arrived.”

Rickey didn’t say anything. He just made sounds in his throat and watched the young flight surgeon come in through the door. He waved the youth over and pointed to a chair.

“Sit and relax. Digger,” he said. “We go for lime and ginger out here, mostly. The harder stuff when we get leave. But, if you’d like?”

“Lime and ginger would be fine, sir, thank you,” Digger said and mopped his face. “My gosh! Is it like this constantly?”

“This is the winter season,” Rickey said with a grin. “Been in the Far East long?”

“Three weeks,” came the startling reply. “Last month I was completing training at Hoover Base in California. Seems like years ago.”

“Time flies in war,” Rickey said. Then after waiting for the drink orderly to serve Digger his lime and ginger, “Captain Smart tells me you brought along quite a load of equipment. What’s it all about?”

Young Digger looked faintly surprised.

“Why, it’s nothing new, sir,” he said. “Standard medical equipment for every air base. Apart from my regular duties. I have to check-test every member of the flying personnel.

Just a routine weekly examination to see that they are medically fit for flying duty.”

“And, if they’re not?” Rickey shot at him.

“Why, then I report it to you, sir,” Digger said. “And you are to ground them until they are. Or, possibly, order their transfer to Base Hospital for treatment. And—would tomorrow morning be all right, sir?”

“All right for what?” Rickey wanted to know.

“My first check-tests, sir,” was the reply. “I’d like to get started as soon as I can.”

“Right!” Rickey snapped. “We’re doing overhaul on the planes, so tomorrow morning will be fine. Arrange everything with Captain Smart. Well, I’ve got some paper work to tackle. Relax and make yourself at home, Digger. We’ll be seeing more of each other.”

For the second time in as many hours Rickey hurried away from the presence of young Flight Surgeon Digger. And for the second time he was mad at himself for not being able to discern why the youthful arrival gave him the shivers, made him feel just a little worried and not sure of everything.

“Don’t be a sap!” he grated to himself. “If that

kid starts messing up the routine, all I have to do is step on him. And that will be that! And how it will!"

He didn't see young Digger the rest of the day, for the new flight surgeon was too busy setting up things in his quarters. As a matter of fact, Rickey didn't see him until shortly after noon the following day when the youth came into the office with a mess of papers in his hand.

"Everybody's checked, sir, and okay," Digger said. "I've made out the reports. I'll sign them and send back copies just as soon as I've checked you, sir? Could you come over, now?"

Rickey stiffened and dropped the cigarette he was putting between his lips.

"Me?" he barked. "What are you talking about?"

"All members of the flying personnel must take the test, sir," Digger replied. "And that, of course, includes you. It's just a simple test, but very important. Of course, though—"

Young Digger paused and seemed to flounder for words.

"Of course, what?" Rickey snapped him up.

"Well, if you don't want to be checked, sir," the youth said slowly, "I can simply put it in my report that way."

For a crazy moment Rickey was tempted to tell the kid exactly what he could do with his report. But he killed the idea as quickly as it was born. He had been in the Service long enough to learn that the way to handle something you didn't like was to handle it and then forget about it. So he got up from the desk.

"Let's go," he said. But make it snappy, Digger. I've got some testing to do myself this afternoon—with planes."

FOR the next half hour, Rickey was grimly reminded of his annual medical some months before Pearl Harbor. Young Digger didn't have one-tenth the equipment that the Medical Board had had back at Bolling Field, but the kid seemed to be three times as intent on his job and that many times as thorough. The only thing he didn't do was to take Rickey apart bone by bone and put him back together again.

When he was all finished and looked at Rickey, there was a queer light in his eyes. It struck Rickey as a combination of fear and sadness.

"Well?" Rickey growled. "That all? Finished

with me?"

Young Digger put down his chart and notes and chewed on his lower lip.

"No, sir," he said in a low tone. "I'm afraid that's not all. Fact is, sir—I guess you'll have to order yourself grounded. Your heart."

Rickey started up out of the chair he was sitting in, but quickly got control of himself and fixed Digger with an agate glare.

"What's that?" he bit off deliberately. "Ground myself? My heart? What the thunder's wrong with my heart?"

"Well—" Digger began, but Rickey stopped him.

"Never mind the twenty-dollar medical terms!" he snapped. "Put it in plain language. And make it brief."

"A slight strain, you could call it," Digger said quietly. "It—ever have a slight burning in your chest after high altitude patrols? And a slight headache, sir?"

Rickey started to deny it angrily, but there was something sincere in Digger's face and voice.

"Sure," Rickey admitted. "Who doesn't? We all do. It's the heat out here."

"Not in your case, sir," the young flight surgeon said quietly. "It's your heart. It's—well, in your language, it's been taking a pretty tough beating. Frankly, you stand the chance of blacking out long before any of the others in the squadron. Your heart wouldn't maintain the pumping pressure needed in a violent maneuver. And, particularly, pulling out of a dive.

"Believe me, sir, I'm not giving you personal guesses. I checked that part twice. The results were the same. And the test results don't lie, sir. They can't. The human factor in the medical examiner has nothing to do with it. I'm sorry, sir, but—well, you'll have to ground yourself. You're not medically fit for flight duty."

Simmering red rage slowly rose in Rickey.

"That's what you think, son!" he said between his teeth. "But I've been flying planes too long not to be able to spot the signs. And when I spot them, then I'll quit and go back to a desk job. Now I've got work to do. There happens to be a war on."

RICKEY got up and reached the door before Digger stopped him. "Just a minute, sir!" And when Rickey had halted and turned, "I can't stop you, of course, sir. You're the commanding officer.

But, you're simply asking for trouble. Not only as regards blacking out and killing yourself, but from G.H.Q. It's my duty to make a complete report.

"My report will be checked by the flight surgeon commandant, and he does have the authority to ground you.

Believe me, sir, I hate this as much as you do. But the test results are correct. The tests are as close to actual flight conditions as possibly can be."

Rickey hesitated, and a sudden thought came to him.

"Close, but *not* actual flight conditions," he said. "That heart test. Could it be made in a plane in flight? Can you make it?"

"Yes, sir," was the instant reply. "I only need a couple of my instruments. But you'd be strapped up a bit. In a plane, I could get a very definite test result."

"Okay!" Rickey snapped. "We have a two-seater trainer here we fool around with now and then. Get your stuff and meet me on the tarmac in half an hour. We'll just tootle around the field, easy like, and you can make your tests."

A funny light seeped into young Digger's eyes. Then it was gone, and he nodded.

"Right, sir," he said. "I'd like very much to make the test in the air. In half an hour, sir."

It was twenty-five minutes later when Rickey tooted the two-seater trainer off the ground and nosed it up toward the sun-seared China sky. He was flying from the front pit, and Digger was in the rear. Bands were wound about Rickey's chest and about the upper parts of his arms, and tubes led from them back to Digger's pit. There was a small watch-like affair pressed over the region of his heart and was held in place by the bands of rubbery stuff.

It all made him feel uncomfortable, but it didn't interfere with his flying in the least. As a matter of fact, he didn't mind it at all, as long as he could show that his condition in flight was one thing, and his condition surrounded by gadgets in Digger's quarters was something else.

So, with a tight grin on his lips and a great big song of certain hope in his heart, he went up away for altitude and then started coasting about over the field in a series of figure eights. Every now and then he made a real tight turn. And each time he came out of it he twisted his head and grinned questioningly back at Digger. But the young flight surgeon didn't see the grins. If he did, he paid no

attention to them. His face was expressionless, and his eyes remained fixed on the recording dials of the various gadgets he had brought along.

AFTER a good half hour of being regarded only as an experimental guinea pig, Rickey's patience began to run low, and the savage desire to *really* make the flight conditions actual took possession of him. Maybe a few fast ones would give the kid something to check.

This lazy-daisy stuff wasn't getting either of them here nor there. If it was to be a test, then he'd make it a real test and give young Digger some results that would shut him up for a while. Ground him, huh? Send him back to a desk job, and—hey! A thought!

Was all this just a gag? Was this the way General Blake back at G.H.Q. was working it to get him to turn over the squadron to somebody else and accept that colonel-desk job? He knew General Blake wouldn't yank him back against his will. So maybe he was pulling it this way? So-o-o?

Twisting around in the seat, Rickey attracted young Digger's attention, and then made whirling motions with one hand. He turned front again and started to slice up the China sky with the trainer. A song really was in his heart now, and there were pink clouds of joy all around him as he rolled, and whip-stalled, and whacked her this way and that.

But suddenly a queer pain shot through his head. It seemed to suck out all his brains and leave a contented emptiness. The pink clouds changed color. They turned a dirty gray, then black. He forced himself to strain his belly against the belt and lean way forward and get his head down as low as he could.

But something told him that he hadn't moved. He couldn't see, because it was getting darker with every passing split second. And he couldn't feel, because that sense seemed to have fled his body. But he couldn't just sit there. He had to do something.

He was blacking out, but not as he had ever blacked out before. This—well this was slower, but more certain. He seemed to be slipping apart in sections—in small pieces, and—

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"You're okay now, sir," said a voice. "Breathe deep, and keep your head down."

He didn't keep his head down. He lifted it up and found himself staring into the face of young Digger. The flight surgeon was standing on the wing stub and leaning in over the cockpit. But what dumbfounded Rickey was the fact that the two-seater trainer was *on the ground!* It was on the ground, on the far side of Twenty-seven's field—and the prop was ticking over as nice as you please.

"My God!" he gasped. "Did I black out and actually land this thing? Land her blind?"

"No, sir," Digger said quietly. "You blacked out, but I landed the plane."

"You landed it?" Rickey gulped. "You're—you're a pilot?"

"I had a civilian license before the war," Digger replied. "A little over a hundred hours. Tried to get into the Air Forces, but—"

The young flight surgeon smiled sadly and pointed at his glasses.

"My eyes," he said. "Good enough for a civilian license, but not up to Air Force standards. But, I

had just hung out my M.D. shingle so I got into it this way. Not as nice as the flying end, but—well, it's a job that helps, and I guess that's the important thing."

Rickey stared at him and said nothing. But there were millions of thoughts in his head. Supposing this had happened on patrol with Smart in the gunner's pit? There were no dual controls in the gunner's pit, and Smart might not have known what had happened until it was too late to bale out. And—and thank God for this kid, Digger. Thank God, for the thousands like him that were coming along. Their job was to save lives. And name one thing more important in war!

"I won't say thanks, Digger," he finally murmured softly. "That would be an insult after what you've done for me today. I'll just say—well, we'll make it a hard drink for both of us, this time. And then I'll go get myself made a colonel—and flat-spin official papers and red tape all over the place."