



The falling plane struck and exploded in a fountain of red, orange and yellow flame

# JINX JET

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

*Three planes and three pilots were lost—and it was up to undercover man Barney Rosen to find out just why and how!*

COLONEL BARNES, commanding officer of Group Icicle, absently drummed the fingertips of one hand on his desk, dragged the other down his worn, haggard face, and stared fixedly at the three pilots standing in front of him.

“You heard nothing?” he asked wearily. “Saw nothing at all?”

The three pilots shook their heads almost in unison. “No, sir,” Lieutenant Mart Masi spoke up. “I didn’t see or hear a thing, sir, until your recall order came through to me.”

“Nor did I, sir,” Lieutenant Jerry Hansen added with a nod. “No different than any of the other details.”

"That's right, sir," Lieutenant Jeff Caldwell made it unanimous. "Not a thing different."

Colonel Barnes sighed, and gave a little half nod. "Very well, and thank you, gentlemen," he said. "You may go."

Saluting, the three lieutenants turned and walked out of the Group office. As the door closed behind them the commanding officer bunched his two hands into rock hard fists, and brought them sharply down on the edge of the desk.

"Three of them!" he said harshly. "Three of them in two weeks, and not the faintest reason, why! So help me, the Jay-One must be a jinx ship!"

"No, it isn't! I tell you, the Jay-One is the best jet, yet. Shelve it and you'll put us two years back in jet development."

Colonel Barnes jerked his head around and stared at Captain Barney Rosen, seated in a corner, as though seeing him for the first time. Barney was second in command of Group Icicle, and he was also a very close friend of the colonel's. They had served together in the war, and now once again they were the one-two command of an experimental project that would have a most pronounced effect upon the development of military and naval jet aircraft.

Three years ago, the X-J-1, as it was termed, had been just an idea half completed on an aircraft manufacturer's drafting board. Two weeks ago fifteen of the craft had been delivered by the manufacturer to the Air Forces, and then flown to a remote spot in northern Canada. It was named Group Icicle, and with the permission of the Canadian Government, extensive war load tests were to be conducted under rugged northern climate conditions. If Group Icicle came through with flying colors, some twenty-five squadrons would then be fitted with the Jay-One. But if not—

Barnes shook his head as though to drive away some taunting thoughts, and then shook it again. "Naturally you feel that way, Barney," he said. "But I simply can't go on with this testing operation, and have my pilots and ships drop like flies!"

ROSEN started to speak but changed his mind. Instead, he came over, hooked a leg across a corner of the desk and leaned forward a little, his demeanor one of fixed conviction.

"It isn't the ship," he said fiercely. "It must be something else. Maybe certain pilots can't take the Jay-One. But I do know this! That Jay-One is the best design any manufacturer has come up with, yet!"

For a brief instant anger flashed across Colonel Barnes' face. Then it went away and he spoke almost as a patient parent might speak to a headstrong child.

"I know exactly how you feel, Barney, and I understand," he said. "You used to be chief test pilot for the Howard company. And when they came up with the Jay-One design, Washington assigned you to do all the testing. It was your reports of performance acceptance that induced Washington to award Howard a contract for fifteen Jay-Ones."

The commanding officer paused as though to give Rosen a chance to say something. When Barney remained silent, he continued.

"But you just can't disregard facts, Barney! In the two weeks we've been here we've lost three jets and pilots. The third this very day. Lieutenant Frank Hall. He's three hours overdue, so he must be down some place. We may never find him, just as we may never find Lieutenant Arthur Baker. Three in two short weeks, Barney, and not one blessed reason why!"

"Exactly my point!" Rosen spoke quickly. "We don't even know why those three jets went down, yet you're about to

inform Washington that the Jay-One doesn't measure up. That the bid of some other manufacturer should be picked up. That's crazy. It's certainly not fair to the Howard outfit!"

Colonel Barnes shrugged, and then sat scowling at his two clenched fists still resting on the desk.

"I'm not concerned with being fair to a jet manufacturer," he said slowly. "I'm concerned about the lives of my pilots. I wouldn't risk losing one of them, if it could possibly be helped. But three! Confound it, Barney, not one of them has been seen going down. Not one of them has so much as radioed a single word that he was in trouble. And at the scene of Collins' crash what did we find? A fire blackened hole in the ground, with pieces of the ship no more than a few inches long scattered for a couple of hundred yards about. Absolutely nothing to tell us a thing! It's fantastic. Horribly fantastic!"

Barney Rosen half nodded absently, and stared unseeing out a window on the opposite side of the office. He suddenly started to speak, and then just as suddenly checked himself. Colonel Barnes glanced at him sharply.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Rosen shrugged. "Just a fantastic thought of my own. Let it go. But nobody has seen them go down because the details we've been flying have been frankly solos. We've flown at separate altitudes from twenty to thirty thousand. Each has had his objective to fly to, and return. None of us has seen the others, save at take-off and landing."

"And not one word over the radio!" Colonel Barnes broke in hotly. "It must have happened in a flash, or the pilot would have had at least the time to—"

"Not necessarily," Rosen broke in himself. "Maintaining constant radio silence is a part of the test maneuvers. I for

one kept my switch off all the time to make sure. Maybe those three boys just blacked out before they could flip their switch and make contact. All I'm saying is, don't take Washington action when you haven't got a shred of anything to back it up."

"We have only three lost jets, and undoubtedly three dead pilots!" Colonel Barnes bit off. "For me that's—!"

He let the last drop away. The jangle of the phone on his desk stopped him. He pulled the instrument to him and answered the call. Rosen, watching him, saw the deep lines and shadows crowd into his face, and made a pretty good guess as to what the Colonel was listening to. His guess was not only pretty good, it was absolutely correct.

"Hall's been found," Barnes said hanging up. "His hole in the ground was, anyway. In a wide open field twenty miles east of Clinton. That was the Clinton Mountie Barracks. A kid found it and got in touch with them. They'll watch the place until we arrive to take over."

Rosen didn't say anything for a moment. Though in his heart he'd been quite certain that Hall was down forever, the information that Hall was down and very definitely dead was like a knife cutting a slice off his heart. He slid off the desk, took a couple of absent-minded steps, and then swung suddenly around.

"Send the crash truck on its way," he said, "but I'm going to buzz over there in one of the prop jobs, and take a look for myself."

"But why?" Colonel Barnes asked. "You saw Collins' crash. There's nothing to see. Absolutely nothing. Not even enough left of it for a halfway decent laboratory analysis. Stay here, Barney."

Rosen stared, his lips tightening.

"That's an order, Colonel?"

The commanding officer started to nod

curtly, but he checked the movement. "No," he said quietly, "it isn't. No, Barney, if it'll make you feel any better, go ahead. Take the Stinson. But Group Icicle is definitely grounded as of this minute, pending further instructions from Washington."

Rosen nodded, hesitated, then quickly turned on his heel and walked out the door.

THE fire-blackened spot where Lieutenant Hall's Jay-One had touched ground for the last time, was visible to Barney Rosen when he was still a couple of miles away. It was smack in the middle of a mile square field that was as flat and smooth as a billiard table.

Not if the jet pilot had been alive, and guiding his craft earthward, could the field have been hit more dead center. At the south border of the field, were a couple of parked cars of the Northwest Mounted Police. Barney could see half a dozen figures in a group some fifty yards from the outer edges of the blackened spot.

A few moments later he slid the Stinson down to an easy landing, well clear of the blackened area, cut gas and switch, and legged out. He walked over to the group that consisted of four Mounties, and man in farmer's garb, and a ten or twelve year old boy. A Sergeant Mountie touched his hat in salute.

"Nothing's been touched, sir," he said. "Waiting for your orders. This youngster, here, found it. Tommy Adams. And this man is his father. He heard the plane come down, but didn't see it. The boy did, or says he did."

Barney nodded, introduced himself, thanked the Mountie for such speedy cooperation, and then walked over to the fire-blackened hole in the center of the field. The others stayed right where they were, and watched him silently.

The hole made by the Jay-One striking and exploding was a good ten feet deep, and perhaps twenty feet across at its widest point. The flames of the explosion had splashed out from the edges of the crater for another twenty-five to thirty feet and scorched the earth to pitch black.

Tiny bits of the plane were scattered all about like chunks of charred wood. Even at the bottom of the crater there wasn't a piece that was over a foot long. And even they were twisted to pretzel and corkscrew shapes.

Fighting to control the butterflies that batted around in his stomach, Barney stared at the horrible sight with the mounting feeling of utter hopelessness and helplessness. It was just as Colonel Barnes had said. Nothing to see. Nothing that could tell him, or anyone else, a thing.

Blown to a million pieces was the Jay-One. And blown to twice as many million pieces was the body of the man who had flown it. Just like Collins' crash that had been found. Plane and pilot scattered in confetti size over a wide blackened area.

When a prop job crashes there usually was at least something. A couple of instruments, and a fair sized section of this or that. But at the terrific speed the jet hits, nothing but fire scorched bits of twisted junk. Rosen now felt certain there was more than either accident or coincidence behind it all. Taking a deep breath Rosen turned and walked back to the waiting group. He looked at the young kid, and managed a half grin.

"You saw it, Tommy?" he said. "Tell me about it, will you, son?"

The youngster glanced at his father, as though to receive permission to speak. Then he looked back at Rosen, gulped, and nodded.

"Sure," he said. "But it happened so fast it's kind of hard to remember it all. Well, I was over that ridge yonder looking

at my line of traps when I heard a funny noise way up in the air. Way up above the clouds it came from.”

“What kind of a noise?” Rosen asked.

“A funny noise, it was,” the youngster replied. “It was like the wind blowing awful hard down the chimney. Like it does at our place in the wintertime. Just blowing and blowing without stopping.”

A tiny hope flickered out in Rosen. The youngster had simply heard the sound of his first jet, that’s all.

“Then what, Tommy?” he asked.

“Well, sir, suddenly a black thing came right down out of those clouds like all get out. It seemed to be coming right for me, and it sure scared me a-plenty. I started to run, but I couldn’t get away. Then I tripped and fell down. Right up there on top of that ridge. It kind of knocked the breath out of me so’s I could not get up.

“That’s how I saw it hit down here. Kind of cigar shaped, and black, and making a terrible noise. Then there was a big roar and a lot of flame shooting all over the place. I ducked and closed my eyes, but none of it touched me. Pretty soon I got up and run home and told Dad. He said he’d seen it, and it must have been a plane. Anyway, he phoned the Clinton barracks. I guess that’s all I can remember about it.”

Barney Rosen nodded his thanks and looked at the boy’s father. “Can you add anything, Mr. Adams?” he asked.

The farmer shook his head. “No, Captain, I’m afraid I can’t,” he replied. “I didn’t even hear the thing until it wasn’t more than a few hundred feet up. I’d just come out of the barn from feeding the stock. I got just a look, and then it had hit and exploded. But I was pretty sure it was some kind of a plane. But traveling almighty fast, it was!”

BARNEY ROSEN didn’t bother to mention that it was probably in the realm of six hundred miles an hour. Instead he half turned and looked over toward the fire-blackened hole again. Almost as though he expected the ghost of Lieutenant Frank Hall to rise up out of it and give him the answer. If even Hall could!

“Anything you want us to do, Captain, until your crash crew arrives?”

It was the Sergeant Mountie who had spoken. Rosen turned and started to give a sad shake of his head. On second thought he checked it. There was a long painstaking job to be done, and the sooner it was started the better.

“Yes, there is, if you fellows care to give me a hand,” he said, and made a half wave at the surrounding area. “This whole place has got to be finetooth-combed for parts of the crash. That also means the pilot. If you’d help me until my crash crew arrives I’d appreciate it very much. Everything we find, no matter what, we’ll put in a pile right here where we’re standing now. That is, save Tommy, here. There might—”

“You mean the pilot, sir?” the kid spoke up. “There ain’t nothing left of him! You should have heard that explosion, and seen them flames!”

Rosen looked at the farmer and was given a quiet nod of consent. “I’ve heard them, and seen them before,” Barney said, looking back to the boy. “Okay, Tommy, I’ll be very glad if you’ll give us a hand, too. Let’s go. Each take a position at the fringe and work out to the edge of they field, and then back.”

Some two hours later a pile, perhaps a foot high and two feet across, of fire-blackened and twisted jet plane parts, had been gathered up. In a blanket a short distance away, produced out of one of the Mountie cars, were a few parts of a body.

Proof, for what it was worth, that Lieutenant Hall had been in the Jay-One when it made final and volcanic contact with the ground. There was still a wide area to be combed, but a few minutes later the crash crew from Group Base arrived in trucks, and they went to work at once.

Perhaps twenty minutes later Rosen was standing by the piled up bits of wreckage, and staring down at it, when a hand touched him on the arm. It was young Tommy Adams, and there was a pleading expression spread all over his face. Rosen grinned down into his dirt and soot smeared face.

"Captain," the youth began and faltered. "Captain, couldn't I have a piece for a souvenir, huh? Just one piece. I found this just now, and it wasn't twenty yards from where I was hugging the top of that ridge. Just imagine! It could have hit me! Can I have it, Captain, can I?"

As the youth spoke he held up a fourteen or fifteen inch length of fire-scorched metal tubing. One good look and Barney Rosen recognized it as a section of the rudder post of the Jay-One. He took it from the youth, and shook his head.

"I'd like to, Tommy, but I can't," he said. "You see, everything we can find will be examined by technical experts to see if it could possibly have had anything to do with the crash. Maybe this piece right here will tell them a whole lot."

"Yeah, okay," the boy grunted as his face fell. "I just thought I'd ask, that's' all."

"And you're a real good scout for asking," Rosen smiled, "and not just sticking it under your shirt, like I've seen some kids do at crashes. Tell you what, Tommy. You rate a kind of reward for finding the plane for us. And for the work you've done. Here, I'm making you a personal present of my wristwatch. That's a real jet pilot's watch, Tommy.

Waterproof, shock proof, a stop second hand, and it keeps perfect time. Here."

The youngster's eyes bugged out a mile as Rosen unstrapped his watch, and held it out. But he made no effort to reach for it.

"I mean it, Tommy," the jet pilot said. "It's yours. A reward for all you've done. Don't worry, I can get another one easily enough. And I really want you to have this one. Okay?"

For a couple of moments the youth seemed to wage a furious battle with himself. Then he took the wristwatch, and held it lovingly in his hands.

"Jeepers, jeepers!" he breathed in awe. "Jeepers, thanks Captain. Thanks a lot. Gosh!"

"Thank you, Tommy," Rosen said, and watched the kid walk away as though he were holding the most precious thing in the world in his two hands.

Turning around Barney stared at the length of rudder post for an instant, and then made the move to toss it on the pile with the rest of the bits of junk. But he never completed the movement. He froze it half way. Then, as though he were seeing some kind of a ghost, he pulled back his hand and peered intently at the length of rudder post. A few moments later he lifted his gaze and stared wide eyed at the fire-blackened hole in the center of the field.

"I was right!" he breathed softly. "It *isn't* the Jay-One!"

LESS than a couple of hours later Barney Rosen walked into Colonel Barnes' Group office. The commanding officer looked up quickly, and his eyes flashed the question before his lips could speak it.

"What did you find out, if anything?"

Rosen gave a half shake of his head, and shrugged. "I don't know for sure," he

said slowly, as though talking to himself. "It may take me a spell to find out. Just don't ask questions, will you? I've a good reason for asking this."

Colonel Barnes' eyes snapped, and he bristled all over.

"Are you crazy, Barney?" he cried. "Confound it, if you found out anything, I want to know it now"

Rosen shook his head. "No, not yet," he said evenly. "I'm not sure that I have a thing. First, I've got to be sure. Let me play it my way, please!"

Any one of ten thousand other Air Forces pilots would have brought Colonel Barnes' wrath pile-driving down upon them. However the commanding officer's close association with Barney Rosen went way back over the years, and they knew each other almost as well as they knew themselves. So the commanding officer simply pressed his lips tightly for a moment, and then nodded shortly.

"All right, play it your way," he said. "But this Group is grounded, and it stays grounded!"

Rosen nodded, shrugged, and then walked over to the row of detailed Group files that lined one whole wall of the office. The colonel watched him pull out one and start to finger through it. Then with a shake of his head, and a little two-hand gesture, he turned and walked out of the office leaving Rosen alone. A couple of hours later when he came back in, Barney Rosen was sitting in a chair and staring fixedly at a spot on the office ceiling.

"And what did those detailed files tell you?" the Colonel snorted. "That maybe we've got a foreign spy in the Group?"

Barney Rosen looked up at him, and didn't smile. "Maybe we've got something about fifty degrees lower than a spy," he said.

"What?" Barnes gulped. "What the—?" He stopped short as Rosen waved a hand.

"Just talking," the former test pilot said. "Forget it. Look, I've got something pretty tough I want you to grant."

Barnes frowned and stared hard at Rosen. "Grant what?" he demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"Not counting you," Barney said, "there are just twelve of us left. I want the twelve of us to fly a three hundred mile clock recco detail."

"Why? So that perhaps we can lose our a fourth pilot and jet? Certainly not, Barney! I told you—"

"I know what you told me!" Rosen cut in sharply. "But I think I know how we lost those three."

"You do?" Colonel Barnes cried. "Then for heaven's sake, spill it, man!"

"I can't!" Barney shot back fiercely. "It's just too darn fantastic, until I get absolute proof. And I'm betting everything that I will get proof if you'll grant a twelve jet clock recco. It is the only way, believe me!"

The Colonel opened his mouth, then slowly closed it. He peered at Rosen as though attempting to look right into the jet pilot's brain and find out what was ticking there.

"And if another is lost?" he suddenly asked. "That will prove what?"

Rosen smiled thinly, and dragged a thumbnail along the angle of his jaw.

"If another is lost, it will be me," he replied. "Because I think I've found it, I'm willing to stick my neck out, because it's part of my job. All you have to do is grant the request for the clock recco detail, and then wait in the radio shack. I'm the only one who has anything to lose. And I'm willing to risk it! I'll explain when the time comes."

Conflicting emotions raced back and forth across Colonel Barnes' face. Then slowly he sighed, and his broad shoulders seemed even to sag a little.

"All right, blast you, I grant it!" he growled. "But if I was any kind of a commanding officer I'd wring out of you what you've got there in your head. Also what's really behind all this. But that's the penalty of being a close friend of a wild, stubborn ox for so long. All right! What time?"

"Thanks, Colonel, my pal," Rosen grinned faintly, and glanced out the window. "In an hour. That will still give us plenty of light. And stick in the radio shack. We'll fly radio silence, as usual, but you never can tell. Thanks again."

"Thanks, my eye!" Barnes growled. "I'll probably be court-martialed, and shot, as a result of this!"

**E**XACTLY one hour later, Barney Rosen faced the eleven other pilots of Group Icicle who stood semi-circle in front of him. On the line, twelve Jay-Ones were ready and waiting to be airborne.

"This clock recco is a very special one, fellows," Rosen said quietly. "In fact, it may be the last time the Jay-One jet will take to the air. We've lost three jets, and, three pilots. No one knows how. The Colonel grounded us, but I got his permission for one last Group detail.

"You all know how close I am to the Jay-One. I don't think there's a single thing wrong with it. But, we've lost three and that has convinced the Colonel. So I want to make this Group detail to prove that there is nothing wrong with the Jay-One. That it must have been a case of the boys blacking out. Actually, the pilots were not quite fitted to fly jets. Now, we're all taking the same chance. Any of you fellows want to withdraw? Say so, if you do."

Barney stopped talking and looked at each pilot in turn. Not one of them nodded, or so much as spoke a word. Rose grinned, and gave them a little half salute.

"Thanks, fellows," he said. "I appreciate it. Well, here's the flight routine. We'll rendezvous at twenty thousand on top of the clouds. Over the field, here. Fly three hundred miles, and then return here. Radio silence, of course. That's all. Masi, you fly one o'clock. I'll fly two o'clock. Hansen, you fly three. Taylor, you fly four—"

To each one Rosen designated the clock number he was to fly. When he had given them all their numbers, and double checked, he gave the signal to man their planes, and head for the rendezvous point at twenty thousand on top of the heavy cloud layer, and right over the field.

Barney took off last and presently all twelve jets were in clock number position and flying the circle pattern at twenty thousand over the field. A couple of moments to check the various positions and then Rosen broke the circle and flew off on the two o'clock route.

One after the other the rest flew off on their clock number routes until all were on their way fanning out from the central rendezpoint. For maybe two minutes Barney could see Masi on his left at one o'clock, and Hansen on his right at three o'clock. And then he was on his own, and there was no sign of any other jet in the air.

Flying steady and true on instruments, Rosen wished very much that the butterflies in his stomach would be still. His heated suit kept him perfectly comfortable at that high, frosty altitude, yet cold drops of sweat began to ooze out all over him and trickle down his body.

More times than he could remember, he had faced death in the air. And each time he had been scared pink, as any

sensible human being would be. But this time it was different from all the other times. This time he had deliberately invited death to strike, and he knew that it would strike like a black flash of lightning at most any second.

And so, as his heart raced, and the clammy cold drops of sweat continued to drench his body, he kept one eye on his instrument panel, and the other on the rear view mirror mounted atop the panel. Seconds ticked by, and became minutes. Then more minutes. All about him was silence save the clicking and ticking of his instruments. At his speed he was keeping ahead of his own sound so he could not hear the exhaust of his rocket chambers. Streaking through a world of comparative silence, waiting for silent death to strike.

Then suddenly he saw it in his rear view mirror. A thick black needle silhouetted against the clouds far behind. It veered around toward him. For a crazy instant fear froze even his brain, and he was unable to do a thing. Then he was released from the fear trance, and every part of him was alive and on instant alert. He whipped one hand from the wheel control, and flipped up the radio switch.

But, even as he did that he saw the winking orange-red lights on that oncoming thick black needle. In that instant he belted the Jay-One over on wingtip, and brought it around and up. Something thudded into his ship, and the craft seemed to stagger off its course for an instant. Stark fear, such as Rosen had never experienced in his whole eventful life, shot through him. And then it was gone as his Jay-One continued to wheel and climb.

**W**HEN he was half way around the thing behind him wasn't a thick black needle any more. It was another Jay-One. He could see its tail number clearly,

and it was striving to curve up under him, its fifty caliber wing guns winking rapidly. There were no more thuds against Rosen's ship, however, and his voice, as he shouted the words into his mike, shook with fury.

"Not this time, Hansen. You're not earning any blood money today by making it number four. Go on down and land, Hansen. You lose! Down and land, or I'll shoot you down!"

"Barney! Barney Rosen! What the devil is—?"

The words in his earphones were being spoken by Colonel Barnes down in the radio shack, but Barney didn't listen to them. He wheeled about the other way, then cut back as Hansen's jet stood on its tail for a blasting belly shot. Another instant and Rosen had cut over on wing, and was headed straight down in a cold meat shot position.

"Your last chance, Hansen!" he roared. "Land at once. This is treason! I'm giving you the break to land and tell your story. Maybe it'll save your dirty hide, and maybe it won't. But I'm giving you this break. Go down and land, or else!"

For perhaps half a second the other jet kept right on coming up. Then, as Rosen's fingers started to tighten on his trigger trips, the other jet cartwheeled over in its own length and went down at the vertical, full out. In a flash it was lost in the clouds. But in a like flash Barney Rosen was in those same clouds, and then through them.

He spotted Lieutenant Hansen's jet at once, and it was still rocketing down at the vertical. And some eighteen thousand feet below was the field of Group Icicle.

Wild, crazy words crowded up in Rosen's throat, but would not come off his lips. It was as though he knew what was taking place, and also knew that no power in heaven or on earth was going to be able to stop it. Hansen's Jay-One rocketed

down and down as though a gigantic magnet in the bowels of the earth were pulling it unresistingly at greater and even greater speed.

A bit of black lightning headed for the earth. And then it struck. Struck and exploded in a fountain of red, orange, and yellow flame that splashed out and down in a wide circle. Barney Rosen gasped, shuddered, and closed both his eyes for a moment.

STILL shaken by the memory of that frightful crash, Captain Rosen sat in Colonel Barnes' office. Memory of that deliberate depth scene was still all too vivid in his brain. As he lighted a cigarette, the flame of the match trembled slightly.

"Only thing the poor devil could do," he murmured softly. "Of course anything he might say would be flatly denied. He'd end up being rated as completely haywire, and be put away."

"Hold it!" Colonel Barnes said sharply. "What are you raving about? In fact, for goodness' sake tell me what all this is about."

A shadow passed across Barney Rosen's face, and was gone. He reached under his shirt and took out the fourteen inch length of Lieutenant Hall's Jay-One rudder post. He held it up so that Barnes could see, and pointed a finger.

"Take a look," he said. "This is a piece of Frank Hall's rudder post."

The Colonel frowned, squinted hard, and then his eyes widened.

"There's a fifty-caliber bullet lodged in there!" he cried. "A fifty, all right, and it's jammed in. Wait a minute! That's not so unusual, Barney. The explosion and fire would touch off the ammo in the gun belts. And—"

"Check," Barney cut in. "But look! This is the way the post stands, and the

slug has gone in from the rear. A very neat trick for one of the exploding bullets in the gun belts to go all the way around back and jam into the rudder post from the rear! Right?"

"I'll be blasted!" Barnes breathed.

"So was I," Barney nodded. "Until it had to make sense. In short, this slug was from another jet that had sneaked up on Hall and clipped him from behind. And, easy, too. All our details have been flown on the solo basis. Planes miles from each other's courses. But each pilot knew the other courses."

"Hansen apparently just picked his man, sneaked up from behind, and gave him one short, quick burst. The poor devil didn't know what hit him. Death came through his canopy, and down he went full out. In Hall's case, though, this one slug lodged in the rear of the rudder post."

Colonel Barnes tried to speak, but emotions held him so he couldn't utter a sound.

"Hall, Collins, and Baker, naturally didn't even dream that another ship was close," Rosen went on talking. "They had instrument courses to fly, and were giving the panel all their attention. They didn't have a chance, and from that altitude the few shots were not heard on the ground."

"Also, they flew under radio silence. No checking in points. They just didn't return. They simply disappeared. And except in Hall's case, bullets found in the pilot, or his ship, would simply be accepted as you just said. From his own ammo belts the crash had touched off. What else?"

Some of the blood had drained out of Colonel Barnes' face, and he stared at Rosen as though he just couldn't believe his ears.

"But Hansen?" he gasped. "And why? What earthly reason? Had the man suddenly gone mad? And how the devil

did you know it was Hansen?"

"I didn't," Barney said quietly. "I was only dead sure that it was either Hansen or Masi. So I worked the clock recco detail. I put Masi on one side of me at one o'clock. And Hansen on the other side at three o'clock. Then I told them all that this detail would mean yes or no for the Jay-One.

"It turned out to be Hansen. He came for me when he thought the time was right. Only it wasn't. I was expecting somebody, and I saw him in my rear view mirror. I gave him the chance to land and tell his story. But I guess he had no proof to back it up. So he took the only way out. The fast one."

"But why?" Colonel Barnes practically shouted. "Why did Hansen shoot down three, and try to get you? Why?"

"To wash-out the Jay-One as a good design," Rosen broke in. "You grounded it, and were ready to inform Washington it was not suitable, weren't you? Well, the files told me two things about Masi and Hansen. One, that they both had flown the details when Collins, Baker and Hall lost their lives.

"What I couldn't tell you of course, was that Washington sent me here on an undercover mission—sort of Special Investigator, so to speak. I couldn't even tell you without putting one of the suspects on their guard.

"You can look it all up for yourself. Both of them used to be connected with jet manufacturers seeking the experimental contract that Howard got instead. Also, they were Air Forces Reserve and came back in only a month before this Group was formed. With Hansen dead we can't prove a thing. But one of three jet manufacturers I could name was paying him to see that the Jay-One did not pass this test. Then he could go after the contract again!"

Colonel Barnes sat perfectly still, his eyes fixed on Barney.

"You mean?" he half whispered. "You mean that a manufacturer hired Hansen to—? But, man, that's murder!"

Rosen nodded and made a little gesture with one hand.

"I know," he said quietly. "But this isn't the first time it's happened. Nor the last, I suppose. Where millions of dollars are concerned, simple murder has never proved much of an obstacle to those who were after those millions. See what I mean?"

Colonel Barnes stood up and shook his head as though to clear his brain. "It's certainly a rotten world sometimes!" he muttered.

"No," Barney Rosen replied quickly. "The world's all right, but there are a lot of rotten people in it!"

Colonel Barnes let that go without argument.