

Greaseball's War

*A Dauntless Air
Mechanic Forsakes
the Ground for a
Fling at the Boche!*

By
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He clung blindly to the gun

JAKE CRAWFORD, the stocky, flame-thatched greaseball, uttered a despairing groan without taking his eyes from the field glasses.

"They got us! They got us sure this time, Jimmy boy!"

The lean, buck-toothed mechanic who had just reported for duty at the squadron that morning stared in puzzled amazement at Jake, and then at the three whirling specks far up in the blue sky.

"What do you mean 'us'?" he demanded.

Jake put down his glasses, looking angry at the interruption.

"We—us!" he barked. "Can't you understand United States?"

"Sure," said Hal Regal, the newcomer. "Can you? Where do you get that 'we' stuff? You're no flyer!"

"I'm not, huh? Well, I sure would be if I didn't have bum eyes. And get this, monkey! That's my buddy flying up there,

and he's got two Boche riding him ragged. If they tag him, it'll break up one of the most deadly combinations at the front. Me and Jimmy Abbott!"

"Sure," said Hal. "I get the Jimmy part. But where do you come in?"

"Where do I come in?" Jake roared. "It makes me feel as if I'd et a mess of bum oysters to talk to anyone so ignerent. Where do I come in, you ask me? What do you s'pose keeps planes in the air? Greaseballs! What do you s'pose keeps machine-guns so they'll fire? Greaseballs! Who takes care of the big guns and services the smaller fry when they need it? Greaseballs! Yes, sir, every time! This is a greaseball's war, monkey, and don't you forget it! If it wasn't for guys like me who can fix machinery when it goes on the fritz, our boys'd be out there fightin' with carvin' knives and their teeth!"

"Yeah," Hal acceded: "but you don't do the fighting."

“Would you like to see what me and Pershing did to the Mexes when we were chasing Pancho Villa?” Jake bristled. “My eyes were okay, then, and I handled a mean machinegun, if I do say it.”

“I’ll believe you,” Hal Regal said hastily.

“You’re new here,” said Jake, softening, “so let me tip you off. They don’t give us mechs no medals. But we win wars just as sure as little apples make big ones. When Jimmy’s plane takes off, he knows that it’s as right as I can make it. He’s smart, Jimmy! He’s wise that he wouldn’t stand no chance if his plane wasn’t in fightin’ shape. We got six notches on our prop now, and that’s something in an observation squadron.”

JAKE rammed the glasses against his eyes again, and groaned.

“That damned Boche is knocking our tail-feathers off, Jimmy. Oh, give me that Lewis, Hardizon! If you’d been with me and Pershing, you wouldn’t be handling that machine-gun like an old woman! I could knock the spots off that Heinie! Down, Jimmy—*down!*”

Other greaseballs, attracted by Jake’s voice, emerged from the hangars.

“Let’s have a look, Jake.”

“Go chase yourself!”

“Tell us what’s happening, then.”

“They got us sandwiched. One Boche is diving, and when he comes up underneath, we’re going to be sitting on a cloud. *Down, Jimmy boy!*” Jake was pleading, his voice husky. “Damn Hardizon! He’s had at least six chances to tag that Heinie behind and he acts like it’s a tea party. *He heard me!*”

“That Jimmy’s plane diving?” yelled one of the mechs.

“Yeah!” Jake exulted. “And going like a bat out of hell! Maybe he’ll get away, diving! F’gosh sake! You had me fooled

that time, Jimmy!”

“He’s going to crash,” gasped one of the men.

Jake’s face was working and strained. Jimmy’s dive was pointed directly at the Albatross which had come up underneath to fire into his blind-spot. It looked like a crash, but Jake was holding his breath. His knees shook. Jimmy’s guns were streaking fire. Smoking tracers streamed toward the Albatross as it tried to side-slip out of range.

Gosh, the youngster was handling the observation plane almost like a single-seated fighter! Jake’s heart swelled with pride. No, he wasn’t going to crash! He had pulled out of the dive—just in time.

The plane was responding beautifully. If it hadn’t at that moment, Jimmy would have plowed into the Albatross. Jake had been up half the night working on that plane. Now he had no regrets for the lost sleep. To Jake, whose big dream was to fly, there was no music quite to be compared with the throb of an engine that was *right*, or the drone of a perfectly synchronized propeller.

“Now scoot for it, Jimmy! We ain’t got no chance with Hardizon actin’ like he was windin’ a gramophone. I don’t see what keeps me from murderin’ that guy!”

“Hardizon’s a good observer, Jake.”

“I don’t know what he observes, but how Jimmy ever gets back with only that lunthead to protect him from behind, beats me.”

“The Boche got Jimmy!”

It certainly looked like it. Jake followed the falling plane, his heart in his throat. Was it a fake to fool the German, or— Jake’s eyes stung. Jimmy wasn’t pulling out. They’d got him! Damn Hardizon for not protecting him from behind. It would serve him right if he burned in thousand hells!

Then, slowly, the nose began coming

up. Jake stiffened all over. Too late now, Jimmy! The plane neared the ground. The wings were going to buckle. Looking through the powerful glasses, Jake imagined he could see the plane trembling. And then, scarcely a thousand feet above the ground, the Salmson's nose finally leveled out. Jimmy was heading home!

Jake let out a whoop that could have been heard above a barrage. He clapped Hal Regal so enthusiastically on the back that Hal went sprawling. And then Jake ran into the hangars, returning with a broken piece of an airplane propeller and a knife. There were six notches already on the prop—six planes that Jimmy had brought down.

“SEVEN, you apes!” Jake cried. “Man, oh, man, what we couldn't do in a pursuit squadron!”

The other mechanics watched enviously as Jake began to carve a seventh notch in the hard wood. Tim LeRoy came closest to Jake's record. The pilot whose plane he took charge of had shot down four Germans. Seven, however, was something to brag about; and Jake had no modesty where Jimmy Abbott was concerned.

He could talk about Jimmy for hours.

Jimmy landed, and rolled up to the hangars. He hopped out—a lithe, eager-faced youngster, still a little white from the recent brush with death.

“Another notch, Jake,” Jimmy cried.

“Already carved, Jimmy!” Jake raised the propeller.

Jimmy grinned, and stood with arms akimbo, staring at the prop.

“Sort of seems we ought to celebrate, Jake.”

“Sure,” said Jake in surprise. “How'd you mean?”

“You've been begging for a ride—”

Jake bellowed. He turned to the other

mechanics.

“Hear that, you apes? I'm going to fly. Give me a helmet; give me some goggles.” Then Jake stopped halfway into the hangars. “Nope. We got to wait until I go over that plane.”

“But I was just up, Jake.”

“Yeah. And you might have a bullet in your boiler.” Carefully Jake examined the plane, followed the bullet holes to see that they hadn't struck any vital spot, had Jimmy tune up the Salmson so that he could listen to see if it sounded true. Then he examined the machine-gun. Jake loved machine-guns.

Many a cold morning he had gotten up in the dark to heat a bag of sand and put it on Jimmy's machine-gun. He did this so the grease would be warm and wouldn't congeal to jam the gun.

“We're all ready,” Jake finally announced.

His homely face was one broad grin from ear to ear as he sat in the cockpit, a helmet on his head, and goggles over his eyes. His heart was thumping wildly as Jimmy revved up. He was going up for the first time—a dream which had been born when he had watched those first, unsatisfactory planes doing observation work in Mexico. The other greaseballs kidded him. Jake thumbed his nose, and grinned back.

Often as he had seen planes trundle down the field, Jake felt an unsteady sensation in the pit of his stomach as the Salmson's snarling spasms changed to a steady roar. His heart dropped away somewhere beneath him as they left the ground.

Jake gripped both sides. Presently he screwed up his courage sufficiently to peek over the side. The hair seemed to rise on his head, and he ducked his head in again.

For several minutes, the vibrating of

the plane made Jake wonder whether he was going to feel the way he had when he crossed the channel. Then this faint nausea passed, and he warmed up to the ride. He stared over the side, and saw the still smoldering embers of the Albatross which Jimmy had shot down.

JIMMY marveled. How could a fellow come that close to death and then have the nerve to go out again and fly? That took guts!

Everything, seen from the air, was a fresh mystery to Jake. He studied the burned patches of woods, wrecked houses, and, presently, the criss-crossed lines of trenches. He tried to increase his range of vision with the field glasses. Difficult, with the jogging of the plane! How did Hardizon manage to make observations?

"Maybe he has a tough job, at that," Jake decided. "But sure as C.O. is poison, he handles a Lewis like my grandmother!"

Suddenly Jake gave a start as he saw barb-wire entanglements. The front lines! They were over German territory! Jake was thrilled down to his toes. Wouldn't those other guys be green-eyed when he told them where he'd been?

On second thought, Jake decided he couldn't tell. Jimmy had no business taking a ground man across the lines. It was strictly against orders. But Jake understood it was Jimmy's way of giving him a treat in return for the way he'd taken care of his Salmson.

"I'm going to have a hemorrhage keeping this to myself!" Jake thought. "Over Hunland! Ain't that somethin'!"

It was right at this point that Jake's trained ear caught a vibration not quite true. This was a fine time for engine trouble! Jake strained to detect just where the sound came from. It grew louder.

Then he realized it could not be the Salmson. It was a faint whining sound.

And the truth came to Jake like an electrical shock. Another crate was making the sound which didn't quite synchronize!

Jake's eyes shot up. He had no difficulty in finding the source of that sound, even though he had to look into the sun.

An ebony black plane!

Belatedly there flashed into Jake's mind a warning which had been sent around to all the squadrons in the sector. A black plane with a gleaming skull painted on either side had dropped a parachute with an insolent message to the effect that von Krantz had thirty-nine victories, and would like to round out his score by shooting down his fortieth victim. Would one of the squadrons oblige by sending up one of their best fighters?

For several days Jake had been worried whenever Jimmy flew. Then nothing happened, and Jake had forgotten the warning. Now, with a sickening shock, he remembered it. The crate slicing down with the sun to hide his approach was the great German ace, von Krantz.

Frantically, Jake hammered the turtleback, and when Jimmy glanced back, Jake pointed. Jimmy seemed to be paralyzed for a moment. Perhaps he realized that in giving Jake the thrill of a lifetime, he had signed two death warrants. Perhaps he realized he was without a trained observer to protect him in retreat.

Jimmy pulled his stick back sharply. His hand flashed to the stick trigger of his gun. *Rat-ta-tat!* The steel-jacketed lead ran low as the Salmson shot up in a steep climb.

The other plane answered. Lead sprayed the wings. Jake had never been in aerial combat before, but he instinctively knew they faced a master technician. He was out for his fortieth victory.

Jimmy pulled up more steeply. It

seemed to Jake that the lines of fire were nearly parallel. Bullets raked them mercilessly, so something must be happening to von Krantz. If so, there was no sign. The black plane roared down. Something nerve-shaking just in its funereal color!

The Salmson stalled, then began back-slipping. A wing dipped, while bullets thudded and whistled about them. Then they began to gain speed in a tail-spin. The wind swept by so fast that Jake couldn't breathe. Down—down—down!

Jake's heart was pinched with a cold chill. Von Krantz had struck Jimmy! The plane was out of control. He'd get his flight—a straight course to hell!

Then, after what seemed to the greaseball an interminable time, the plane came out of the tail-spin. Jimmy whipped the Salmson around, heading for home. He fed the ship full gun. It was no use! Von Krantz had not been fooled for a moment. He had followed that tail-spin, his gun rattling in a long, staccato burst. And now lead whined about them. Even twisting and turning as he was, Jimmy couldn't keep the Salmson out of those funnels of flame.

"Can you use a Lewis, Jake?" He turned, screaming.

"Can I?" Jake bellowed back. "You oughta seen what me and Black Jack done to them Mexes!"

Jake released his safety-strap. He felt like a man standing on the cornice of a tall building as he slowly pushed himself to his feet and had nothing to hold him in. But with a good grip on the Lewis, he drove out his fear.

The gun helped, too. It had a solid, substantial feeling. And Jake loved machine-guns. Here was something he understood!

The air seemed to be raining bullets as von Krantz rode their tail, closing in. Jake

swung the mounted gun. And then he let it rip.

Rat-tat-ta-tat-tat!

Jake grunted. Low! He was thrown off-balance by a lurch of the plane, but he braced himself, correcting aim. Another burst! And still low!

THE black plane with the two flaming red eyes bore down behind. Von Krantz wasn't as accurate now, which was something. Jake had come too close for comfort, and the German was being wary.

"*Cucaracha!*" snorted Jake. "You're as slippery as Pancho Villa!"

A bullet ripped through the flesh of Jake's leg, but in his wild excitement, he didn't feel the pain. He swiveled his gun, yelling. Jimmy was trying to keep the plane steady, but when bullets tore chunks out of the wings, he had to bank away.

The gun clattered incessantly. But just as incessantly Spandaus clattered behind.

Jake was getting the hang of the thing, when—

Blackness crept over him in a blinding wave. Jake felt as if his insides were on fire. He clung blindly to the gun. Each lurch of the plane drew blood from his mangled hand.

"*La cucaracha!*" Jake choked out.

Somehow he focused his glazing, burning eyes. Somehow, with pain tearing at him like a fox in his vitals, he swung the gun into position for another burst. Somehow, he got the gun rattling.

There was an explosion like a small cannon. Blankly, Jake stared at the spot where the iridescent prop had been—and was no more. The nose of the Albatross dropped, with no prop to drive air back.

Von Krantz' head came within range of that spitting Lewis. It jerked sharply, like the head of a rag doll struck with a stick.

Von Krantz, Germany's greatest living

ace, dead! Gone to join Richthofen!

“We got him, Jimmy,” Jake said, twisting his blood-flecked lips into a ghastly smile. And then he slid down into the cockpit.

OTHERS tried to lift Jake out; Jimmy, whose eyes were brimming, pushed them away. Gently, he raised the limp body. Life had gone out of Jake Crawford, but his lips were still twisted with that last attempt to smile.

The war ended. And not long after, Jimmy Abbott was sitting in a small room with a sweet, white-haired little lady who was daubing at her eyes while he spoke. It was Jake’s mother.

“They stood me up, a French general kissed me on both cheeks, and gave me

this.” He opened a case in which was a Croix de Guerre. “It—it was given to me, but I couldn’t keep it. It’s Jake’s by all rights.”

Jimmy lifted a package from the floor, and unwrapped a piece of a broken propeller.

“There are twelve notches on it now,” he said softly. “That’s Jake’s too. He cut only seven of them. I cut the other five for him. Whenever I was in a tight spot and did not believe there was any way out, I’d hear Jake’s voice, ‘We whipped von Krantz, Jimmy. After that, no one can lick us!’ And no one could, as long as I knew he was there beside me. A great soldier, Jake!”

