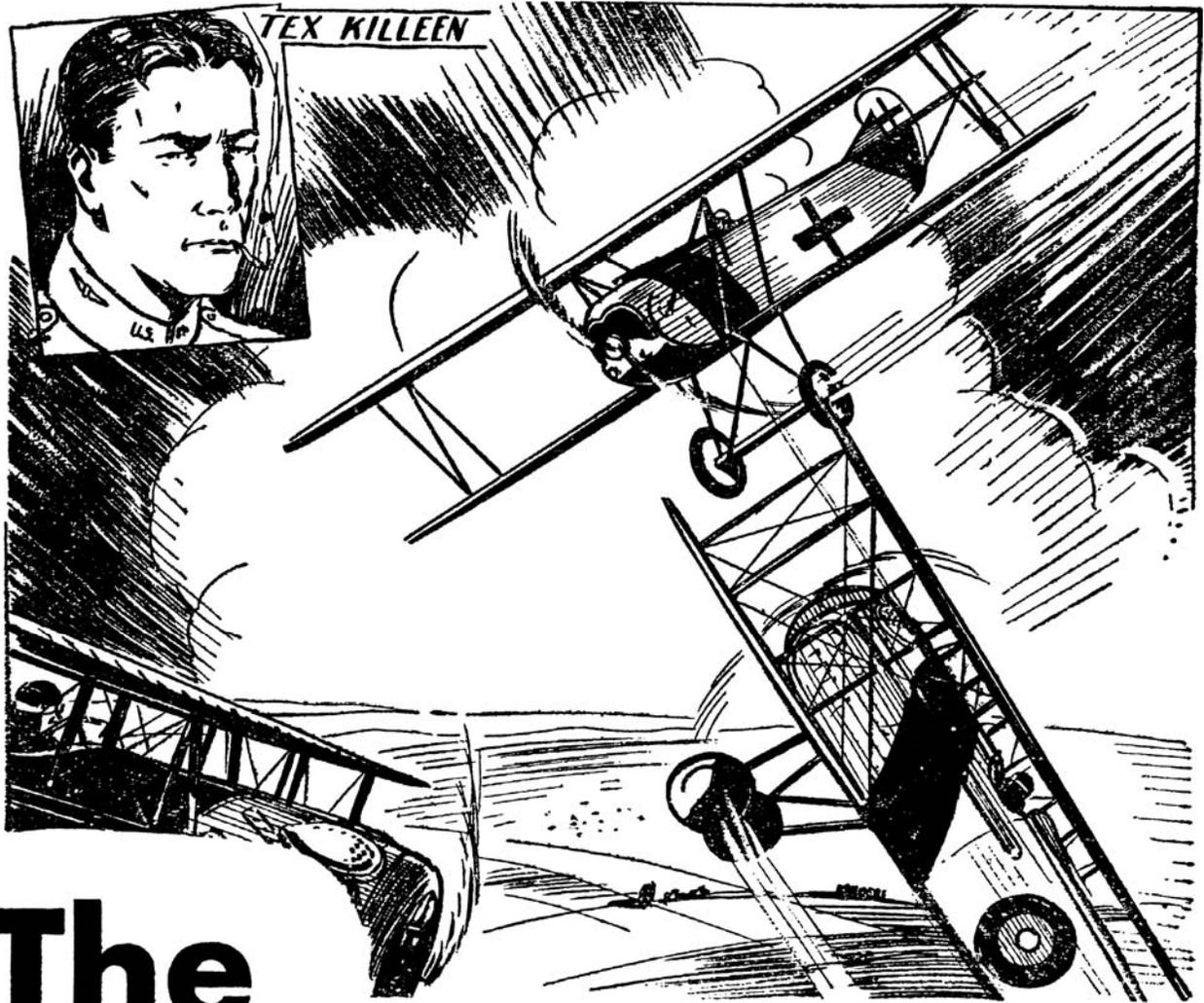


*Tex Killeen Uses Cow Wrangling Tactics in a Dogfight  
– and Amazes Even the Germans!*



*Dockstader darted in between Tex Killeen and the Fokker*

# The Road Runner

By **ARTHUR J. BURKS**

*Author of "Cold Courage," "Terror Tarmac," etc.*

**N**OBODY in the Fifth Pursuit Group knew that if the war had ended four months before, Lieutenant Tex Killeen wouldn't have got into it at all. Nobody guessed within two years of his age. He was so large that he looked

several years older. He'd just got under the wire and had a commission because his dad was senior senator from the state of Texas. All they saw when he reported for duty, was a lank, drawling chap, with wind-tanned cheeks, and squinty eyes that

plainly were accustomed to looking over vast distances into the face of a burning sun. To them he was a kid who had just got to the front along with whispers that the war wouldn't last another five months.

To be absolutely fair to the Fifth Pursuit Group, they had been through hell. During the last month or two the Germans had been fighting with their backs to the wall, and that fighting was bitter and fierce. And the Fifth Pursuit had got more than their share of it.

Germany, losing steadily in the war, nevertheless held supremacy in the air in the sector over which the Fifth Pursuit Group flew. When the gray legions on the ground lost a few kilometers to the increasingly confident Allies, the Germans in the air redoubled their efforts, took greater chances with their lives, with their ships.

As a result, a Yank flyer who'd been two weeks with the Fifth was an aged veteran. A round dozen, some of them old-timers, had gone down in flames during the last three weeks. Desperate, bitter fighting had etched lines on the faces of survivors. The cracked glasses on the mantel, each one a silent reminder of a final toast to a fallen wingmate, were almost a solid row from end to end.

**T**HE Fifth was edgy, from the major in command to the latest veteran, who had been up four days and had already become an ace, because if a flyer didn't become an ace he became a corpse. There was no middle ground.

Their eyes were haunted, those veterans. Lines were in their faces. Their cheeks were sallow and sunken, filled with shadows. It took little imagination to see in those shadows the shapes of the wingmates of yesterday, and the day before, and the days before that, who had gone down in flames, or with wings shot off, heads lolling on cockpit coamings.

Tex Killeen saw all this as he walked across the tarmac after landing the new Spad he had just ferried up from Issoudun. He spoke to the first officer he saw, a first lieutenant.

"This ain't a morgue, is it?" he asked, grinning.

The lieutenant stared at him for all of a minute, as though he were some two-legged species of animal the lieutenant had never seen before. Killeen wasn't accustomed to having his questions go unanswered, even by an officer senior to himself. So he paused in front of First

Lieutenant Dockstader, his blue eyes narrowing, and went on:

"You don't have any great antipathy to answering a civil question, do you? I asked you if this here place was a morgue."

"I heard you, big fellow, and the question isn't funny," Dockstader snapped.

"No, I didn't reckon it is. But I figured it ought to be asked. When I see crepe hanging around, I always wonder."

"Then keep wondering. Maybe the place *is* a morgue. To me, it is. My best friends have been shot to hell and gone during the last week. Maybe people getting killed don't disturb you. Maybe you don't worry because you're liable to be next. Of course you wouldn't. That new uniform of yours is a giveaway, fellow, as much of one as your Texas drawl. We here don't take kindly to folks who come up fresh, with no taste of war in their mouths, and find fault with our outfit."

Tex Killeen drawled:

"Will you die any easier by pulling a long face, and feeling sorry for yourself? Of course, I haven't been up before. The why don't matter, I reckon. And I'm as scared of getting bumped off as the next one, but, same time, I won't get bumped any deader simply because I won't let it get me down."

"How do you know you won't, when you haven't been over yet? I hate Pollyanna stuff. So do the rest of the bunch. And we think newcomers should be seen and not heard, especially if it's taken them as long as it has you to get into the fuss."

Tex Killeen stiffened, saluted gravely, proceeded to Headquarters to report to Major Norris.

**N**ORRIS looked him over as Tex Killeen stood stiffly at attention before his desk. "No combat experience, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"No, sir, though I've done a lot with cameras and spitballs—"

"I wouldn't mention it if I were you—to the others, I mean. They're bitter, and they have a right to be. There is talk of an armistice, and they feel that every guy who falls between now and then is virtually murdered."

"I gathered," said Killeen slowly, "just before I came in, that everybody feels right sorry for hisself."

"That will do, Killeen," said Norris sharply. "You won't have much to say after you've been

over once, even if you live to get back. Each replacement has come to mean to the others just one guy they've got to watch go down, or wet nurse until he gets back. And when he gets back, likely as not, some old-timer here has to die for him to make it. You see? You won't talk tomorrow—and talking today is damn' bad taste!"

Tex Killeen, assigned to "B" Flight, said nothing further. There was no doing away with the pall of gloom that hung over the Fifth. But he wasn't satisfied with that. He knew the minute he stepped into the mess-shack that Dockstader had said things about him, for looks of open hostility were turned his way. It was Dockstader who spoke first.

"Meet Texas Killeen," he said, "the guy from the wild and woolly West, who's here to show us how to get more notches on our guns. He don't seem to like us none."

Dockstader used an exaggerated drawl which might have been funny, even to Killeen, if anybody had smiled. But nobody did. Their resentment against him was plain.

"Now that you've come here to show us how," said another, "might a bevy of aces ask what delayed you?"

Killeen's eyes narrowed. He had no intention of telling them the truth—that he simply hadn't been old enough to arrive any sooner, that he'd even lied, with the help of his dad, to get into the war at all.

"Well, he said softly, "I reckon you might ask, at that. I assure you there were reasons."

"Was one of them a slight lack of desire to get your guts shot out?" asked Dockstader.

"Well, that might have been part of it," said Killeen. "I don't hone to have my guts shot out any more than any of the rest of you. But while I stand a better chance of getting just that tomorrow than any of you, since it's my first flight over the lines where they use real bullets, I'm not worrying so much it puts lines in my face. If I get mine, I get it—"

Dockstader kicked back his chair, stood up.

"So you think we're bothered entirely about ourselves?" he said hoarsely. "Then get it out of your head! It's a damn' sight worse to see others sent down, burning! And you'll find that out, too!"

Killeen realized that in riding him they were ridding themselves of pent-up steam. If they ganged on him, verbally or otherwise, it was good for them, made them forget themselves a little while. So he deliberately goaded them, looking

from face to face and realizing the nervous tension under which all of them were laboring.

He took things from them all that would have called for battles with fists at any other time. Their faces were flushed with anger as he answered each gibe with one of his own. It would never do to let them know the compassion he felt for them, for they would have resented that more than the air of superiority he hadn't intended at all.

It was Dockstader who finally closed the discussion which, ended, miraculously, without a fight, by saying:

"I don't intend to take anything off a Texas road-runner, Killeen. Keep out of my way tomorrow, that's all!"

"ROAD-RUNNER?" repeated another. "What's that?"

"A road-runner," said Dockstader, "is a long-legged bird that darts out of a bit of brush, crosses the road in front of you and hides in the brush on the opposite side. It kills rattlesnakes by covering them with cockle-burrs or something. Texans are all part road-runner, you know. Their long legs are part of their common road-runner ancestry!"

It was a feeble witticism at best, but Dockstader seemed to be satisfied with it. They ignored Killeen after that, until it was time for lights out.

Killeen repaired to the hutment set aside for him. He had a comfortable philosophy. Tomorrow was another day. That he might be dead this time tomorrow night wouldn't keep him from getting a good night's sleep tonight. If he got killed, okay. The time to worry was when he saw death staring him in the face.

He had scarcely fallen asleep than an orderly was shaking his shoulders advising him that it was time to get out to the deadline for morning patrol.

He found the captain of "A" Flight, reported. Captain Dorsey stared at him and Killeen knew that his wing-mates had been talking. He crawled into his pit with some discomfort. A Spad pit wasn't so hot for a man with legs that were as long as his own.

Now he'd soon know. Road-runner, eh? They might as well have called him a kiwi. Maybe that's what Dockstader had meant, anyhow. They certainly hadn't called him a flyer, nor accepted him as such. But he'd show them, just the same.

His wingmates studiously avoided looking at him, and he had the feeling that if he got into any jams today he'd have to get himself out of them.

And that was all right, too, for he'd trained himself to the second, in every way possible to a flyer behind the lines who couldn't practice on enemy airmen.

The flight got under way. Dorsey's wheels left the ground first. Then Killeen. Rendezvous was at five thousand. Killeen felt that he flew as well as the others. Perhaps better, for their nervousness showed in the way they sped down the field; the way they lifted off the tarmac.

At five thousand, the V headed for German-held skies. Killeen looked around at his wingmates, noticed that several were looking furtively in his direction. They knew, from bitter experience, what they faced across the lines. They didn't know how this newcomer would fare against it. And bad luck to him might be bad luck to them, too. One bad move on his part might cost the life of any one of his wingmates.

Killeen grinned, waved to the man opposite, across the middle of the V. The fellow pretended not to see his salutation.

The Archies began to flower around them. They bothered Killeen. He looked down and, looking up again, caught the eyes of the others on him. He knew they wanted to see how he was taking his first taste of Archie—which was his cue to look unconcerned.

So he kept on watching the Archies, following the shots from the guns below, and looking aloft to where, far above "A" Flight, the Archies burst and bloomed.

They were perhaps five kilometers behind the lines when fourteen Fokkers attacked the nine Spads. Dorsey saw them, waggled his wings. He looked once at Killeen, who waved to Dorsey as much as to say:

"Don't pay any attention to me; I'll do all right."

He saw Dorsey shrug. Then the Spad formation broke apart and none of its members sparred for position. None of Killeen's wingmates wasted a second maneuvering for position, not after the formation had fallen into a scattered maelstrom of ships. Every American flyer lanced away just far enough to give himself sky-room, then lifted his nose to the German formation and zoomed straight into it, Vickers flaming.

Killeen grinned, and was right with them.

Fokkers dived under the Spads, going down, Killeen knew, to zoom up and get the Spads through the guts. But it would take time for them to go down, come back, and set their Spandaus to

raging.

Killeen knew the speed of the enemy ships, and just how much time he had. He also knew that his new crate was a dead giveaway to the Germans. They'd believe that if the crate were new, the pilot probably was new also, and therefore easy prey.

And, so thinking, Killeen almost got killed in the first five seconds of the sky battle, because his mind was with the crates that had dived, and not with the crate that was diving straight into his propeller.

Dockstader saved his life. Dockstader darted in from the side, between Killeen and the German, and sent a burst into the fuselage of the Fokker. The German pilot nosed up to escape, fell off on one wing, and didn't come out of it. Killeen hadn't had a chance to fire a single burst!

As Dockstader sped past his prop he saw a look of jeering contempt on the first lieutenant's face. But he didn't waste time thinking about it. He knew, by now, about where the crate or crates would be that were nosing up for a burst at his guts.

He brought his stick back into his belly and zoomed clear out of the dog-fight that now raged furiously all about him. He dropped his left wing down, and slanted back through the formation, missing Dockstader's prop no more than Dockstader had missed his. But now he was intent on the zooming crates below.

One of them was drawing his sight line on Dockstader himself, but he never loosed so much as one burst, for Killeen, with the stick held between his bony knees, his steely eyes fixed on his ring-sight, was pouring lead into the Fokker. He saw the motor section aslant, and the pilot hanging to the sky by his pit. He saw his tracers end at the motor section, play back along the fuselage to the pit.

He saw the German slip out of sight into the pit. It might be a trick, but at the same time he saw infinitesimal tendrils of smoke come out of the motor section—tendrils so small that only eyes accustomed to seeing small objects at a great distance, in the face of the sun, could have spotted them. And he knew that fire would burst from that Fokker before the German, even if he were playing 'possum, could fire a single burst.

Killeen took his thumb off the trips a second as he banked swiftly away, keeping his eye to the ring-sight, searching with the sight for more black crosses. And when he saw such crosses the crate that sported them was already in line of his

Vickers' fire. He wondered if Dockstader knew that he had saved his life, had repaid him for saving his, Killeen's. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe it wouldn't change things.

After the war, maybe he'd punch Dockstader's nose, just to show him that he could.

The second Fokker went down, almost in the black, smoky trail of the first. And two other Fokkers, slanting up to get the Spads from below, but noting what had happened to two of their fellows, leveled off and shot away from the dog-fight, no longer dangerous. When they came back it would be into the thick of the main dog-fight.

Killeen now plunged straight into that dog-fight himself. He had forgotten that this was his first fight. He'd got two Germans. That was enough to show him how it was done. He covered the entire dog-fight. He shot a German off the tail of Dorsey.

He broke up a box that was surrounding Lieutenant Lasters with a ring of fire. He dived at this one, Vickers flaming, plunged at that one, lifting his thumb from the triggers only when his guns swung on a Spad. He was as cool as he had ever been when handling cattle in Texas.

There wasn't much difference, at that. When cattle got to milling, they had to be held together. Friend and enemy were milling here, and it was oddly like riding herd to dart in and out among them, avoiding friend, attacking enemy.

The Americans and the Germans were fighting on even terms when six Albatross dived from above into the thick of the fight. Dorsey, as soon as the Germans came in, signaled for the return to the home tarmac. The flight swung swiftly into formation, with the Germans riding them closely, their Spandaus raging without let-up. Dorsey signaled to Dockstader to help him fight a rear-guard action, until the Spads had got started. Dockstader missed the signal, and Killeen took it.

The Germans were pursuing, following in rough semi-circle. Killeen headed straight into the thick of them, Vickers flaming. They parted for him to go through and one of their number dropped out, slanting for the ground, his wings a-wobble.

Through the German formation, Killeen nosed up, over onto his back, half-rolled out. But instead of doing the expected—plunging back into the Germans—and thus bringing himself into line of lead from his own flight, he dived straight at the back of the wounded German who was heading for the ground.

One burst, and the German disappeared into

his pit. Then Killeen nosed up, his Vickers chattering like a band of crazy gibbons. How much he had to do with breaking the spearhead of the pursuit, and how much Dorsey had—with Dorsey spitting lead straight into the faces of the Germans—Killeen didn't know.

But he knew that his wingmates could not but say that he'd done the right thing all the way through. But he'd done the right thing for a veteran, not for a newcomer. And they'd never forgive him.

Road-runner, eh?

The phrase, road-runner, was intended to take the place of the commonly used kiwi. They had meant it to be insulting. Well, they would stop insulting him now!

A quick look around revealed that every last Spad was going home. One or two wobbled, but their pilots, by cheery waves of the hand, indicated that they were alive and kicking.

Killeen glanced down at the ground—and gasped. A vast area of the ground below them appeared to be thinly held by the Allies, before whose trenches was a screen of shell-blasted trees. *And that screen masked the steady advance of enough Germans to wipe those Allies off the earth!*

Quickly Killeen studied the ground below. The Germans were using roads to the jumping-off place, roads which had once been well behind the German lines, but that were near the front now because Germany had been driven back so steadily. Those roads looked good enough for a road-runner!

Killeen deliberately cut out of the formation, rushed up beside Dorsey, pointed down. Dorsey looked over, recognized the situation, but shook his head. It was no business of theirs unless they had orders to strafe.

**K**ILLEEN pointed to himself, then down. Dorsey shrugged.

Killeen banked away, slanted down to the right, his eyes fixed on the nearest road up which the gray columns of the enemy were marching.

As he went down he decided on a trick that no road-runner had ever thought of, though road-runners had tricks of their own. He went down as though his crate were crippled, as though the pilot were fighting to regain control.

Bullets from the Boche infantry were snapping about him, but he kept on falling. The road was right under him, and the column head paused to watch him crash. Then Killeen gunned

his crate, leveled off, touched his wheels; but, keeping his tail up to point his guns, taxied at top speed straight into the faces of the Germans, with his Vickers going full blast!

German troops had been ground- strafed plenty, but never, Killeen was sure, like this. Incidentally, if he made even the slightest error, and touched one of those soldiers with his wings, he was finished. If he didn't get killed in the crash, he would become a prisoner for the rest of the war.

The enemy flopped in windrows before the blasting death from his guns. Maybe some fell deliberately to escape the onrush of this mad Yank. But plenty were shot to death before they could drop.

He pulled his crate off the road when the prop was almost ready to slash into the front rank of fallen Germans.

Up and over. Then he nosed down again, giving the ranks behind more lead. Full speed, he did an Immelmann right over the heads of the infantry, came back over them, firing steadily, dived when he had passed the head of the column, and did another Immelmann so close to the ground that his undermost wing must have kicked slime from the road.

The Germans broke, scattering for the trees. As they scattered he jumped over the fallen in the road, touched wheels beyond them, guns still yammering, then zoomed away in time to escape the fire which the Germans who'd scattered to the woods on either side, turned to pour at him.

He'd done all he could here; now to get to the next road, in either direction. Over rows of blasted trees, flying with Hiss full out—

To the north, and another road. A swing to the left to head off the column. Then, down into the road, wheels touching, tail off, Vickers blasting as fast as bullets could be fed through them. More Germans down, rows of them.

He didn't know how long he'd been at it, but he realized suddenly that "B" Flight was in it with him, because German flyers, seeing what was being done to their infantry, were diving on him. He couldn't even guess how many bursts had been fired at him, but he did know that his wingmates were doing their best to reduce additional bursts to a minimum.

And they weren't up to this sort of fighting. He'd pulled them into it because they felt he'd gone too far, needed help to get out.

He zoomed away, and as he went he wrote a note on a piece of paper with the blunt nose of a bullet. This, weighted with the bullet, he dropped among the Allied troops beyond the trees. By this time his wingmates, still not having lost a man or a crate, were right with him.

And behind them came three more Fokkers which had recently been part of the pursuit in the general dogfight, together with an uncounted number of German infantry. It wasn't a bad day's work.

The Flight landed on the home tarmac. Killeen crawled out of his crate, and simply stood, waiting. Dorsey led the advance. They stopped in a semi-circle around him.

"Road-runner!" said Dockstader. Killeen didn't answer. Let them say what they wished. "And don't say that you figured that all out by yourself! If I hadn't called you a road-runner, you'd—you'd—"

"I'd what, Dockstader?" said Killeen quietly.

"Wouldn't have done your best to *be* one, using the wings of a Spad instead of your own legs. Thanks to me, you've covered yourself with glory, warned our troops of a surprise attack, killed a flock of Heinies—"

"I reckon you're right," said Killeen softly. "My Dad used to say, when some guy objected because Dad called him out of his name, that if the shoe fitted the guy should wear it! And Dad always made him wear it, whether he liked it or not. You fitted the shoe, and I wore it, that's all!"

Dockstader gasped. Then, for three minutes, without a stop, he swore roundly and savagely at Killeen.

"By Gary!" said Killeen, when Dockstader stopped for breath. "I believe you are from Texas!"

"How the hell," bellowed Dockstader, "would I have recognized a road-runner otherwise? And listen, Killeen, much as I hate to admit it, you did all right, considering your bad beginning. Maybe if you'd show us how to do an Immelmann fifty feet above the ground, we'd maybe find it in our hearts to forgive you for all the things we did to you, and said. Well?"

"I'm quite well," said Killeen, grinning, "and how's all your folks, and really 'twarn't nothin' nohow!"

But it was something, at that. Now that he was no longer a rookie, it was nice, sort of, being a veteran.