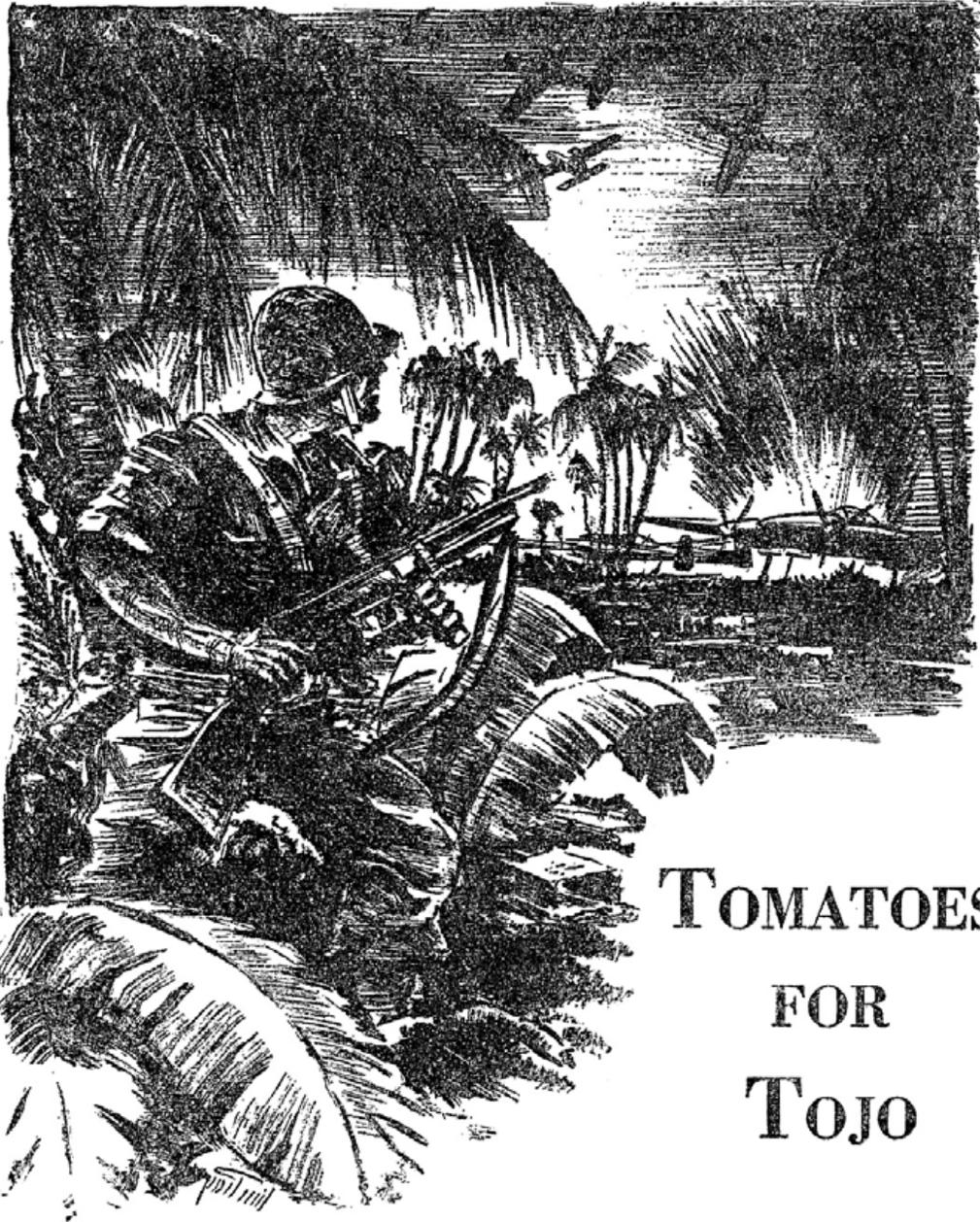


“You Fool Kids Bull Into Everything and to Hell With What Happens. You Can’t Win a War That Way!”



TOMATOES FOR TOJO

By **NELSON W. BAKER**

SECOND LIEUTENANT CAL BRADFORD raised a grimy countenance from the guts of the Allison he was overhauling and stared with sullen longing at the two P-38's warming at the far end of the runway. His face brightened as their motors revved

and they rocketed down the strip, leaping away from the dusty yellow plain at a steep climb. His eyes followed them as they shot over the brow of the hills, circled Madang and Astrolabe Bay, then roared back across the field northwest toward the fleeing Jap, until their slim dual bodies

lost themselves among the high dark shoulders of the Finisterres.

That would be Arno and Benson, he thought; good, steady fighter pilots, knocking down Zeros and Mitsubishi's regularly; getting a nice string of little Rising Suns stenciled on their ships. Swell. But it hurt like smoke to see guys in his own squadron running up their scores of Nips on him, while he ate his heart out down here in the sweltering heat and dust.

His stubborn young face lost the little-boy-on-Christmas-morning look, and he forced his attention once more on the oily intricacies of the motor, hating New Guinea, the Air Force, the brass hats, the whole lousy setup. It wasn't enough to ground a guy because he'd had the cussed luck to crack up a plane or two accidentally. The Old Man had to stick him in Maintenance, make a grease monkey out of a guy who belonged up there where it was sweet and free, and he could pour it on the Nips with everything in him. What the hell kind of efficiency did they call that, when the Aussies had the Japs on the run toward Dutch New Guinea, and every good flyer was needed to blast hot enemy bases like Rabaul and Kawieng? Every *good* flyer—that was it; the Old Man thought he was a washout.

He jammed a torque-wrench over a nut, gave it a vicious twist that shot the gauge-needle far beyond the required pressure-point. Before he could remedy the conscious error, a shadow loomed over him, relentless as doom.

"Tryin' to wreck my babies?" Sergeant Bill Scott exploded. "Back that nut offa there an' set it right, or—"

Bradford glared up at Scotty, who stood on the cowling, fists punched into his sides, a look of hopeless exasperation on his sunburned Highland face. Scotty, ground-crew chief, was a fussy old woman about his planes, but a Simon Legree with

his men—Bradford knew.

He wiped grimy sweat from his forehead. "Yeah?" he said with painful deliberation. "Don't use that tone of voice when you address a commissioned officer, Sergeant." He emphasized the "sergeant."

"Nuts to that stuff," Scotty said. "You're just another grease monkey to me—and a lousy one. The Old Man sticks you in Maintenance because you bust up his planes. 'Let him fix 'em a while and see how he likes it,' he says, and I'm stuck with you—you're still wreckin' 'em!"

Bradford took his hand off the wrench. "You've been riding my tail for two weeks, Scott. I'm sick of you."

He hand-hopped up onto the cowling and swung a wild punch for Scotty's square jaw. The sergeant was a ham wrestler, broad as he was tall in his greasy O.D. coveralls. He ducked and locked his caliper arms around Bradford's middle. Bradford was lanky, with the awkward grace of movement that marks an overgrown kid; but harsh training had put steel in him. He grabbed handfuls of the older man's clothing and heaved. They sailed off the plane, hit the ground in a grunting, rolling tangle of furiously-twisting arms and legs.

PILOTS and grease monkeys came running. It might have been a scrap in the local ball park back home, instead of at an air-base on wild New Guinea, with the threat of sudden, screaming death hanging in the air, the way they yelled enthusiastic, if profane, encouragement.

Bradford found himself pinned on his back; grounded, when the limitless blue sky was up there pulling at him like a magnet. The thought set him wild, numbed him to the bonecracking pressure of Scotty's armlock. He kicked and whacked with indiscriminate abandon of the rules of fair fighting. He wasn't just fighting

Scotty; this was physical release from the mental battle he'd been fighting ever since the Old Man had clipped his wings.

"Cheez," somebody hissed in a stage whisper, "here comes the Old Man!"

Bradford didn't hear; but he suddenly realized Scotty wasn't hugging him any more.

He sat up. The crowd was gone. Scotty was on his feet, rigid as a poker, right hand at a smart salute. Bradford turned his head and saw the Old Man. Something like an electric shock hit him in the stomach, and he scrambled to his feet with a celerity that caused his caved ribs to scream protest, snapped stiff fingers to his right eyebrow.

"At ease," the Old Man barked. He was small and straight, with a set gravity of face, and war-won wisdom in his gray eyes. He heard them out, then stared frostily at Bradford.

"You've had an excellent record, Bradford. What's got into you?"

Bradford said doggedly, "All my fault, sir—but I'm a fighter pilot, not a gr—mechanic."

"Obviously, from what Scott says," the Old Man snapped. "I'm beginning to doubt that you're a flyer. I warned you if you cracked up another P-38, I'd take you out of them. You did. I put you on medium bombers to slow you down, and you drop the first one miles back in the jungle. Now you're in trouble with Scott—"

"I had a run of tough luck with those Lightnings, sir," Bradford said stubbornly. "And that medium—"

The Old Man tossed an impatient hand. "I've heard all that before, Bradford. We've only a small holding force here, and we're short of all types of planes. I can't have a man throwing them away simply because he can't control his eagerness. Do you realize the parts from that medium you crashed would put some of our cripples back in the air?"

"Yes, sir," Bradford admitted. "But I've six Japs to my credit. Doesn't that mean anything?"

The Old Man bristled. "Certainly. But I run an Air Force, not a flying circus. For the life of me, I can't understand how some of you flat-hatting young punks get your wing commissions. What did you do back in the States before the war, Bradford?"

"Er—nothing much, sir." Bradford's eyes dropped, a rush of warm memories bringing a nostalgic lump into his throat. "When I got out of high school, Dad wanted me to go in brokerage with him; but I liked auto racing. I had an old jalopie—called her 'Mable.' I spent a lot of time souping her up. Dad got kind of interested after I won a couple of races at the dry lakes—110 m.p.h. the last one. But I turned over. Dad wouldn't even let me drag what was left of Mable out of the desert. I could have fixed her good as new." The wistful enthusiasm faded from his eyes, and he flushed. "I just craved speed, sir, so I went to flying school."

A corner of the Old Man's mouth twitched. He killed a full minute glaring up toward the gap where the Nips came through the ranges from straggling northern bases on their raids.

"All right, Bradford," he said gruffly. "You're at fault here by your own admission. There's no place in this war for temperament. Report to the O.D. for guard duty until further orders."

Bradford bit his lip. He saluted, said dully, "Yes, sir," and stood there, staring at nothing, while the Old Man walked away.

He wasn't aware of Scotty standing beside him, until the sergeant muttered, "Of all the crazy damnfools. Stop fightin' yourself, kid, and come down to earth."

It wasn't said with rancor; but Bradford's head came around fast, his eyes

clouded and snapping. "Where the hell do you think I am? You've got nothing to beef about, Scott—you've got the berth you want."

"Sure," Scotty agreed emphatically. "Because I use my brains. Us older guys take time to figure things out before we bust into 'em. You fool kids bull into everything, and to hell with what happens. You can't win a war that way."

"Yeah?" Bradford scoffed. "I suppose a guy has time to park on his hips and take it to Congress with a couple Zeros chewing his tail. Try and win your war *that* way, Scott."

He left Scotty cussing and mumbling something about "babies with wet diapers." He was too sick to make an issue of it.

THEY had a raid that night. Bradford was on guard post with a tommy-gun slung behind his shoulder, pounding his arches around a couple of damaged P-38's under a shrimp-net camouflage at the edge of the field. His mood was one of morbid dejection. A guy might have an excuse to go over the hill, if they wouldn't let him fight, he thought; except that guard duty was better than Scotty's spying and nagging. Scotty and his old-fashioned ideas about winning a war! What a guy!

He stopped his pacing, and his eyes were drawn to the sky. It was alive with the movement of scudding clouds that made a blinker-light out of a fat moon. Swell night for flying, he thought gloomily, and swiped at the horde of mosquitoes buzzing around his face. Damn "annies," forever hanging around waiting for a guy's G.I. mosquito lotion to wear off. A pair of night-fighters on high-altitude patrol droned over, the heavy beat of their motors punching through the eternal hum of insects. From the ranges behind him came an incessant excited

bumping of native "kundu" drums, a sudden rattling cough of machine-gun fire, and the pumping of mortars. Somebody was getting merry hell—the Japs, he hoped. He wondered what would happen if they broke through. The Old Man would probably let him fly quick enough then. If he didn't—Holy Cow! It would be awful to fight down here in the dust. He unslung the tommy and cuddled it in his left arm, staring up toward the black ranges.

He was standing that way when the air-raid alarm exploded its screaming warning. Scramble! Instinctively he started to run toward the string of fighter-planes at the end of the runways, then checked himself, his heart beating like a trip-hammer. Excited voices crackled across the field, the sound of men running. A gunned jeep-engine buzzed waspishly. Already warm motors roared to life, and night-fighters blasted down the strip on the take-off.

The Japs came in from the sea, at low altitude, with cut motors—an unprecedented tactic that almost caught the base napping. Even before they dropped flares to light the target, Bradford saw their batlike shapes against the moon. The boys in the AA emplacements must have seen them too, for the night sky was suddenly horribly beautiful with spangling tracers and a bedlam of sound.

Bradford heard the screeching descent of the first stick of bombs and dived into his slit-trench. They struck short of the field, their spaced concussions jarring his brain. He crouched, open-mouthed, waiting for the second stick. It fell, the last crumper so close he could feel the vicious whiplash of its breath across his trench. The third stick struck somewhere on the field; the fourth went wild—jettisoned; and that was all. He came up for air, shaking a little. There were some fires across the field, but the boys up there were

tearing into the Jap planes now. The sky was ghastly with moonlight, slow-descent flares, and red tracers from the .50's. A plane burst into flames and fell away in a beautiful arc, like a comet—a Jap bomber, he could tell by its size. Holy Cow, what a show he was missing! He stood up, yelling, and fired at an enemy fighter zooming low to strafe the field.

Standing, he became aware of a revealing brightness growing around him. He turned and saw a halo of fire leaping from one of the crippled P-38's. Gasoline! He scrambled out of the trench and under the shrimp-net, looking for the fire-extinguisher cart and not finding it. Scotty and a grease monkey ran up. Scotty was swearing, his face red and glistening with hurry.

“Get a scooter here, Case,” he yelled. “Gotta get this baby out before she catches the other one. Snap it up, Case. Who in hell took that fire-cart? I'll get 'em court-martialed!”

Bradford caught Scotty's arm, pointing past the burning plane. “Motors okay in that one?”

Scotty bobbed his head, and Bradford shot him a scathing look. “Then what the hell are you waiting for?”

HE RAN to the plane, climbed up, and ducked into the open cockpit between the motors—boy, it was sweet to pile into that cockpit, fire or no fire! Flames from the burning plane were licking at the wingtip before he brought the cold motors to life. He gunned them and the plane lurched ahead out of reach of the blaze. Scotty would give him forty kinds of hell for razzing those cold Allison—but the baby was safe, wasn't she? While “take-it-to-Congress” Scotty was thinking about it. He cut the ignition, piled out, and ran back to help with the other plane.

Scotty was still damning whoever took the fire-cart, and squirting at the blaze with a small extinguisher. He wasn't getting anywhere, Bradford saw, because he couldn't get close to the heart of the fire, which seemed to be centered on a wing, between a motor and the pilot's nacelle. Bradford wanted to tell him he could reach it better from the other side; but you couldn't tell a guy like Scotty anything.

There was a bucket sitting beside one of the net supports. Bradford snatched it up and scooped it full of loose dirt. He ran around to the opposite side of the plane and climbed up on a wing beside the nacelle. Through the closed glass hatch he could see the nucleus of the blaze eating into the motor housing; when it reached the gas tanks— He slid the hatch with a bang, and the heat struck him like a blow in the face, scalding his eyeballs. Squinting, he flung the dirt, slammed the hatch, and stood back, digging at his eyes. He knew an instant of panic—what if he couldn't see again? A guy with 20-15 vision gone blackout would be grounded for keeps! He opened his eyes wide, and the glaring heart of the blaze seemed to be gone. Or was it? Hell yes; everything else was there — Scotty, the smoke, a half-dozen fires on the field beyond.

He was a little slow getting back to where Scotty was working. Case had brought up a “cat” and a couple of men with a large extinguisher. There wasn't much left for them to do except cinch the job. They buzzed away, and Bradford remembered he was on guard post. He found his tommy-gun and stood blinking at the smoking plane. He could feel Scotty's eyes on him.

Scotty said reproachfully, “Bullin' into a thing like that mighta got your eyes burnt out, kid.”

Bradford looked up at the sky, watching the night-fighters chase the Nips. All of a sudden he felt pretty low.

“So what?” he said. “I don’t need ‘em much down here.”

Scotty threw down his extinguisher. “Crazy as a goony-bird,” he said feelingly, and stalked away.

The racket in the sky had stopped. Bradford stood in the darkness, his stomach all hollow, and watched the fighters land one by one by signal light—those who were coming back. Things settled down, and the base was left to clean up its debris and count noses. Not a man would sleep that night, Bradford knew, except the dead, and the poor guys that got the morphine needle. Hell, he might as well be one of them, as a helpless dope on the sidelines. If the Old Man wasn’t ever going to let him fly again—he started pacing, kicking vindictively at the dust, and mentally putting the Old Man in his place. All at once he stopped, thinking about something the Old Man had said when he’d dressed him down that morning—something about that medium bomber he’d crashed back in the jungle. A grin that almost hurt cracked the morbid set of his face. Holy Cow! Maybe *there* was a way he could get the Old Man to let him fly again!

THE day was ablaze with sunlight before a jeep buzzed across the field between shuttling planes to pick him up. He could have kissed the bleary-eyed corporal at the wheel as he piled in.

“Take me to HQ on the double, Gus,” he said. “I got to see the Old Man.”

Gus yawned and expertly dodged a bomb-crater. “You’re tellin’ me, sir—the Old Man craves to see you, but plenty.”

“Yeah?” Bradford’s thoughts backwashed, searching for a slip that might have got him in deeper. “What’s the

deal?”

Gus shrugged. “How should I know. I only work here, and do I work! Gee, we took a pastin’ las’ night. Messed up our runways and got six of them ten new mediums that just come in, settin’ like ducks on a lake.” He jerked his head at a mass of tangled wreckage.

“Holy Cow!” Bradford breathed, and cased the field, his mouth twisted. Most of the craters had been filled and smoothed over to permit intensive flight operations to continue; but a bulldozer and, a crowd of men were working at a mess around Operations, and one camouflaged hangar was a wreck. The Nips were sure fools for luck, he thought. Six new mediums shot to blazes. Boy that was tough when the base was so short. If the Old Man didn’t listen now—

Like the field, Command HQ was a beehive. Scotty, looking like a booze-fighter the morning after, was talking to two Aussie Beaufighter pilots outside the Old Man’s office. As Bradford went in, he saw the sergeant tap his head and shake it in his direction. Nuts, was he? Okay, he’d show ‘em. The Old Man didn’t look any too happy to see him, he thought apprehensively. He came to attention and a salute.

“Lieutenant Bradford reporting, sir.”

The Old Man said without preliminaries, “Sergeant Scott tells me you saved two P-38’s from burning at considerable risk to yourself, Lieutenant. That puts you in line for a decoration, you know—we’ve a few more to award after last night.”

Bradford felt his face grow hot. He said, “Thank you, sir—but I’d rather you considered those planes compensation for the two I crashed.” He got the rest out quick. “And, sir—I want to make up for that medium I crashed. It wasn’t in bad shape, and you’ll need those parts more

than ever now. Give me three grease monkeys and fly me back there, sir. I'll salvage enough parts to put some of our cripples back in the air."

For a minute the Old Man just stared at him, then smiled crookedly. "Bradford, I believe you'd go to any lengths to get out of guard duty."

"I'd do anything to get back in the air, sir." Bradford said quickly. "I can fight up there."

He felt his stomach contract under the twin gun-muzzles of the Old Man's eyes. To his surprise, the Old Man's voice was oddly gentle.

"You understand the risk, Bradford—we don't know how close the Japs are patrolling that area?"

"I understand, sir."

The Old Man hesitated a moment, then nodded. "All right, Lieutenant. We do need those parts—desperately. I'll give you your grease monkeys and have you dropped back there. Think you'll be able to locate that plane?"

"Yes, sir," Bradford said. "The natives have a lot of wild tomato patches close by. I can spot 'em easy from three thousand."

"Good enough," the Old Man said. "In three days we'll send in a transport to pick you up. Now let's get Sergeant Scott and call for volunteers."

They picked Scotty up on the way to Maintenance. When he found out what was doing, he shot Bradford an "I-can-take-it-if-you-can" look and said with shocking celerity, "Count me in, sir. I need a vacation."

"Very well, Sergeant," the Old Man assented, a twinkle in his eye.

Bradford groaned inwardly. Stuck with "Take-it-to-Congress" Scotty—Holy Cow, was the Old Man making it tough! He stood by, grinding his teeth, while they called up two more volunteers—Bugs Macy and Cappy Riggs. Bradford groaned

again without sound. A couple of good guys, but Scotty's stooges. He saw Scotty grinning smugly, and he could have smacked the guy.

The Old Man briefed them and assigned them a light bomber. They got their stuff aboard, and Bradford was just climbing in when the Old Man called to him.

"Luck, Lieutenant, and don't forget—we are counting on you."

There was something in the Old Man's voice that made Bradford's heart leap—something the Old Man kept in hallowed reserve for his tough, impulsive kids when they needed it. As the plane took off, Bradford looked back and saw the Old Man standing there among his grease monkeys, a look of pride and confidence softening the stern lines of his face, and he thought, Oh, Lord, I've got to make good!

THEY were skirting a high valley, bisected by a sinuous river, and splotched with patches of green jungle and tawny "pit-pit" grass when Bradford spotted the wild tomato patches.

"Bradford to pilot," he said quickly over the inner-phone. "We're over the crash area. I see the plane now, sir—straight ahead along the river. See her wing sticking out of the jungle?"

In a moment the skipper's voice came back, "Got it. Can't risk a landing. Better drop your equipment and get set to bail. Bribe the fuzzies to clear a strip for us near as you can to the plane. We'll see you in three days. Luck."

They got down all right, but Scotty sprained his wrist. By the time they found the ship, Scotty's face was all locked up with pain. Bradford bound the wrist tightly.

"You'll never make out with that flipper," he said.

"The hell," Scotty declared. "I'll work

left-handed.”

Holy Cow! Bradford thought; left-handed the guy would be slower than ever—just when they needed fast action! He looked around at the silent jungle, the sea of six-foot pit-pit grass, thinking of the Old Man’s warning about Jap patrols, and anxiety gripped him.

“Okay, fellows,” he said. “Sidearms at all times, and keep those tommy-guns handy.”

They were unpacking the supplies and equipment when the natives appeared—fuzzy-haired muscular black fellows wearing their birthday suits and carrying wicked spears and warclubs. There had been no sound; they were just there, abruptly, big-eyed and curious as children. They seemed to remember him, Bradford thought, for they returned his friendly grin. To get rid of them, he distributed trinkets and tobacco, and set them to work clearing a landing-strip, and cutting the jungle away from the plane.

They went over the ship carefully, and Bradford decided she didn’t look so bad—dense, springy growth had eased the shock on the motors, trees had hung up the tail; one wing was out of line and full of holes; but the landing-gear was okay, and there was gas in her tanks; enough, maybe, to—

“Hey, Scotty,” he said. “If we can get those motors perking, I believe I can fly her back!”

Scotty shot him a dirty look. “She’ll never get off the ground.”

“Wait a minute,” Bradford said. “We’re in hot enemy territory. We’ve got to get this job done the quickest way and get out. You’re no good with that wrist, and you admit I’m a lousy mechanic—that leaves Bugs and Cappy on the big jobs. We can repair quicker than we can salvage; if we can get back to Base before the three days is up, we’ll save the boys a trip and be bringing in a whole plane.”

Cappy and Bugs looked at Scotty. Scotty spat with scornful deliberation.

“Bullin’ into it again,” he said.

Bradford grabbed his temper in time. “Okay, Scott. I’m C.O. here—I say we try it.”

With the natives’ help, they got the ship on an even keel, and went to work on the motors. By noon the second day, things were looking good. Scotty had passed inspection on one motor, but Bradford wouldn’t let him start it because of the danger of attracting a Jap patrol. Scotty was sullen and taciturn. He supervised, doing what he could with his good arm. Bradford found it best to stay out of the way. Watching the slow progress of the work strained his race-horse nerves almost to the breaking point; so he stood by with a tommy-gun, his restless eyes on the jungle fringe. At mid-afternoon, Scotty announced flatly:

“Got to tear this port motor down to the raw.”

Bradford went over. “Look here, Scott—if that’s a stall—”

Scotty’s face went livid. “I’m not riskin’ my neck or these guys’ on any hair-brained kid-stuff. That motor’s fixed right, or we stay here, order or not!”

Bradford held onto himself, wishing to God he knew more about motors. “How long will it take?”

“I ain’t promisin’ nothin’,” Scotty said defiantly.

With a helpless shrug, Bradford stalked off toward the river. “Take-it-to-Congress” Scotty. Holy Cow, what could you do with a bull-headed guy like that? He’d cooled off a little by the time he reached the wild tomato patches. There were some native women picking tomatoes and putting them into woven fiber bags they carried over their shoulders. At sight of him they started to flee; but he grinned and they halted in a

little group, giggling and watching him. He pointed to a tomato, then to himself, and they nodded. He picked a ripe fruit and bit into it— Boy, it tasted swell here in this awful heat. The guys back at Base would sure go for these—maybe he could get some from the natives to take back.

IT WAS late afternoon when Bradford left the native village, a gang of natives at his heels carrying enough tomatoes to feed half the Air Force. He had almost reached the plane when a sputtering roar burst upon the jungle quiet— Holy Cow! Scotty must have started the motors. He began to run.

He met Scotty climbing out of the plane, pushed past him, and cut the switch. “I told you not to start those motors till we’re set to pullout,” he said. “If there’s a Jap patrol within five miles it’ll be on our necks now!”

“How the hammered hell you expect me to tune ‘em?” Scotty demanded harshly.

Scotty’s protruding jaw was a temptation. Bradford resisted. He said, “Are they ready to go?”

“Hell no! An’ we ain’t night-flyin’ this crash job of yours till I know them motors’ll get us back!”

Bugs said, “That port motor’s got to be adjusted.”

Cappy nodded.

Bradford looked into their weary, sober faces, and the impulsive anger drained out of him. After all, these men were trained mechanics; he was only a pilot; his life, theirs, depended upon their knowledge and judgment. And the Old Man was depending on *him!* He took a steadying breath.

“Tune ‘em, then,” he said resignedly. “But keep those tommy-guns right beside your tools—and go easy on the gas.”

While the natives finished clearing a strip, Bradford loaded the bags of tomatoes on the plane. There were a dozen, bulging with ripe fruit. Night fell, and the natives left. Scotty came up and lit a match.

“In your hat,” Bradford snapped.

Scotty swore. “Get my head sniped off some day with this weedin’.”

“How much longer?” Bradford asked.

“Give us two hours in the mornin’, an’ the baby’ll fly home,” Scotty promised.

Bradford said reproachfully, “We’ll have to wait for the transport now. If I’d got the radio perking, we could have saved ‘em the trip.”

“Yeah—*if*,” Scotty said sarcastically. “*If* a lotta things in this screwy war.”

Bradford ignored the implications. “Go grab some shut-eye. I’ll stand watch.”

THE night was black and interminable, and alive with nerve-shattering rounds that kept Bradford’s heart in his mouth and his finger tense on the tommy-gun trigger—but nothing happened. At dawn, after Scotty got the boys working on the port engine, his spirits picked up a little.

The sun was well up before Scotty started the motors. He let them warm, then shoved them through their paces, head cocked, listening. Finally he cut the switch, and a grin broke the strained lines of his face.

“Cooin’ like well-fed babies,” he announced proudly.

Bradford grinned; so did Bugs and Cappy. It was just a matter of waiting now. They loaded their equipment aboard and sat around the plane, not talking or smoking, their eyes on the south sky, their ears tuned-in for the drone of motors. Bradford squirmed, glancing uneasily along the jungle fringe. He couldn’t get Jap patrols out of his head. All of a sudden

Scotty jumped up and started waving his arms.

"Here she comes," he yipped.

Cappy and Bugs started waving their caps. Bradford saw her, then; just a line and three bumps slicking in for a landing on the improvised strip.

"Take cover," he snapped. "Wait'll you're sure she's ours before you bull into it." He looked straight at Scotty.

They ducked behind the plane until the incoming ship gave them a buzz, and the sun flashed on the old familiar star-circle. Bradford let his breath go—just a matter of minutes now, and they'd be on their way. Before the transport bumped to a stop at the far end of the strip, he was running toward her, the rest on his heels. The loading door was open, and the skipper and three men were jumping to the ground. Bradford headed straight for the skipper.

"No salvage, sir," he said breathlessly. "We're flying her back in one piece—sorry we couldn't have saved you the trip, but the radio was shot." He couldn't help grinning, thinking what the Old Man was going to say.

The grin froze into stark meaninglessness as shots burst from the jungle behind the medium. Bullets splattered the transport. Some didn't reach it—the radioman folded; Bugs gasped and grabbed his shoulder; the skipper grunted and went to his knees.

"Nips!" Scotty yelled.

Bradford saw them slinking out of the jungle, using the medium as a shield. He whipped the tommy up and let go at the pairs of bandy legs moving between the body of the plane and the ground. There were yells and more shots. Somebody slammed him down on the ground. It must have been Scotty, for he was right beside him, shooting with his good arm—and the rest who could were shooting too; slow-

spaced shots that made Bradford's heart do a nose-dive—his was the only tommy-gun—Scotty and the boys had left theirs in the medium. Four issue .45's and one tommy against God knew how many Japs armed with automatic rifles! And just a matter of minutes till they'd have been safe up there in the blue sky—

The laps were advancing across the strip, firing methodically — Bradford counted a dozen. The way the little Nip twenty-five caliber stingers were buzzing around him like mad hornets, there might have been a hundred. He glanced around; all the guys were flat; but they were openly exposed here. Thirty yards away in the tall pit-pit at the edge of the strip he saw a rock outcropping. Thirty yards—

He jerked a thumb toward it. "Scotty—get the skipper and hit for those rocks—I'll cover you."

He laid a full clip in front of his nose and opened up on the Japs. A man went down, and the rest did a belly-flop. There was a lull in the firing. Scotty hesitated.

"For God's sake, get the lead out!" Bradford yelled.

Scotty got going, and Bradford emptied the clip and slammed in the full one. Lord! He had to hold 'em till the boys made it. Thirty yards—would they never get there? He fired the clip half-empty, not daring to look around. Then he heard Scotty yelling.

"Come on, kid—we'll keep 'em down!"

Bradford leaped up and ran. Bullets snapped at his heels as he ducked behind the rocks. Everybody was shooting, even the skipper, who was sitting up with a white face and a bloody shoulder. Bradford found a crevice. The Japs were up and advancing on the run. When he opened up with the tommy-gun, they swerved and dived into a shallow depression.

“Hold your fire,” the skipper said. “Keep down and let ‘em pot away—got to save our ammo.”

THE Japs evidently had the same idea. They stopped shooting. The skipper took inventory, and his face turned a shade whiter—two sidearm clips apiece, and ten shells in the tommy-gun. Nobody said a word. Bradford looked at the tense, grim faces, and something hit him between the eyes—not a bullet; something worse. They couldn’t hold out very long. Then all these swell guys would be killed. It was his fault. He’d crashed that medium, hadn’t he? It was his idea to come out and salvage it. All because of his damned selfish craving to get back in the air again. He looked at the tommy, then out to where the Japs were holed up. Hell, one grenade tossed in that depression would wipe ‘em out; but they didn’t have any grenades. He could rush ‘em with the tommy, he thought—Lord, he’d do anything to save these guys and those two big planes.

Planes — he stiffened. Hey, there were three tommy-guns and extra clips of ammo back there in the medium where Scotty and the boys had put ‘em—if the Japs hadn’t found them. Holy Cow! It was a chance— He shoved his tommy-gun into Scotty’s hands.

“I’ll be seein’ you,” he said.

“Hey, Bradford, you can’t—” the skipper started; but Bradford had dived into tall pit-pit behind them.

He never quite knew how he got back to the medium by the circuitous route he had to take to keep out of sight—some kind of homing instinct a flyer has, maybe. But he made it, and found her unattended by the little brown men. He slipped up to the open hatch and crawled in, his heart pounding. It almost stopped—because the tommy-guns and clips of ammo were gone! Nothing inside the plane but tools

and tomatoes. A dozen bags of tomatoes—maybe four hundred pounds of them, when what he needed was one grenade, some ammo, or a bomb. A bomb! One exploded inside his head then; just the way a ripe juicy tomato had exploded against it that time back in Alhambra when the Moors and South Pas Tigers mixed it up after a football game. Holy Cow, what a screwy slapstick idea—but it might work.

He began frantically heaving the big bags of tomatoes into a tight pile on top of the bomb bay doors. He grabbed a rope from the tool kit and tied them in place, then ran to the front of the plane. There was a scream of gears, and the plane shot forward along the bumpy strip. A bullet made a splintery sunburst against the glass beside him. Then he was up, roaring out over the jungle. Boy, were those motors sweet—thanks to Scotty’s “take-it-to-Congress” patience. The guy sure knew his onions. He could see him down below, standing and shaking his fist.

“Thinks I’m running out,” he muttered. “The old billy-goat!”

He banked sharply and brought the ship down in a long slant, straight for the ten Japs huddled in the depression; a made-to-order setup, if he ever saw one. He saw the Japs, apparently unperturbed, roll over and start shooting at him as he came within range. Just scaring ‘em, was he? His lips drew back as the ground rushed up at him. His eye gave him the signal, and he prayed that he wouldn’t miss. He jerked the bomb-door release—four hundred pounds of gooey-ripe tomatoes spewed downward—

He circled and swung back to come in. Then he let out a yell. The Japs were wallowing in a juicy red smear, trying to fight off Scotty and the guys, who were swarming all over them.

Bradford yelled again, so loud it hurt his tonsils—

IT WAS Sunday morning. Everybody was lined up in front of Operations, where a big new P-38 stood with a tarp over its nose, like a veiled statue. Bradford wondered what it was all about. The Old Man gave them a little speech on Yankee courage and ingenuity. Then he looked at Bradford, a twinkle in his eye.

“As long as our Air Force has flyers like Lieutenant Bradford,” he said, “who can slap down the Jap and win an objective with a mere plane-load of tomatoes, how the hell can we lose a war? Lieutenant Bradford, step forward.”

There were Cheers. Bradford came to attention before the Old Man, his ears burning.

“I couldn’t have done it, sir, without Sergeant Scott and the boys,” he said.

There were more cheers, and the Old Man personally decorated him, then motioned to two men standing beside the P-38. They grinned and slowly pulled the tarp off its nose.

“Lieutenant Bradford,” the Old Man went on, “in view of the fact that you’ve proved yourself courageous, capable, and resourceful, I’m reinstating you with your squadron as a fighter pilot. This P-38 is your ship—take her, and luck to you.”

The tarp fell. Painted down the side of the plane were six little Rising Sun flags, and across the long nose in great white letters was a name.

Bradford looked and a lump rose in his throat. “Mable,” he said. “Holy C—Cow, sir!”