

Blunder Flight

Tommy Reed Thought the Boys in the Night-Flying Bombers Had It Soft, Until—



Reed saw the ship heel over and fall

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THE flight of Spads swept through the dusty bars of a slanting sun and settled down on the tarmac, which for the next few weeks was to be their nest. Lieutenant Tommy Reed crawled out of his cockpit, shouted a flippant remark about the rutted airdrome on which he had just set down, to one of his companions, then proceeded to unfasten the bag strapped on the wing by the fuselage.

While he fumbled with the buckle he kept looking across the field at a row of ships standing in front of the distant hangars.

"Handleys," he muttered. "Lucky stiffs! Imagine having nothing to do but tool one of those big excursion boats through the air. Some guys are lucky."

He turned his attention to the recalcitrant buckle and finally managed to get it unfastened.

"Where's my hut?" he shouted to the adjutant who had preceded the flight.

The captain jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward a Nissen hut at the end of the line. Reed hurried toward the queer building which looked like some prehistoric pachyderm mired in the oozing mud. He opened the door and without bothering to examine his new quarters, tossed the bag in and heard it clump to the uneven boards.

"One hut's like the next," he growled as he pulled the door to. "Be at home in one of these tin things no matter where I found it."

Then without a word to his companions, some of whom were already engaged in tacking pictures from the French and British weeklies to the walls, he walked past the clustered huts, skirted the hangars and struck out in the direction of the Handley-Pages across the field.

As he approached the giant ships his eyes took in every detail, the long wings high above the big wheels, with their ailerons moving gently in the breeze. He stood at the leading edge of the nearest ship and looked up at the powerful Rolls-Royce motors nestled in their web of spars.

"Some crates!" he mused. "Evidently belong to the I.A.F. Didn't know there were any Limey squadrons down here. Thought us Yanks were taking care of the air in this sector."

AS he walked around the wing, and studied the long tapered fuselage with its queer tail assembly, his eye fell on a solitary figure sitting against a heap of sandbags, reading.

"Well, I'll be damned," Reed muttered. "Wondered what had happened to Elsie."

He hurried toward the figure and slapped the fellow on the back.

"L—c. Haynes!" he cried. "Imagine finding you here!"

Now there was a pretty good reason for Reed's slight pause between the two letters. He knew better than to string the L and C together. Once when he was in the same training flight with the man who sat staring up at him, Reed had made a terrible mistake. He had heard the other cadets run the two initials together so they sounded like Elsie. He hadn't noticed that they had always done it behind Haynes' back. One day as he met Haynes entering the mess for the midday meal, Reed had called out:

"Elsie!" That was as far as he got. The

next minute he was sitting on the hard clay of the parade ground, rubbing his jaw and looking up at the little fellow whose name was down on the squadron roster as L. C. Haynes.

And what made Reed remember that fatal error more than ever was the fact that he had had to live on bread and milk and a little soup for the next few days while the soreness went out of his teeth. A few days later Haynes had moved on to an advanced training squadron and eventually had beaten Reed across the Atlantic.

Haynes was on his feet now.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Tommy," he smiled. "Never did have an opportunity to apologize for smacking you that day." That was typical of the soft-spoken Haynes. Crack a man on the jaw and then apologize to the victim.

Reed laughed, touched the side of his face with his stubby fingers and shuddered as he recalled that just a few seconds ago he had almost made the same blunder.

"What are you doing here?" he asked to change the subject.

L.C. motioned toward the Handley-Page at the end of the line. "Flying that," he said and laid his book on the top bag of sand.

Reed grinned. "You always were a lucky stiff, Haynes. You went around in your own quiet way, reading books, minding your own business, but all the time you were using your old bean."

"Meaning what?" asked Haynes.

"You know," Reed rattled on. "Those three undercarriages. Wish I'd had the sense not to act so smart with those old Canucks. Look what it got me to have my log book free of crashes. Look what it got you for buckling a wheel one time, tearing off an undercarriage strut another time, and then completing your list by slicing your wheels and struts off an' landing that old Jenny on her belly. Wise baby, you

were. Why didn't you tip a bird off?"

HAYNES shook his head. "I don't understand, Tommy. You don't for a moment think I busted those ships up on purpose, do you?"

Reed grinned. "Wise guy!"

"But I—"

"Yeah, I know, accident," Reed broke in, grinning. "Wish I'd used some brains. I thought a cadet went through his course and then when he got overseas they asked him what kinda ships he'd like to fly best. That's where I was dumb. Haynes, I pretty near had a hemorrhage when they told me I was going on Spads."

"And what kind of ship did you want to fly?" L.C. asked in his well modulated voice.

"Bombers," exclaimed Reed. "The bigger the better. Big easy going jobs that fly themselves. Something you can sit back in and enjoy yourself without having to jockey a stick every damned minute you're in the air."

"But—" Haynes tried to break in again.

"I know what you're gonna say," Reed said hurriedly. "You're gonna tell me that it takes you a long time to get where you're going and a longer time to get back in a bomber. But don't forget you're sitting there in comfort. Guys to watch your tail for you, another sitting up in the nose to spray a Hun, if one ever does find you. Why you don't even have to bother kicking on rudder. That forward gunner can swing his guns to follow a target."

Haynes held up his hand as if to interrupt Reed but dropped it.

"Look at us Spad pilots," Reed went on. "All alone in our crates. Have to watch the whole sky. If a Hun gets on our tail we have to shake him off ourselves; no gunner sitting in back of us to belt hell out of him. No, sir! An' if a Fokker gets in front of us

we have to keep kicking rudder if we want our tracer to get anywhere near him. I tell you, Haynes, I made an awful blunder when I didn't manage to have a couple of minor crack-ups, just enough so they wouldn't sign me up as qualified for pursuit jobs. You birds flyin' these big crates have the life of Riley. Only danger is the matter of a forced landing, trying to get into a small field with your flying cathedral."

"But, Tommy, we—" Haynes shrugged his shoulders and gave it up as Reed broke in again, with another wide grin crossing his freckled face.

"I know," he said. "You're gonna tell me that you go over the lines. Sure you do. Nobody says you don't. But how do you go over? At night. In the dark when they can't see you. You sneak over, flying high, wide an' handsome and then hustle back home with nothing to do until the next time they want some dizzy dump bombed."

Haynes picked up his book, glanced at Reed with a queer smile. "Go on," he said slowly. "Tell me about the dangers of being a Spad pilot. I suppose you're going to spring the sad story of the pursuit pilots who have to get up early an' do a dawn patrol, working up an appetite for breakfast by drilling holes in a couple of Huns an' watching them go down, frying like chunks of greasy bacon. And then how you have to battle your way home, patch up your ships and then start out to knock off a few more, battling all over the skies all day long while the bomber pilots sit at home quaking in their boots waiting for the kind sheltering shadows to hide them from the evil eyes of the bloodthirsty Huns."

"So you know you're lucky," growled Reed. "You realize how lucky you are not to have to fly over those hellish lines in daylight and have every Hun pilot in

creation try to add you to his bag— An' besides the public doesn't expect so much from you guys."

"Public?" Haynes asked.

"Yeah, how many times have you ever seen the name of a bombing pilot in the papers? You birds don't have to go out and die for dear old Rutgers as they say back home."

Reed scowled and kicked at the cinders. "Makes me sore every time I think of how dumb I was. I could have been flying bombers if I'd worked it like you did. But no, I had to be smart, stunt those old Jennies all over Canada, land them like a bat outa hell, an' what do I get? A Spad pilot, that's what I am."

Haynes' mouth snapped open, but a call from the Operations office cut off his words. He listened as the stentorian voice of the adjutant rang out across the tarmac and then turned to Reed.

"You'd really like to fly in one of these crates, I take it?" he said quietly.

"Hell, yes!" grinned Reed. "Like to get up in the air once in a crate I didn't have to be strapped into. Be able to stretch my legs and take a little walk through that long fuselage, Sit there staring straight ahead dreaming without having to worry about whether a Hun was sitting in the sun, waiting for a chance to come down on my tail. Or do Fokkers come out of the moon at you?" he taunted.

"C.O. wants me now," smiled Haynes. "I'll be seeing you around here for a while, I suppose—that is if you live through one of those hazardous dawn patrols. I'll wake up tomorrow morning at dawn and think about you, Reed. Yes, sir, as the first rosy streaks come peaking through my window I'll be feeling sorry for you, Reed. Poor you, up there all by yourself, worrying about how you can manage to get a couple of more Huns so you can stick out your chest and call yourself an ace. You know

we're not troubled much with that ace business in a bombing outfit."

Reed watched L.C. Haynes hurry toward the Operations office. When he was sure that he was out of earshot he said:

"Elsie, you are a lucky stiff an' don't know it. Or maybe you don't like to be told that you've got a soft snap. Bet you don't even know the difference between a Fokker and a Pfalz."

THE officers of the Spad outfit were settling down to an evening of cards when a British orderly appeared in the door.

"H'im a lookin' for Leftenant Reed," he said as he stood gazing around the mess of the Yankee outfit.

Somebody pointed to Reed who was sitting in a far corner. He glanced up as the Britisher snapped to attention in front of him and handed him a note.

"From Leftenant Hell C. Haynes, sir," the orderly said.

Reed grinned, took the note, and opened it. His smile widened as he read:

Dear Reed:

If I recall our conversation of this afternoon correctly, you said that you would like to take a flight in one of our flying cathedrals, as you call them. This is to inform you that I am going over on a little jaunt this evening. If you would care to accompany me, be over here at eleven-thirty. Meet me by the end ship, the one I pointed out this afternoon.

L. C. Haynes.

P. S. Bring your flying togs.

Reed looked up. His grin broadened into a big smile.

"Tell Leftenant Hell C. Haynes, that Leftenant Tommy Reed accepts his kind invitation with a great deal of pleasure."

The orderly saluted and turned away.

"Just a moment," called Reed, "Tell the Leftenant that I will bring a pack of

cards along and perhaps a little picnic lunch.”

The orderly saluted again.

Reed glanced at his wrist watch, grinned widely. “Eight-thirty,” he murmured. “Got three hours yet. If I don’t finish this book by then I’ll take it along and finish it under the dash lights.”

AT eleven-twenty Reed went to his hut, picked up his fur-lined coveralls, slipped his helmet on and hurried across the field where tiny lights seemed to be playing leap frog under the giant Handleys.

“Bring the cards?” asked Haynes with a grin as he met Reed by the side of the quivering ship.

Reed looked up at the blue tipped flames coming from the exhaust stacks of the throbbing Rolls-Royces. “Where’re we heading for?” he asked.

Haynes jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the east, then turned to take an envelope from the adjutant. Reed noticed that Haynes kept him in the shadows while the captain was near.

“Not supposed to take any outsider up with me,” he grinned. “But my forward gunner just came back from the village and was he blotto. You’re going in his place. I know you can handle a Lewis if necessary. Don’t forget—if anybody should speak to you before we get off, you’re Sergeant Lewis. The rest of the crew know about it. Better get inside; we’re buzzing off in a few moments.”

“But where to?” demanded Reed. “Don’t you fellows know where you’re heading or do you just hop off and hope you spot a target for your eggs?”

Haynes smiled. “I hope we find a target tonight,” he said. Then he pushed Reed into the quivering fuselage of the big ship. “See you in a second,” he called. “Go up front.”

Reed walked up the narrow catwalk and found the control cockpit of the giant night-flying bomber.

“What a life,” he murmured as he settled down in the seat without being cramped on either side by longerons. “All the room in the world. No stinking blast from a motor almost resting on your knees. And all the world stretched out in front of you without facing the slipstream of a whirring prop. Nice, I’d call it.”

Presently L.C. appeared through the narrow door leading to the fuselage. Without a word he dropped into the pilot’s seat, buzzed the thundering Rolls-Royces a few moments, then waved his arm over the side.

“Bring that picnic lunch?” he cried, easing the throttles forward on the quadrant. And when Reed shook his head, he continued: “Knew you wouldn’t, so I brought one. Just a couple of sandwiches and a bottle of brandy in case we get hungry before we get back.”

“Where in hell are we going?” shouted Reed.

Haynes shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t worry, we’ll be back before dawn. Don’t forget I promised to worry about you as the rosy pink of a new day came through the window of my hut. I’ll have my batman bring me a cup of tea an’ I’ll drink a toast to your good health while I lie in bed, comfortable an’ warm, while you’re up there, cold, shivering, trying to get yourself a couple of Huns so you can be tagged as one of our intrepid aces.”

“Stow it,” growled Reed, as the Handley wobbled across the tarmac and lifted slowly into the air. “What I’d like to know is *where are we goin’?*”

Haynes kept on grinning as he settled his attention on lifting the Handley over the trees at the edge of the field. Behind him two other ships jumped into the night, and he swept into a wide circle waiting for

them to catch up and get into position. Then he turned and headed East.

AS the line of wavering star shells arced out of the trenches far below them, marking the boundaries of blood-soaked No Man's Land, L.C. reached into the pocket of his flying suit and took out the sealed envelope which the adjutant had given him before the take-off. Holding the wheel steady with a crooked elbow he broke the seal and took out a slip of paper. For a moment he scrutinized the message, and a frown began to pucker the skin at the edge of his helmet.

"There's your answer," he shouted as he handed the slip to Reed. "Sealed orders."

Reed clutched the fluttering strip of paper and leaned toward the light on the dash. His eyes popped open in surprise and consternation as he read the typed lines.

To Lieutenant L. C. Haynes.
Independent Air Force.

You are to proceed to Mannheim. Your objective will be the Chemical Works and the loaded barges along the Rhine. These must be destroyed at all costs. Bombs are to be dropped from a low altitude to assure their striking and setting fire to factories. Course, on reaching German border, to be set at pilot's own discretion. Duplicates of this order go to pilots of planes L-6457 and L-6431.

(Signed) Col. H. L. Hastings,
Wing Com. 8th Wing. A.I.F.

Reed's lips puckered into an inaudible whistle as he handed the slip back to L.C. "Not kidding me, are you, Haynes?" he shouted, all the laughter gone from his voice now.

Haynes shook his head, grinning widely.

"But, L-C," shouted Reed, "Mannheim is a hundred kilometers the other side of the German border."

"I know," answered Haynes. "I've been there before."

Reed sat back, and stared into the star-studded skies. Then he turned to L.C. "You mean that a long distance raid like this is nothing out of the ordinary?"

"That's it," replied Haynes. "We just sit back in our flying cathedrals, toddle over into Germany a couple of hundred miles, drop a load of eggs and then hustle home to bed."

Reed watched a searchlight spring into life and sweep across the skies, trying to pick up the still-climbing Handley. With a touch on the wheel L.C. sent the lumbering crate off on another tack and the light finally gave it up and sputtered into darkness.

Reed found himself trying to watch every twinkling star in the heavens, wondering whether it really was a constellation or the flickering flare of a thousand exhaust stacks.

Suddenly a startled gasp escaped his throat. His body jerked against the back of the seat. He felt as if a load of slugs had crashed through the fabric of the Handley, but when he looked down he saw that it was only L.C.'s hand touching his knee.

"Better get up forward," Haynes shouted. "Apt to be a Fokker nosing in on this show any minute now. Get your guns loaded and keep your eyes peeled."

Reed slipped from his seat and crawled through the narrow tunnel leading to the forward cockpit. For the moment his apprehension was gone as he slipped a double drum on his twin Lewis guns, swung the mounting a few times, then slumped down on the little folding stool to wait.

And Reed did a lot of thinking as the big Handley lumbered through the night toward Mannheim. Searchlights kept leaping out of the black well of night. Archie batteries began to throw stinking

clusters of crashing shells in the path of the big bomber. And for the first time in his career over the lines Reed began to fear those sparkling jewels thrown heavenward by the long-snouted guns hidden in the shadows. This business of sliding through the starry heavens toward an objective far behind the enemy border wasn't all that he had thought it to be.

He crouched low to keep out of the biting stream of wind pouring into the forward cockpit. When he turned and glanced back, it seemed miles to the spot where he could see the dashlights glinting on L.C.'s goggles.

The thin ribbon of the Glan River twinkled far down there in the velvety darkness. The lights of Kaiserslautern blinked off and gave way to more of the hunting rays of light flung upward from mobile searchlight batteries. More anti-aircraft shells vied with the brilliant stars. Once or twice they crackled close, stripping the curtain of night with golden spangles. One shrieking shell tossed a whirring fragment right through the lower wing, missed an engine strut by inches and continued its paean of hate far up in the black vault of the heavens.

Tommy Reed watched the fabric flapping around the jagged hole for a moment and then turned his eyes upward to survey the skies.

"What a blunder I made," he murmured to himself as he pulled himself erect and faced the roar of the wind, with one hand resting on the spade-grip of his Lewis guns. "What a sap I was to think this job was a cinch. It gets you down, just sitting here in the dark waiting for something to happen, staring into the black all around you, thinking every twinkling star is a Hun exhaust."

Suddenly he heard something thudding against the protruding nose of the Handley. It seemed to be coming from a

spot between L.C. and himself.

His mouth seemed to be full of shredded cotton as he whirled. The motors were dying; their steady roar was fading somewhere behind them. Then he saw the fist of L.C. pounding on the cowling. It pointed.

"Now what?" snapped Reed as he grabbed for his guns and swung around to stare ahead, sweeping the skies with anxious eyes for lurking black-crossed crates. But he could see nothing. Then the pounding sounded again. Tommy kept his hold on the guns and turned to L.C.

"The Rhine!" L.C. was shouting as he pointed dead ahead. "Soon be there."

THE motors broke out again, drowning out all sound save the whine of the wind through the flying wires.

Tommy Reed brushed his arm across his forehead and looked toward the sinister shadows of the east. There he saw a ribbon of gleaming white, cutting the shadows, running north and south as far as the eye could see. He took a deep breath.

He tried to whistle but his lips seemed dry. He bit them to hold them still.

The Rhine grew broader. The black blotch of Ludwigshafen passed under the bobbing trucks of the Handley. The sky suddenly became alive with long slithering arms of silver, which crossed and crisscrossed in their search for the foe coming out of the west.

And through the arching lights Reed caught a glimpse of another river joining the long tortuous course of the Rhine. "The Neckar," he muttered. "We're there. If I remember my maps, Mannheim is at the junction of the Rhine and the Neckar. All hell's gonna be popping in a few minutes. An' to think that I could be back there in my own little hut, sound asleep, instead of standing here watching for a Hun to spear me with a bunch of hot slugs.

Boy, I shot off the old trap once too often today!"

The anti-aircraft batteries began to growl far below. Reed could see their lightninglike jabs against the curtain of black shielding the earth. He found himself drawing his head low on his shoulder to get it below the edge of the cowling, unmindful of the fact that one single sliver of hurtling steel would cut fabric and longerons like a knife going through a hot potato.

Now the gleaming ribbon of the Rhine was directly underneath, reflecting the long sweeping arms of the searchlights in its twisting depths. On the further shore was a big black shadow, sprawled out against the earth, and Reed knew that they had reached their objective, or almost reached it.

SWEEPING in on all sides, funneling down toward the big Handley, were long lines of sparkling fire. Tracer!

Reed yanked his guns around, bringing them to bear on a fleeting shadow which seemed to be floating dead ahead. He saw his tracer skitter through the dark, and then the shadow was gone like a wraith in a storm. And it was storming—a steady stream of blistering lead poured across the Handley. The thunder of guns dimmed the steady beat of the Rolls-Royces. The patter of slugs eating their way through fabric sent a chill through Reed's body.

"At all costs," he murmured, recalling the underlined words in the sealed orders for the raid. "At all costs."

But despite the trepidation gripping his heart, Reed stood up and faced the storm, answering the challenge of Spandaus on all sides, aiming at flickering exhaust stacks curling through the air in front of him. Behind him, along the quivering fuselage, he could here the rattle of the Lewis guns from the rear cockpit.

And in between, L.C. sat still staring straight ahead, his gloved hand resting on the throttle knobs.

As the leading edge of the lower wing cut into the sparkling shadows on the far bank of the Rhine, the nose of the Handley went down. The Fokkers, tearing madly through the heavens, lost sight of the big ship for the moment as the exhaust stacks of the Handley began to cool.

Down and down the giant bomber wended its way through the invisible path in the shadows. Lower and lower it drifted, slipping by skillful turns from light to light, slipping away into the shadows again before the anti-aircraft rangers could hold her in their sights.

Reed stood braced in the slanting cockpit. Forgotten now was the fear which had torn at his heart. His eyes burned with the excitement of battle as he turned loose another withering cluster of fire at a shadow coming up at them from below. He saw his tracer belt right into the coffin nose, saw the ship heel over and fall through the blinding rays of a wavering beam.

"Got that one," he snarled, then turned and glanced back toward the seemingly imperturbable L.C. "Talk about chittlin's, that boy's got 'em!"

A blazing streak of fire passed between Reed and Haynes. Reed ducked and came up with his guns blazing. A shower of sparks trailed through the air and he knew that his aim had been good. A grin crossed his face as he recalled L.C.'s ragging him about getting a couple more Huns in order to be called an Ace. Then he swung his guns around to drive off a vicious charge from in front and above.

When he took his eyes from the shadows above for a moment and glanced over the side his heart clicked against his ribs. He was looking right down into the

faintly smoking mouths of the chimneys of the sprawling chemical works along the banks of the Rhine. And stretching off to the East he could see the regularity of the streets sweeping back from the dike protecting the city.

“And are we low!” he murmured. “A little more and we’ll be perching right on top one of those chimneys like a stork. His nibs, the wing commander, couldn’t kick about that. Good Lord, what’s that?”

HIS face was ashen as he lifted it toward the heavens. A little to the left, a ghastly torch was lighting the skies. It flared up, shedding its eerie gleam out over the city of Mannheim. One of the Handley’s had got it. He felt sick as he watched the giant ship, a mass of ruddy flames, curve through the sky like a comet and fall some distance off on the cool suburbs, throwing a golden fountain of sparks upward to mark the spot of its final landing.

Reed felt the ship lift under his feet as it banked over the factories. Machine-gun slugs, one pounders, and flaming onions made the air around the Handley a man-made hell. From somewhere above, Reed could hear the angry chatter of Lewis guns snarling back at Spandaus as the Huns tried to keep the other Handley from reaching the objective.

Then the ship really lifted. To Reed it felt as if some Gargantuan fist had grabbed at the big biplane, yanking it skyward. The earth seemed to blossom with great angry blotches of red as the bombs from the Handley racks cut through the serrated roof of the chemical factories below.

“A direct hit,” yelled Reed as he swung his guns to plaster the air around a diving Fokker. “But I missed *my* target.”

The Handley quivered again as another load of eggs slid from the racks and went screaming toward the earth. This time they

caught a long snakey line of barges which a snorting tug was trying to haul away from the threatened docks. They let go with an ear-splitting roar. The air mushroomed around the Handley and drove it still higher on wings which groaned under the impact. Again, L.C. lifted his hand. Again a trio of bombs slid from the dark belly of the big plane and bored their way into the darkened factory.

Flames were now towering to the heavens, turning black night into eerie, golden day. Tiny dark figures dashed madly about the now brightly lighted alleys between the doomed buildings. Searchlight after searchlight was extinguished by the mounting flames.

But still L.C. held his ship over the spot, raising and lowering his arm like the leader of an orchestra. And the tune pounded out by his instruments rose to a crescendo, with a chorus from hell adding to the tumult.

Reed fired blindly now. Ships were pouring in on them out of the rising columns of flame and smoke. He caught a glimpse of the other Handley going down. Its flight was erratic, but it continued on its course and soon was drifting over the flaming area below. And Reed, by the light of the burning buildings could see the props were stopped. He held his breath and watched. The flames licked upward, sometimes they seemed to catch at the riddled fabric.

Then the ship seemed to take a new lease on life. The bombs were rattling from the racks, lightening the crate for a moment, increasing its gliding angle just enough for it to float over the gleaming Rhine which had turned from silver to red gold. It hit with a splash, turned over and began to sink. Tiny dots thrashed the water around the battered ship.

“At all costs!” Reed muttered. “At all costs! Rotten words. I never want to see

them again.”

SOMEBODY slapped him on the shoulder. He swung around. There was nobody there. His shoulder felt heavy and when he glanced down at his flying suit he saw a red stain spreading over the weatherbeaten fabric.

“Drilled me,” he muttered. Then over his top wing he saw a Fokker curling around for another dive. He felt as if a hot poker were being run through his flesh as he swung his mounting around and grabbed for the triggers.

His guns jumped, but he leaned against them and held them steady.

He stood up finally and stared at a line of fire dancing on the cowling. He swung savagely to answer the challenge. His glassy eyes peered at the sights faintly visible along the barrels which seemed miles long. His finger pressed the triggers. The guns answered and sent stabs of lightning through his body, but he saw a ball of orange grow before his eyes. “Somebody else made a blunder,” he laughed, swinging his guns to bear on another dodging shadow. Then the target was gone.

Reed stood up, tore his helmet from his sweating head and tossed it over the side, goggles and all. The icy blast revived him just in time to allow him to nail another Fokker coming up at them from an angle. He felt the ship rock as L.C. banked to allow him an easy shot. Then he looked toward the pilot and grinned.

“Wipe your mouth, Elsie,” he shouted.

But L.C. continued to tool the ship away from the holocaust despite the fact that a trickle of blood joined chin and mouth.

Fokkers continued to come out of the shadows as the Handley crept home. Reed emptied drum after drum at the fleeting shadows and then threw the drums at the

whirling props with a curse on his blood-flecked lips. “Damn the cost!” he shouted crazily as he watched the containers float off alongside the Handley.

The rest was a hazy nightmare to Reed. He remembered firing until his ammunition was gone. He remembered one of the motors cutting out, but he did not know that it was because he had slashed a prop to splinters with a blindly fired burst. There were times when he amused himself by watching the fluttering rags of fabric along the fuselage of the battered Handley.

But he did not remember shouting to L.C., continually commanding him to wipe his mouth. He didn’t remember slumping to his knees, slipping on the bloody floorboards of the forward cockpit. He didn’t remember kneeling there and staring back at L.C., who looked straight ahead, watching for the mounting flares of No Man’s Land.

NOR did he remember the splintering crash of wood; the grind of metal; the shriek of trapped men, and then the awful silence as the Handley wiped off its giant undercarriage in a yawning shell hole behind the American lines. Nor did he recall babbling about costs and blunders while doughboys lifted him gently from the twisted wreckage of the big bomber.

Tommy Reed did not open his eyes until the first pink streaks of dawn were filtering through the windows of the base hospital. He blinked and stared at something towering in front of him, and by the dim light he finally made it out to be his leg which seemed to be trying to touch the ceiling under the support of a maze of wires and pulleys.

He tried to turn, but something was packed around his right shoulder, something that seemed to press right through the hot flesh. Then he noticed that

his arm could not be moved. It seemed to be imprisoned in a mass of white. He felt better when he discovered that he could wiggle his fingers.

Then from somewhere out of the shadows a voice was calling.

"Tommy," it came from what seemed an awful distance. "Tommy, are you all right?"

Reed turned. He blinked his eyes, stared. "L-C, are *you* all right?" he called finally.

L.C. grinned despite the bandage around his chin. He motioned with a bandaged arm toward the deepening pink of the dawn. "I said I'd be worryin' about you at dawn, Tommy. Remember?" He stirred under the white sheets. "An' believe me, I've been worryin'. Let you in for an awful load of grief, didn't I?"

"Forget it," Reed grinned, then winced as a twinge went through his shoulder. "It was my blunder."

L.C. started to say something, but the nurse came in and stuck a thermometer in his mouth. He watched her treat Tommy to

a dose of the glass and waited. When she was gone he looked over at Reed.

"You're a stout fella, Tommy," he said slowly. "We could use more like you in the Independent Air Force. Maybe I could wangle you a transfer to the night bombers. How about it?"

Tommy Reed jerked his head around regardless of how much it hurt his shoulder. "I made one blunder, L-C," he said, making sure to space the initials, "But I'm not making it again."

"What do you mean?" asked L.C. "You said you always wanted to fly a big job."

"That was my blunder," snorted Reed. "I'm sticking to Spads. When I get in a jam I don't want to be bothered yanking one of those big Handleys around with me. I want something that can step. No, sir, Elsie, one blunder is enough!"

And neither of them seemed to notice the fact that Reed ran the L.C. together, making Elsie out of it. They just lay there, grinning at one another—a friendly, understanding grin.