



# The Wild Ace

*Lieutenant Barber's Crime Sheet Proves He Is a Hell-Bender,  
and He Tries to Live Up to It in Battle-Torn Skies!*

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**M**AJOR PRESCOTT, hardboiled, two-fisted C.O. of the Yank 39th Pursuits, looked at the lean, tow-headed pilot for a moment or so, then turned his attention to the letter the fledgling had handed over with his Pilots' Pool assignment papers. The letter read:

Dear Prescott:

Don't blame me for sending you this replacement, Second Lieutenant George Barber. He happens to be the only man at the Pool who has completed his training and is ready for assignment to the Front.

Frankly, I think he'll prove to be a big help licking the Fokkers if you can pin his ears back and make him realize that helping to win the damn

war is the only reason he's over here. He doesn't know the meaning of the word discipline, as the attached copy of his crime sheet to date will show. By rights he should have been stuck in front of a firing squad long ago for the crazy damn fool things he's done.

He's just plain wild, Prescott, but he can fly like a fool, and he's a dead shot with the Vickers. And you needed a replacement in a hurry.

Regards,  
Stafford, Pau Pool.

PRESCOTT put the letter to one side and glanced at the copy of the fledgling's crime sheet. Then he raised brittle eyes.

"Just a tough nut to crack, eh, Barber?" he grunted. "I see by your crime sheet that you've spent a lot of time in the klink for one thing and another? Well, we don't go in much for klinks at the Front. When a newcomer doesn't show up to our standards we warn him once. The next time he pulls anything crazy he's blasted the hell out of the squadron for keeps. We've seen too many men die to waste time over some smart alec fathead who just loves to kick holes in Army rules and regulations.

"Is that clear?"

Barber's face tightened slightly, but his eyes were steady.

"Yes sir," he said evenly. "I realize it's different at the Front."

"A hell of a lot different!" Prescott snapped. "And you're getting your first warning right *now*. For the simple reason that you should have reported here two days ago. Came by way of Paris, I suppose? And stopped off to tell all the pretty little things good-by—while other men were being killed out here at the Front!"

The fledgling raised his eyes and stared straight at the wall in back of Prescott. The skin over his high cheekbones whitened slightly, and he took a long time before he nodded his head.

"Yes sir," he said. "I was in Paris, saying good-by."

"Well, that rates your one and only warning," the C.O. said sharply. "Now go hunt up the flight sergeant and tell him to assign you a plane. I'll take you over for a look-see patrol in half an hour. And I hope for your sake, Barber, you *can* fly and shoot. That's all."

IT WAS exactly twenty-five minutes later when Prescott taxied his Bentley-powered Camel out into the wind, and took off. Climbing up to six thousand he leveled off and looked down at Barber's plane as it moved out onto the field. The takeoff wasn't bad, nor was it good. Anyway the fledgling got his ship into the air and came winging upward. When he was in position on his right rear, the C.O. banked around and headed for the lines.

On the way he turned around in the seat every now and then and squinted at the way Barber was flying formation. What he saw didn't add much to his happiness. The fledgling was just a little shy of being average in his formation work. However, there was a look of grim determination on his face, and he seemed to be trying hard to hold correct position and distance.

"Just fair," Prescott grunted, turning front for the umpteenth time. "Maybe Stafford was kidding me. That kind of flying would never make a Flight School C.O. overlook dizzy stunts pulled on the ground. Wouldn't compensate for a thing; not a thing."

With a shrug, Prescott veered southeast over No Man's Land and headed for a hotbed of German Archie gunners.

Next to a dog-fight there was nothing better than zigzagging through furious Archie bursts to bring out the real flying qualities of a pilot. And the flying qualities of a new pilot was something Prescott

would rather know before even his name or flight school record.

And in a few minutes he found out in the case of Second Lieutenant George Barber. His dodging of Archie bursts was worse, if anything, than his formation flying. True, the fledgling didn't allow his plane to be hit, and he stuck fairly close to Prescott's ship all the way through that particular area of sky. But it was far from perfect flying.

In fact, the C.O. noted half a dozen little things regarding the way Barber handled his plane that would need changing if Barber was going to hold up his end and nail his share of Fokkers. All in all, it didn't measure up according to Prescott's way of thinking. Barber went at his flying with earnest determination rather than with the wild, crazy abandonment that was indicated for a man with his crime sheet record.

"Maybe the kid's leaning over backward," he grunted. Then as the alternative thought came to him: "Or he's pulling his punches until he thinks he's set in the squadron and can cut loose on his own."

The last ended the C.O.'s summing up of the new pilot. Or rather, the sudden yammer of Spandau fire ended it for him. At the first crack he snapped his eye up and around to the left, and cursed softly. Five Fokkers had obviously been hiding out in the cloud layer above, just waiting for the two Yank planes to get a good distance behind the German lines. And now they were thundering down to serve notice with streams of hot lead that this section of air was no place for American wings.

Waving a frantic signal to Barber to dive down under him for protection, Prescott spun around on a wing tip and hauled the nose up. Tracer smoke was zipping down past him on all sides, but he

braced himself in the seat and held the Camel in its power climb. Then when the lead Fokker was close enough, he jabbed both trigger trips and sprayed it from wing tip to wing tip by "sawing" on his rudder.

Perhaps the German pilot thought that his engine was sufficient protection. Or perhaps he steepened his dive a bit too much in his eagerness to ram down past Prescott and get at the obvious fledgling underneath. However, in both cases he was wrong. The Yank C.O.'s savage burst practically tore the German pilot's head off.

The plane went right straight on down like a meteor, to burst into a sheet of flame when it hit.

NOT giving his first victim a second glance, Prescott blasted on upward in an effort to split up the four remaining Fokkers and thus prevent them from ganging up on him, or on Barber below. He succeeded fifty percent. The four Fokkers swerved off in pairs. One pair came ripping in at him, and the other pair cut down sharply to drop on Barber's tail.

Ignoring the Spandau slugs that whined dangerously close past his ears, Prescott wheeled over and down in a wing-screaming half roll. Regardless of whether or not the Pool colonel had written that Barber was a dead shot, the lad was still a fledgling, and as such needed the first flight protection that a veteran skyman could give. And so, the C.O. purposely left himself wide open and went thundering down on the pair of Germans who were trying to "box" Barber.

He got one of them in short order; a single burst straight into the Fokker's cockpit that chewed through the pilot and came out the other side. But that was all he could do in the time allowed. The other two Fokkers plunged down on top of him

and it became a question of saving his own hide.

Smashing and banging his Camel all over the sky he managed to send one of the Fokkers limping back homeward. The other he sent whipping downward in a frantic spin for lost altitude so that the pilot could yank out close to the ground and go scooting homeward himself.

AT any other time Prescott would have followed the German and settled his hash once and for all, but the flash of Barber's wings off to his right killed the impulse instantly. The fledgling was battling the lone German survivor tooth and nail. That is, he was striving desperately to keep the German off his tail and cut in for a death-dealing burst. However, the German was striving to do both things himself, and as Prescott righted his own ship and stared across the intervening air space he realized at a glance that one Yank fledgling was scrapping one German fledgling.

There was no doubt of that, for each pilot missed half a dozen opportunities to lure his opponent into a trap maneuver and nail him cold. Had either of them been experienced pilots the fight would have been over minutes ago. And as Prescott whipped around and went racing forward to show Barber how it should be done, he breathed a fervent prayer of thanks that by a crazy act of Fate the Yank fledgling had met up with as poor a pilot as himself on his first trip over.

However, before Prescott could roar in and demonstrate for Barber's benefit, Fate stepped in again to play a hand. Perhaps the German pilot saw the veteran C.O. thundering in and tried to break away too fast. Or perhaps a sloppy right spiral by Barber fooled the German.

At any rate, Barber's guns chattered and tracer smoke ripped straight into the

gas tank of the Fokker. The entire plane went up in a roaring burst of flame. What was left of it after that went slithering downward toward the ground.

"A dead shot, eh?" Prescott echoed, and signaled Barber to drop into formation position. "A lucky shot suits him better. Stafford must be nuts. Barber needs a lot of practice patrol work before he'll be set to take care of himself against a real pilot."

He led the way back to 39th's field, landed, and waited on the tarmac for Barber to roll in. When the towheaded fledgling climbed slowly from his pit he went over.

"Well, you got a Hun, Barber," he said. "But I wouldn't write home about it, if I were you. Your guns were loaded with luck instead of bullets. But you did get him, so congratulations."

Barber smiled faintly.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "It certainly was plain luck. I thought I was never going to get in a burst. Hope I'll do better next time. I—"

The fledgling stopped short, then suddenly grinned broadly. He made a little gesture with one hand.

"It was a cinch, though," he said in a loud voice. "I could fight Fokkers twenty-four hours a day and love it. Reckon I'm going to like this war plenty. Thanks for the congratulations, sir."

Turning on his heel Barber walked over toward the mess. Prescott stared after him pop-eyed. Presently he let out a long sigh and absently scratched his head.

"Am I nuts, or is that bird two different people?" he grunted. "Admits he has plenty to learn in one breath, then goes sounding off about himself in the next. Hell, what is this?"

The C.O. considered a possible answer for a couple of minutes, then gave it up in disgust. Besides, there were seventeen other pilots in the squadron, and the time

he could waste on an apparently daffy fledgling was limited. And so he went over to the squadron office and plunged into work that needed his attention.

For the next two days he was too busy with other matters to take any particular notice of Barber. As a matter of fact he only heard of the man from the leader of "A" Flight to whom he had assigned the fledgling for regular routine work. But "A" Flight leader's report was but a blueprint of the man himself.

"A queer bird, Major. Catch him off guard and he's okay. Just like a regular fledgling who's trying hard to learn fast—and needs plenty of learning, too. But when he thinks you're listening he sounds off as though he could do everything with one hand tied behind his back. And tries to fly that way, too. Funny, but you can't help liking the guy, and he has nailed two Huns."

And that's the way things stood on the third day when Colonel Stafford, C.O. of the Pau Pool, dropped in on a surprise visit.

"On my way up to Wing," Stafford explained as he took Prescott's hand. "Just dropped off to see how Barber's making out. Now, don't jump on me. I warned you, and he was the only one ready."

"Ready?" Prescott echoed. "You're a fine judge of combat qualities, you are. Barber's just average in his flying. And a dead shot? Hell, I've seen dozens of fledglings who could shoot rings around him."

The Pool colonel frowned.

"Yeah?" he murmured. "Then keep your eyes open. That red-headed devil is a flying fool, and a crack shot. He's probably working up to some dizzy—"

"Red-headed?" Prescott broke in. "What do you mean red-headed?"

"Are you blind?" Stafford exclaimed. "Or does he keep his hat on all the time?"

Why he's got a four alarm thatch on his head."

Prescott was on his feet and headed for the squadron office door.

"Wait there a minute!" he called back over his shoulder and went bounding outside.

As he ran down the tarmac he saw the lone Camel clearing the ground on the far side of the field and go prop-clawing skyward. The silhouette of the pilot in the pit looked like Barber. Prescott raced over to the flight sergeant and checked.

"Who's that who took off?" he demanded.

"Lieutenant Barber, sir," the non. com replied. "Said he was going over to have a look at the Contreau balloon line."

**P**RESCOTT gave him a shove. "Get on my prop and twist it!" he shouted.

Three minutes later he yanked his ship off the ground, climbed for just enough altitude to clear the trees, then went hell bending northeastward toward the Contreau balloon line. Barber was miles ahead. Not even a dot in the heavens any more. Eyes hard, face grim, Prescott cursed extra speed out of his ship and went ripping forward.

It was a good fifteen minutes before he spotted the five planes milling around some three thousand feet above the Contreau balloon line. Four of them were Fokkers, and the fifth was Barber's ship. As Prescott picked it out, stared at it, he suddenly saw the plane zoom out from under a diving German, then flop over into a wild power spin. The maneuver left the Fokker pilots high and dry. Rather than dive down for a finishing burst, they made formation and went drifting eastward.

His heart a lump, but his brows furrowed, Prescott followed Barber's spin earthward.

“Got clipped, and he’s out of control,” he grunted.

Suddenly, though, he sat up straight in the seat. Barber had stopped the spin and was slip-sliding down the last five hundred feet into a barren valley that hid him from the doughboys in the second line of trenches.

The balloons having been hauled down, Prescott was the only man who saw Barber land bumpily, then deliberately taxi his Camel full out into a shell-shattered tree stump. The plane hit the stump with its right wings, skidded across the soft ground and ended up in a heap.

His own throttle hauled back, Prescott glided down into the valley, eyes blazing with baffled anger. When he touched ground, Barber had crawled out of the wreck and was standing with his back to Prescott, fumbling his hands in his pockets.

Letting his own ship roll the C.O. leaped out and streaked across the sixty or seventy yards of ground. When he grabbed Barber and swung the fledgling around the man was in the act of striking a match. In a single movement Prescott knocked the lighted match to the ground, the box also, and jerked his service gun.

Barber made no effort to retrieve the match box. He stood white-faced, staring at Prescott in stunned surprise. Then the words came.

**I** DIDN’T see you coming in to land!” he mumbled.

The C.O. fixed him with agate eyes.

“Nor did you know I saw you deliberately wreck that ship!” he snapped. “So you weren’t shot down by those Fokkers! Stand steady. What’s your real name—your German one?”

The other’s eyes widened. “German name?” he mumbled thickly.

“You’re not George Barber, not with that mop of yellow hair!” Prescott grated. “You pulled a boner. It should be red. Tough luck Colonel Stafford happened to show up, wasn’t it? He’d know you weren’t Barber. So you pulled this trick of making it look as though the real George Barber had been shot down, and burned up. Why, you—”

Prescott stopped as the other’s face turned haggard with grief, and he nodded sadly.

“That’s right, Major Prescott,” he said in a low voice. “I wanted to make it look as though George had been shot down. I—I’m his brother, Frank. Did—did Colonel Stafford see me, sir?”

“His brother?” Prescott grunted. “No, Stafford spoke of red hair and I went after you. His brother? You’ll have to prove that.”

The tow-headed pilot pulled some papers from his pocket and held them up for Prescott to see. They were Pool assignment papers.

“I’m appealing to you, sir,” he said. “I was assigned from Issy Pool to Sixty-five the same day George was assigned here from Pau. I had to come by way of Paris, and I met him there. He—Well, George was always pretty wild, and he was on a farewell bender. Helling around in the wrong part of the city. I tried to get him to cut it and report to your squadron. He’d have been a great ace, Major. But he gave me the slip one night. I went hunting for him.”

The pilot paused and his face seemed to line visibly.

“I found him in the gutter in the Apache section. He’d been knifed to death and robbed of everything but his papers. It wasn’t hard to guess. He’d helled around in some cheap dive, drunk as a lord, and spoiling for any kind of a fight.”

“But the military police?” Prescott cut in. “They should have—”

“No!” the other said fiercely. “You don’t understand. George was always my Father’s favorite. Mother died when we were young. Dad idolized George. It was the proudest moment of Dad’s life when George enlisted. But Dad’s sickly. He hasn’t long to live. To hear that George had been killed in some drunken Apache brawl— I tell you, I *had* to save Dad that! So I took George’s papers and everything else that would identify him, and reported in his place.”

“I don’t get it, yet,” Prescott said. “What about yourself? You were assigned to Sixty-five. Those papers there say so.”

“I only intended to stay in Thirty-nine a couple of more days,” the fledgling said. “Seeing Colonel Stafford show up made

me hurry my plans. After I’d fired this ship I was going to slip back to Paris and then go to Sixty-five and take whatever was coming for being a week overdue. But Dad would hear that George had been shot down; that—that he’d gone down fighting for his country. But now, though, I guess—”

Frank Barber stopped and let his hands drop limp to his sides. Prescott stared at him a moment, then reached down and picked up the match box. He held it out.

“Fire that ship, Barber,” he said quietly. “Then get on back to Paris, and to Sixty-five. Your dad will get a personal letter from me telling how his son, George, went down fighting for his flag. And you’ll get a transfer to Thirty-nine, as soon as I can work it. I need men like you in my squadron.”