



The test pilot slumped in his seat and Casey took over

# TESTED WINGS

By DANIEL PRESCOTT

*It was a new plane, but bald-headed mechanic Casey could fly it—as he proved when there was a sudden emergency!*

**J**IMMY REGAN, chief test pilot for Baxter Aircraft Corp., took a cigarette from the pocket of his oil stained flying jacket, stuck it between his lips, and lighted up. Down the tarmac a ways a half dozen mechanics were fussing over the latest thing off the Baxter drafting boards. A two seater scout-bomber, built to do its job any place in the world, it was armed so that

enemy fighters would receive as much as they dished out. And probably more.

For quite awhile the Baxter "Slugger," as it had been named, was one of those hush-hush things that nobody talked about, except enemy agents when they were alone. However, the Slugger had been out in the open for over a week, now, and had passed all of the Navy acceptance tests. Today

Regan would take her up for a routine check-off flight, while a lot of other Sluggers were moving along the factory's assembly line.

Standing with Regan was Tabor, who had designed the Slugger, and M. G. Baxter, president of the company. They watched the mechanics fuss over the plane for a few minutes, and Tabor looked at Regan and said the same words he had been repeating over and over again for the last week.

"You like her, Jimmy?"

The test pilot nodded without taking his eyes off the plane.

"She's a honey," he said. "A honey. You've really given the boys something this time. What are you worrying about?"

"Me?" the other echoed with a short laugh. "Not a thing, Jimmy, not a thing. If she had any bugs you'd have found them by now."

Regan nodded again, but said nothing. He wasn't worrying, either. Or was he? For some reason he wished very much that this routine flight was over and done with. But, as far as that went, he was always mighty relieved when a new "baby" was definitely accepted as a member of the war plane family. Somehow, though, he couldn't help but feel that he would be doubly thankful when he could check the Slugger off his list.

"Rats!" he muttered under his breath. "I must be getting old and jittery. She's the sweetest thing with wings in the world."

"What was that, Jimmy?" Tabor asked and leaned forward.

"Nothing," the chief test pilot grunted. Then, pointing with his cigarette, he asked: "Who's that old, bald headed bird in the blue pull-over? Every time I look around here, I see that guy."

"Which one?" Tabor echoed, and then looked. "Oh. Casey, you mean. I don't know much about him. He's just one of the mechanics around here. A good one, too, or Williams wouldn't keep him on the pay-

roll. I've noticed him a couple of times, myself. He sure is a worker. Particularly on the Slugger. You'd almost think he'd designed her, himself. I—oh-oh. I guess they must be set, Jimmy. And here comes Casey to tell you so."

"He always does," Regan said with a grin. "So, he's Casey, eh? Every time I go up he fusses over me like an old mother hen. Once I had a 'chute strap unbuckled, and he acted like I was his kid going to Sunday school without my tie. I guess the others let him have the kick of telling me when a ship's set to go up. And, to him I'm always, Sir, if you please. Makes me feel like a general. Just watch, now."

Casey looked like a man of forty-eight or nine, but maybe was sixty or sixty-five. His face and his bald head were the color of treated leather, and his hands looked like they'd been in a can of grease for months and months. He walked with a little stoop, and when he got close, you realized that he had only one good eye. The left one was fixed and expressionless.

He approached to within a few feet of Regan, and touched a finger to his leathery-skinned forehead.

"She's all set, sir," he said in a slightly grave voice. "Any time, now, sir."

"Fine, Casey, fine," Regan said and toed out his cigarette. "Okay, then we'll get it over. I'll— What's the matter, Casey? Something on your mind?"

CASEY looked as though he did have something on his mind. Something very important. He hesitated, and glanced half apologetically at M. G. Baxter, and then quickly returned his serious gaze to Regan's face.

"Oh, I guess it's nothing, sir," he said with a shrug. "I—Well, she's all set, sir."

Regan suddenly had a great fondness for the old fellow. He didn't know why, and didn't bother to analyze his sudden feeling.

“No, tell me what it is, Casey,” he said, and pulled on his helmet, and goggles.

Maybe it was the presence of the company’s president, or maybe it was the “old man” that caused the flush to show faintly in Casey’s cheeks. At any rate, he hesitated a moment or two, as though carefully choosing his words, before he spoke.

“I’ve only done what I could to help, sir,” he said. “But—Well, this is only a routine check flight, and so— Well, could I make the hop with you in the rear pit?”

Regan instinctively started to shake his head, not that it was against the rules to take up passengers but simply that he didn’t like anybody flying with him, unless it was absolutely necessary.

However, as he started to shake his head something caused him to check the movement. Perhaps it was the almost childlike appeal that glowed in Casey’s face. Anyway, Regan checked the shake of his head and looked at Tabor and M. G. Baxter.

“What about it?” he said. “It’s your airplane, you know. I don’t mind taking him along, though. And, I’d say that he rated the ride.”

“All right with me, if you want to take him, Regan,” the company president said. “Sure, go ahead, if you want.”

“Sure, go ahead,” Tabor echoed, and smiled at the mechanic. “I guess Casey deserves a ride, right enough.”

“Okay, Casey,” Regan nodded. “Go over to the office, and get yourself a ‘chute pack, helmet and goggles. I’ll wait for you in the ship.”

Casey beamed and then turned and hurried over to the hangar office.

Regan was in the forward pit buckling up when Casey climbed in behind. Regan checked his instruments, and plugged in his radio jack. He was all set then, and was about to taxi slowly out when he realized

that Casey was in back of him.

“You hear me, Casey?” he spoke into his tube.

“Yes, sir!” came the instant reply. “I’m all set, sir.”

“Good,” Regan grunted with a nod. “Just relax, and have fun, Casey. I won’t do anything tough. But, keep your hands off things back there. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Casey assured him.

Regan nodded again, and then got down to the business of flying an airplane. He rolled out onto the long concrete runway, trundled into the wind, and looked around in all directions. The field dispatcher in his little hut atop one of the hangars gave him the sign that all was clear. But, Regan was never the one to take chances, or rely on somebody else’s judgment.

To do that might prove fatal in his kind of business. Besides, he still had a slight case of nerve jitters, or whatever it was that made him wish more and more that this routine flight was over. Satisfied himself that all was okay, he started the take-off.

In less time than it takes to tell, the powerful scout-bomber was clear of the concrete runway, climbing upward with the speed of a rocket. Regan let her climb, and from force of habit checked and re-checked the engine instrument readings, and the feel of the ship under him.

He leveled off considerably below the oxygen-needed point, and began to coast about here and there, letting the Slugger have its head one minute, and sticking her through a few mild paces the next.

From four bladed steel prop to trimmer flap-fitted rudder the Slugger was the perfect airplane. It was almost as though it sensed Regan’s next maneuver, for she answered the controls instantly, and didn’t so much as quiver a wingtip. And for the hundred thousandth time Jimmy Regan agreed with himself that the Slugger was the smoothest, neatest airplane he had ever

flown. And he had flown plenty of them.

Then, suddenly, it happened! He had dropped the Slugger into a short power dive when suddenly sound and movement came to him as one. The sound was something like a pistol shot, and the movement was the eight inch oval inspection plate fitted top center in the radial's cowling.

It tore free, and sliced back through the windshield glass like a gleaming knife. Regan saw it and ducked, but he couldn't duck fast enough. He felt bits of shattered glass spray against his face, and then he was hit a stunning blow square in the middle of his forehead, just above the center piece of his goggles.

White hot pain tore straight through his brain, and spinning red balls of fire filled his eyes. A crazy lightness took hold of his head, and it seemed to be floating away from his neck and shoulders. He heard himself cry out with the pain. His first instinctive move was to clap one hand to his forehead. He felt a wet jagged gash there. The edges seemed to swell under his touch. He pulled his hand down and saw the palm and fingers red with his own blood.

**H**E TORE off his goggles because the lenses were smeared with blood. But that didn't help any. Blood trickled down through his brows and into his eyes. He dug at them with the knuckles of one hand and automatically pulled the Slugger out of its short dive with the other. And when he continued to remain blood-blinded he tugged off his neck scarf and swabbed his eyes.

But even that didn't help much. There seemed to be a waterfall of his blood pouring out of the gash, and added to that a dizzy weakness closed in on him. In a crazy sort of way he knew that he was gripping the joy-stick, that his feet were on the rudder pedals, and that he was flying level. Or was he flying level? He couldn't see the

instrument board. It was just a red smear before his eyes. And prop-wash was tearing through the shattered windshield to make his eyelids flutter like butterfly wings in a gale.

"You hurt bad, sir? You hurt bad?"

The sound of a voice that he knew was not his own startled him, panic gripped him as he remembered Casey in the rear pit. He heard the mechanic say something else, but he could not understand. There was a roaring in his head, now, and it felt as though it was coming apart in four quarters. He tried to call out to Casey to climb up on his seat and bail out, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Half blinded, half crazed with the pain in his head, he tried to twist around and motion to Casey to get free of the ship. Darkness closed in, he knew he was losing consciousness, and the world before him faded into darkness.

He opened his eyes to find he was still in the plane. A red film still covered everything but it wasn't as deep as before. He could feel that the plane was not in a dive, but in level flight, and— But, no! The propeller was only idling, and the nose was up slightly. In that split second he thought that he had cut the throttle, and that the ship was about to stall.

Then he knew he was wrong, for he felt the Slugger sink belly first, just a bit too rapidly. There was a jarring jounce that made his head feel as though the top had been pried off. Then another jounce, a little less violent, another, and then finally, the familiar motion and movement of the plane rolling forward to a stop. Half dazed, bewildered, with lightning striking in his head, he pushed away from the cockpit rim, and stared agog at the familiar sight of Baxter field.

That cleared his head for a moment, and he twisted around to look back at Casey. The mechanic's eyes were wide, blinking,

and he was licking his lower lip; swallowing in gulps. He looked at Regan, blinked and gulped a couple of times, then scrambled out of his pit and onto the wing stub by Regan.

“Take it easy, sir!” he said breathlessly. “I’ll help you out. Here comes the ambulance—I radioed you’d had an accident.”

“An accident, and a miracle!” Regan gasped. “When did you learn to fly, Casey?”

“In the last war, sir,” the mechanic said. “That’s when I got wounded. And like what happened to you today. It’s my fault, sir. I should have said something, instead of being afraid of speaking out of turn.”

“Said something? What do you mean, Casey?” Regan grunted, and peered at him through the faint red haze that still clouded his vision.

The mechanic nodded toward the radial’s cowling.

“I didn’t think that inspection plate had big enough clips to hold it, sir,” he said. “One came off my Camel in the last war. Came right back through the windshield, and hit me in the head. But, I figured the clips on this job weren’t strong enough, and I wanted to say something, but— Well, you know. I didn’t think Mr. Tabor would like me sticking my nose into his business. I thought that if I could see it flutter in the air, it would be all right for me to mention it to you. So, I asked you for that ride. I didn’t think it would come off, or I would have spoken to you. I thought I’d see if it wasn’t okay completely.

“You know, a little strained from the acceptance tests. And—I think I added ten years to the forty-eight I’ve already got. If this ship didn’t practically land herself, we’d never have made it. It’s been a few years since I’ve done any flying. Old duffers like me have had their day.”

“A pilot, yet you were willing to get into the grease and oil!” Regan breathed. “Well, I’ll be—that’s what I call serving.”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir,” Casey said with a shrug. “There’s a lot of old pilots like me who want to fly, but can’t. I’ve got a son, you see. Nineteen, and he’s taking his Navy Pre-Flight right now. If I can do a little to help him, and his pals, get them the best ships, and lots of them, then— Well, it sort of makes me feel a little that I’m still doing my bit, even if I do have to stay on the ground.”

THE test pilot shook his head to clear away the grey fog, settling in his brain.

“Do a little to help, he says?” Regan murmured and looked at the shattered windshield. “He calls it doing a little to help when he grabs the spare controls and saves a forty thousand dollar airplane. I . . . Well, here comes the ambulance, and I guess maybe I will take a little ride. The old head isn’t so steady, yet.

“But, look, Casey, I want to have a talk with you when they patch me up. A guy with your experience and knowledge rates more than a job swabbing wings, and the like. So I’m going to change a few things, and—”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir,” Casey said, and looked embarrassed. “I—”

“Well, I do!” Regan snapped. “And the first thing I’ll change is this sir business. From now on you get the sir stuff, because that’s the way it should be. And you get a few other things, too, or M. G. Baxter digs up another chief test pilot. Now, shut up—sir—and give me a hand out of here. We’ll do some more talking later. And flying, too, I hope.”

“And so do I, sir!” Casey said in a husky voice.