



THE Aussies and the Yanks were closing in on Buna when Chuck Lansing got his transfer to the single seaters. The new appointment climaxed a dogged battle against the inertia of his superior officers, and when Chuck finally got the nod he was the grinningest first lieutenant Down Under.

This was the first time in many weeks Chuck had felt like grinning. He had a generous mouth, big strong teeth, and an open countenance and an appealing grin. The bright blue of his eyes suggested that Chuck Lansing was a man of turbulent emotions. Beyond that, his face was rather ordinary, in a rugged way.

He could handle a ship with a deft skill which seemed to imbue it with a live intelligence. He had blundered in selecting bombers. He didn't know quite why, and

the puzzle was even more acute when, after qualifying for the big ones, he developed an overpowering urge to kick the little fellows through the ozone.

This, he decided, was the way to fight. Man to man stuff, with the devil straddling the fuselage of the hindermost. He wanted to kill Japs. All you could do in a B-25 was trundle the big crate through the sky, while the men at the guns had all the fun.

He scarcely hoped to get his transfer through, and when he did he was one happy guy. He was based in northern Australia when the news came. It didn't take him long to get his hand back, but he was jumpy with excitement the day they sent him to Port Moresby.

Once there, he didn't have to sit around twiddling his thumbs. The Allied counter drive across the Owen Stanley range had

carried to the coast beyond. The Nips, with their backs to the sea, were fighting it out at their Buna base. The Yanks and the Aussies were closing in. They needed constant air help, and that's where Chuck and a half-dozen other fighter pilots fitted in. Their job was to ride herd on the bombers, give them a chance to lay their eggs, and to slap in the buck teeth of any Jap Zero pilots who had other ideas.

Then too, there was the possibility that the Zeros might stay holed up, in which event there was the alluring prospect of a little ground strafing. This appealed to Chuck, although he had never had the chance to try it.

CHUCK LANSING, therefore, was feeling better than he had for several weeks as he headed for his ship, already warming up in the dispersal area. It was one of the first P-40 jobs. Even though he was taking a single-seater for the first time into combat—at least, he hoped it would be combat—he was so hepped up about the notion that he would just as soon have taken to the air on an ironing board powered with an outboard motor.

The bomber pilots and their four-man crews were heading for their big two-motor jobs. Chuck shot a casual glance at one of these groups, and his breath jammed suddenly in his throat. He jerked to a stop, hoping that his eyes were playing tricks.

It was Gil Randall. No doubt about it. Chuck's breath hissed slowly out between his teeth as he absorbed the shock, and wrestled with the incredible coincidence that this one man, of all the men in the United States Air Force, should be stationed here at Moresby.

Chuck felt a sharp, thumping anger in his throat. It grew with an explosive force which left him helpless in the snarl of his emotions. He started toward Gil Randall. He couldn't help it. He was simply dragged

along by a power too strong for him. He had promised himself this moment and it was something which even a war could not postpone.

Gil Randall hadn't seen him. He was laughing and kidding with the other members of his crew. Chuck didn't call out because he wanted his appearance to be a complete surprise. He wanted that much satisfaction before settling down to the job of remodeling Randall's handsome pan.

A hand fell on Chuck's shoulder. So great was his concentration that he shook it off without even bothering to look around. The hand returned and clamped down solidly, halting Chuck's progress and turning him about. Bart Leed, squadron commander, was staring at Chuck intently.

"What's going on?" demanded Leed. "We're starting on a Jap hunt. Remember?"

It was a lucky break for Chuck. He had the sudden feeling that someone had dropped an ice cube down his back. He had been about to toss his first big chance into the ash can. He was grateful now for the steady hardness of Leed's eyes.

"Yeah, sure, Bart. Thanks. It must have slipped my mind," he said.

"You picked a hell of a time to forget it," Leed snapped. "I don't know what you're all steamed up about, but you'd better remember why you're here."

"Yeah, sure," said Chuck unsteadily, and started for his ship.

The reaction from his anger left him weak and shaky. The mechanic, waiting at the little plane, eyed him curiously. It came to Chuck that the mechanic had got the wrong idea. He knew, of course, that Chuck Lansing was about to take off on his first single-seater hop, and from Chuck's white, sweaty face, he must have believed Chuck was frightened silly.

It wasn't the best sort of an impression to make on the ground personnel. Chuck accepted this with some annoyance as he

swung a leg into the cockpit and wedged his angular one hundred eighty pounds into the narrow seat. He snapped his safety belt, checked his controls, set his brakes, and revved the big Allison motor until it gave out with its full-throated bellow. It sounded sweet and true, so Chuck brought it back to idling speed. He gestured to the mechanic in a manner which he hoped was reassuring enough to offset the first bad impression he had made.

THE signal to take off came when the bombers had all left. The fighting ships then made their short swift runs, and nosed into the air, climbing steeply. By the time they reached three thousand feet, they were neatly wedged. Bart Leed flew at the apex. Chuck's ship was second on the left. The fighters caught up with the bombers, and remained above them, a reassuring umbrella for the big ships.

Chuck flew automatically, which was bad. It gave him too much time to think, and he didn't want to think right now. His thoughts centered on Gil Randall, but unfortunately there was no way of stopping them there. They went back to the somewhat recent days when he was learning how to fly, the days of Marcia Grant.

Everything had started there. Chuck had never been in love before, but when he encountered the curvaceous loveliness of Marcia Grant, he went overboard as completely as a deep-sea diver. It was a tumultuous period of misery and bliss, until Gil Randall came along and decided to deal himself a hand. Gil also was a flight cadet, but was far better equipped for romance than Chuck Lansing.

Gil was handsome as a collar ad. He had the devil-may-care dash and spark which rests becomingly upon the shoulders of an aviator. In fact, he had everything required to start a girl's heart doing loops,

and he turned the whole thing loose on Marcia Grant.

Chuck didn't have a chance. He didn't have the line of chatter or the romantic flare to compete against a guy like Gil. Chuck battled as gamely as he could. In fact, he was certain he had made the grade at the time he had won his wings. He had worried some about leaving Gil back there to finish his training course, but had accepted Marcia's steadfast assurance that she would be there when he got back.

This was probably double talk. Marcia would still be there, but she would be waiting for Gil Randall. Chuck learned this from a letter which reached him in Australia.

MARCIA was pretty blunt about it. She told Chuck that all bets were off, and justified herself by telling Chuck she had learned unsavory things about him. To wit, that Chuck had been toying with her affections, that all the time there had been a redhead in the offing who was actually receiving the bulk of his devotion. She wound up by saying Gil Randall was top man now.

Chuck had some black days after that. He knew, of course, who had lied to Marcia about him. No one but Gil could have benefited by it. That's why Chuck had nursed his consuming bitterness, hoping savagely for the day when he would meet Gil Randall face to face and slam a fist against that handsome nose.

The moment had come sooner than he had anticipated. It had come at a bad time, at a time when Chuck had wanted to concentrate his every thought upon a new, exciting job. Given a few more weeks he might have lost his sourness, when he could once more think of women as desirable, rather than as treacherous and fickle.

But now he was plunged deeper than

ever into his former mental turmoil. Finding Gil Randall stationed at the same restricted base was more than he could handle in his stride. He could tell from the recurring chills along his spine, and from the churning of his stomach, that there would have to be a show-down, which could only be settled in one way. He had to beat hell out of Gil Randall.

Chuck watched with dull eyes, as the bulk of the Owen Stanley mountains came at them. He saw the up-sweep of the streaming jungles along their furrowed sides. A deep layer of clouds hung over them. That meant rain. He heard Leed's voice across the plane to plane system.

"Loosen up, back there, and spread out a little."

That meant Leed was taking them through the storm, instead of over it, and once inside, the muck would be too thick for wing to wing stuff. Chuck eased off and saw the distance widen between himself and the plane ahead. An instant later he plunged into the wall of clouds, and saw the rain cascading from the transparent cockpit hood above him.

It was bumpy in there, but not too bumpy. He was jounced around a bit, but his big, deft hands and feet took care of that. He watched his instruments carefully, not depending too much on the seat of his pants as a flying guide.

Suddenly he hurtled from the mist into the blinding tropic sunlight. The Owen Stanleys were behind him now, and the Coral Sea was glinting straight ahead. The fighters tightened their formation once again, and took their watchful place above the twelve big bombers underneath. Leed said:

"Keep your eyes peeled now. Watch those clouds. That's where the little monkeys'll probably be."

The clouds were cumulus, big cottony heaps floating high above the beach, ideal

hiding places for Nip ships. Chuck fastened his eyes on them, and felt a slow amazement creeping over him. He had expected to be tense and excited with anticipation, exhilarated at the prospect of meeting his first redoubtable Zero, ship to ship.

BUT that isn't the way it was. He had been robbed of all that pleasure. He couldn't seem to care now if the clouds ahead were lousy with Zeros. The unexpected sight of Gil Randall, and all that it implied, had dulled his senses. This should have been one of the greatest moments of his life, and it was flat.

Things were going on around him now. The anti-aircraft guns had opened up with an angling fire. He had seen the explosive puffs of the bursting shells on previous bomber raids, and they didn't worry him much now.

A quick glance showed him that the bombers below were spreading out in line for their first runs over the targets. There were no supporting enemy warships off shore at the time, so the targets would be ground installations, supply dumps, or anything which could be destroyed.

Leed said quietly, "Here they come. Let's go."

When the message came through Chuck's earphones, he jerked his head up and saw the Jap attack ships dropping from the clouds. They looked like fragile little toys, but Chuck knew better. He waited for the thrill to hit him, but it didn't come. He wondered why the Zeros bothered to hide in clouds. They could outclimb these P-40's any time they wanted. They didn't have to skulk around in clouds. He decided it was just the nature of the beast.

He did not have much more time for impersonal observations of this sort. The Jap ships—he counted ten of them—were already howling down to the attack. The P-

40's had scattered like a covey of quail, making difficult, dodging targets for the diving Zeros.

It was fortunate that no more than a single enemy plane picked Chuck for its meat, because Chuck wasn't at his best. There was no fire in him, none of that hair-trigger stuff which inspires a man in moments of high danger. His movements were still automatic—rule book stuff.

When he saw the Zero come down he headed toward it, but kept his own ship level. These P-40's had plenty of lateral speed, and Chuck pointed it, wide open, directly along the plane of the Jap's dive.

Chuck saw the tracers slightly wide of his right wing. He held a straight course. The Jap corrected his aim, but was only able to chew a small chunk out of Chuck's right wing tip before the P-40 was underneath and out of range. The Jap would have had to pull an outside loop to keep Chuck on his sights, but the Jap didn't have that in his bag of tricks.

ONCE out of the path of the Zero's guns, Chuck yanked his ship in a tight half loop, and flipped it right side up when he reached the top, a maneuver which not only started him back the way he came, but gained him altitude as well.

He saw the Zero pulling out of its dive about a thousand feet below, and a mile or so ahead. It looked like a nifty set-up because these P-40's were diving fools, and Chuck had enough altitude to make things mighty dangerous for the little ape.

Chuck went after him with his throttle pulled back to the last notch. The screaming of the air rose above the thunder of his motor. Chuck wanted to get there in a hurry, wanted to get his sights lined up while the Jap was still recovering from his black-out—that instant of near-oblivion which hits pilots pulling out of a power dive.

It looked for a moment as if Chuck Lansing would be privileged to paint a rising-sun flag on his fuselage, but he took the thing too much for granted. It was an easy kill—or it should have been—but the dullness of his mind was reflected in his muscles. He saw his tracers leading the Jap too far, and before he could correct his line, the Jap had dropped off on a wing, out of range.

Chuck cursed hoarsely. "What in hell's wrong with me?" he gritted.

He came out of his dive, cleared the black-out cobwebs from his brain, and found the Jap on top of him again. This time he was not so lucky. He saw a machine-gun burst chew at the motor cowling, peppering it with holes. He expected his motor to conk out, but it hadn't been hit in a vital spot. He dodged desperately before the Jap could correct his aim enough to open with the cannon.

They maneuvered for position, and the Jap bested him. Another burst came perilously close this time, blasting through the plastic glass above him, and shattering the instruments on the board.

"Enough's enough!" Chuck grunted.

He got mad, and just in time. His flying tightened up and he kept out of danger, but that was about all. He got in a few ineffective bursts—nothing to be proud of.

Chuck's timing remained off. He was either a fraction of a second fast, or a fraction of a second slow. He could actually feel the protest from the plane itself. He knew subconsciously that his mind was not alert.

After the warning hail of steel against his instrument board, it never occurred to him that the Jap might down him. He was fighting on equal terms with the Nip now, and that's what made him sore. That little chimpanzee wasn't good enough to stay alive this long. He wasn't good enough to make a fool out of Chuck Lansing. And

Chuck got fighting mad.

THE P-40 must have thought it had a new boss in the cockpit. It came to life like a horse heading for the barn. Chuck whipped it around as if he meant it, but when he finally slashed in for the kill he found he was too late.

The Jap, with a good head start, lit out for home. Chuck couldn't figure this, until he looked around the sky and discovered there were no more Japs. The men of Squadron 42 had either polished them off or scared them off. Chuck, seeing that his opponent had been last to leave, cursed him for a yellow-bellied so-and-so, and set out after him.

With the feel of the fight finally in his bones, he didn't intend to be cheated. He was going to get that Nip if he had to chase him back to Tokio. Wide open, he dove for the Zero's fleeing tail.

The Jap headed toward his Buna base. The bombers were still blasting the area methodically below, and the Zero Chuck was chasing seemed intent on taking a crack at one of the bombers.

Chuck saw the Zero go in for the attack, then lunge in mid-air like a shot duck, as it stopped a blast from a pair of fifty-caliber guns in the top turret of one of the bombers. The Zero rolled lazily, belched black smoke and orange flame, then took its final dive.

Chuck was really sore. He'd figured that Jap as his private meat. He hadn't got his teeth in this fight until too late, and now there were no more Japs.

"Like hell there aren't," Chuck grunted, as a new thought struck him. There were plenty of Japs on the ground below, and he headed straight for them.

He leveled off at a couple of hundred feet, and searched the bomb-pocked earth for a victim. There was none in sight about the rickety little village of Buna, but Chuck

didn't let that discourage him. He swung down the beach toward the line which the Japs were holding outside Buna, but even here there wasn't much to shoot at. The Japs were burrowed in their fox holes, and the gun emplacements were camouflaged. So was everything else, it seemed, and the hunting was pretty bad as Chuck buzzed around like an angry wasp.

After a few fruitless minutes of this stuff he happened to look up into the sky. He got such a jolt from what he saw that he almost wrecked his ship. He was climbing frantically for the upper air where his squadron had been jumped by eight more Zeros.

COLD sweat oozed from every pore as he realized what he'd done. He had left his post on a wild goose chase. It wasn't nice to think about as his plane seemed to climb with hard deliberation.

Things above him moved with a deadly swiftness. He saw two Zeros spin flaming toward the water. The men in the P-40's were fighting with a concentrated fury, which the Japs in their lighter, under-armored ships could not stand up to. Two more of them went down before Chuck reached the scene. Once again, he was too late. With the bombers already on their way toward home, the Japs gave up the fight. The single seaters—pretty well shot up, but still flying—reformed their wedge, and aimed it at the Owen Stanley mountains.

Chuck fell into position, feeling low. He'd been anything but a credit to the squadron on his first attempt. He expected momentarily to hear Leed's bawling out. It finally dawned on him that he couldn't have heard the squadron leader if he'd wanted to—his radio was out. The burst into his cockpit had done the business. That's why he had failed to hear the warning when the second batch of Zeros popped out of the clouds. Leed had been

forced to let him stay down there near the ground and make a fool of himself.

The trip home was uneventful. The single seaters, with their limited fuel supply, landed first and were taxied promptly to the dispersal area. Chuck climbed stiffly from his ship, unslung his parachute pack, and started for the flight office to report.

He wanted to get in and out of the place as quickly as he could, then back to his quarters before he had a chance to meet Gil Randall.

Getting back on the ground once more only tended to bring the matter to a dangerous focus, and Chuck knew that if he met Gil now there'd be a brawl. He didn't want that until he'd had the chance to redeem himself a little for the stinking performance he'd put on today. His stock was pretty low around these parts just now, and he didn't want to make it any lower.

He was held up in the flight office longer than he'd figured on. When he came out the door he bumped into Gil Randall coming in. Gil's eyes popped, then his handsome face broke into a grin.

"Chuck Lansing!" he exclaimed. "Hi, fella. What're you doing here?"

IF THERE was any suggestion of guilty strain in Randall's manner, Chuck Lansing couldn't spot it. But then, he reasoned, Gil was too smooth for that, too good an actor.

Chuck said shortly, "I'm doing the same as you."

Gil's eyebrows raised at the brittleness in Chuck's voice.

"You don't seem very glad to see me, Chuck. Why not?"

"Should I be glad to see you?"

Gil's eyes went slightly hard. "I get it. You're sore about Marcia."

"You're right, so far," admitted Chuck.

"All right, I cut you out. So what? Did you expect me to sit around and read mystery stories while you, or any guy, walked off with the girl I'd fallen for?"

"I could swallow all that, Gil, if you hadn't made it easier for yourself by spreading a lot of dirt about me."

"If you say I pulled a trick like that, you lie."

"Okay, Gil," Chuck said thinly. "You asked for it. Get rid of your pack, and come and get it."

"You're damn right I'll come and get it, Romeo!" Gil tossed his parachute pack aside. "Look out!"

Chuck got in the first swing, but Gil swerved and took it on the shoulder. Gil countered with a short, wicked left hook, which Chuck judged neatly and let whistle over his head.

The force of the missed wallop threw Gil off balance, and when Chuck uncoiled swiftly from his crouch, he found an opening with his right. It exploded on Gil's jaw and he went down.

He didn't stay down, though. He was tougher than he looked. He bounced up, shook his head, and came shuffling in with mayhem in his eyes. Chuck's eyes were no more gentle. He went for Gil, but never reached him. Someone roared, "Attention!" with an authority which it stopped both men in their tracks.

It was Colonel Brady, and Chuck's heart took a downward plop when he saw the commander of the airfield striding toward them. It was a nasty break of luck to have Brady show up at this time, because Brady was a five-minute egg who knew his job, and wouldn't put up with foolishness. The thing he insisted on, and rightly, was corps unity. And, by no stretch of the imagination, could that include a fist fight in front of the flight office.

His face was tanned, hard and uncompromising. "Who started this?" he

demanded evenly.

Chuck swallowed hard, and admitted, "I did, sir."

"You're Lansing, aren't you? Didn't you just get in this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see you haven't wasted much time getting acquainted," said the colonel drily. "You will remain in quarters until I send for you."

"Yes, sir," Chuck said hoarsely. He saluted and marched away, wishing that someone would kick him solidly in the pants.

COLONEL BRADY, being a man of action, didn't let the matter hang fire very long. He sent an orderly for Chuck late that afternoon. Chuck stood at attention before the Colonel's desk.

"At ease, Lansing, and let's talk this thing over," Brady said. "I don't like to see men get off on the wrong foot, and you're away to a good start in that direction. What's wrong with you and Randall?"

Chuck felt the color heating up his neck. "It—it's a personal matter, sir," he stammered.

"I see. That probably means there's a woman in it somewhere, which would indicate that it started back in the States."

Chuck gave a slight start at the accuracy of the Colonel's diagnosis. If Brady noticed Chuck's surprise, he didn't show it.

"Is it something that can be patched up?" he asked pointedly.

Chuck saw the trend of Brady's investigation, but Chuck was not adept at hiding his thoughts.

"I'm afraid not, sir," he blurted.

Brady's lips went slightly tight. "Sorry to hear that. I'm willing, as a rule, to make a reasonable effort to straighten out messes of this sort, but I'm afraid the circumstances hardly justify it. Neither of

you is valuable enough to this outfit. Randall seems to think the war is being staged for his own personal entertainment. And you, Lansing—" The colonel tapped a paper lying on his desk. "I have Lieutenant Leed's report of the action this afternoon, from which it appears that you are not suited for single combat work. Furthermore, it seems that you left your unit without orders, thereby endangering the planes you were sent out to protect. Can you explain it?"

Chuck drew a long breath. "Not satisfactorily, sir," he said.

"I'm sorry, Lansing," Brady said. "I'm arranging for your transfer."

The silence hung heavy in the office. Chuck felt a quick flutter of hope. "May I ask where, sir?" he managed.

"New Zealand."

The hope turned over on its back and died. New Zealand, one of the quietest spots in the South Pacific. An old man's home. A place where a fighting man could give up all hope of fighting, and resign himself to the deadly monotony of patrol work.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Is that all sir?"

"That's all. We're sending a B-25 down there tomorrow. You'll fly it."

Chuck left the office on rubber legs. He went back to his quarters and sat on his bunk, ignoring mess call. He didn't feel like eating.

THERE was a diversion some time later. Gil Randall got himself tanked up on Australian beer, and did his best to renew the afternoon's fight. He got no farther, however, than the outside of Chuck's quarters before he was nabbed and subdued with some difficulty. Once more Colonel Brady acted promptly, and the co-pilot of Chuck's ship on the following morning was none other than Gil Randall. Gil, too, had drawn a passage to New Zealand.

It was a bad trip for Chuck, and Gil did not seem to be enjoying himself much either. He stared ahead with the vacant air of a man who has been blackjacked, while Chuck attended grimly to his flying. It was bad enough, Chuck reasoned, to be deported to New Zealand, but it was a whole lot worse to be taking Randall with him. It destroyed every hope of severing the memory which linked him to his past.

He landed at an airport outside Sidney to refuel. The crew got out to stretch their legs, then climbed aboard once more and started on the final lap. They reached Auckland late that afternoon. Chuck found the landing field without much trouble, and brought the big plane down. He and Gil left the ship in dogged silence, and plodded off to report to Major Bell.

The major was lanky, likable, and inclined to be informal. He wore a quiet air of authority, however, which suggested that a subordinate hadn't better try to be too informal. His eyes were a quizzical grey, and their corners were etched with the inevitable crow's-feet of those men who have many hours behind them in the air. The major was also blunt.

"You men both think, perhaps, that you have been sent down here as a form of punishment. That, to some degree, is true, but don't get the idea in your heads that New Zealand is not an important theatre of the war. It is. It's vital. The Japs are treacherous, tricky and unpredictable. If they hit here, they'll hit hard, and we've got to be ready for them. We're patrolling constantly, and that will be your job."

The mere threat of danger to New Zealand did not go far toward consoling Chuck Lansing. He wanted action, and there was little promise of it here. Even the patrolling was worse than he'd expected. He wouldn't have minded so much if he had been assigned to a big ship, but he drew a Curtis O-52 observation job instead.

It was a fine little ship, with a nice cruising range, a fair speed, and as easy to handle as kiddie-kar, but heaven help the two-man crew that ever had to fight in it. It simply wasn't built for that.

AUCKLAND, the base from which he flew, was a nice town, too. It wasn't as modern as the towns back home, but there was a strong link there just the same. The cars, for the most part, were American, except for the small ones, which included little three-wheeled scooters which putted about the place like busy ants. There were lots of bicycles too, hundreds of them. Men, women and children pedaled about with apparent disregard for life and limb, but no one seemed to get hurt.

The people of New Zealand spoke with a decided accent, more British than American. Their slang was confusing too, until he got the hang of it. Their coffee was atrocious, their butter better than he had ever eaten, and their Spaetz beer simply great, even though they seldom iced it. He even learned to like an occasional shandy. Half beer, half lemon soda—they called it lemonade—the very thought of which made him squirm before he'd tried it. It wasn't bad. In fact, it grew on you.

The people themselves were reserved at first, but he found the reserve to be merely skin deep. They were cordial, friendly, and they knew how to enjoy life. They quickly cracked Chuck's shell of bitterness, and made him like the place.

The shock of his transfer had cooled his explosive anger toward Gil Randall. He still didn't like the guy, but he lost the active desire to knock hell out of him. The change seemed to have affected Gil the same way. They avoided each other now as much as possible.

His observer, a corporal named Patch Bowman, was a tow-headed, likable kid. Bowman's only fault was that he liked to

talk about his girl back home, a subject which Chuck could not share with enthusiasm. Chuck felt sorry for the poor dope, but refrained from saying so.

They were cruising north one afternoon, loafing along several miles off shore at two thousand feet. The sky was uncertain, lumped with clouds which might turn into squalls. Chuck's radio crackled, then came in clear through the ear phones.

"Calling Lansing. Calling Lansing. Please acknowledge."

"This is Lansing."

"Where are you now?"

Chuck checked the shore line and the islands to his right.

"I'm between Bream Head and Moko Hinou."

"That's swell. A fishing boat reports black bulky object disappearing beneath surface about sixty miles dead east of Bream Head. Sounds like a whale to me, but you'd better go out and take a peek. You're the only one around there."

Chuck felt a quickening of his pulse. "Okay," he said. "I'm off."

He got a compass bearing on Bream Head, and set a course due east. Even if it was a sub there was virtually no chance of spotting it, but Chuck felt better just the same. It was something definite to do, which was more than he'd had since reporting for his new job.

IT TOOK about a half hour to reach the approximate spot, but, as Chuck had expected, there was nothing in sight but a lot of wet ocean. Nevertheless, he began to search the locality in gradually widening circles, muttering meanwhile:

"What'd I do if I found it? Spit on it?"

But he didn't find it. He reported as much back to the base, and was instructed to come back to the mainland, swinging up to the north tip of the island in order to patrol the west shore on his way home.

He checked his gas, and decided he had enough, with some to spare. He set a course for North Cape, but before he had traveled very far, the land ahead was blotted out with the angry darkness of a squall. He grunted with annoyance. The disturbance looked too high to climb above, so he shrugged his shoulders and decided to bore right through the middle of it.

He soon found, however, that he had underestimated the meanness of these brief Southern Pacific storms. Once inside the thing he found he had a good sized bear by the tail. The wind was gusty, hard and dead against him. It tossed the little plane around so much that Chuck really worked to keep it right side up. Patch Bowman said across the interphone:

"Hell, lieutenant, I feel someone was shakin' me up in a dice cup. I'll bet if they rolled me out now I'd be a natural."

"Dig your spurs in, kid," Chuck laughed. "We'll tame 'er."

It was fun at first, until Chuck began worrying about his gas supply. In computing the amount needed to get home, he hadn't counted on bucking a head wind of this velocity. He had a pretty good idea that his ground speed was next to nothing because he wasn't making much headway toward dry land.

The squall lasted for another thirty minutes, by which time Chuck was really worried. When he finally bucked his way back into the sunlight, the needle of his gas gauge was wobbling around above the empty mark. He judged there was enough left to reach the mainland, but not enough to get him home. The storm had damaged his plane-to-shore radio. He couldn't raise the base.

"Looks like a forced landing, Patch," he said. "I think we'll come in somewhere near Cape Brett. Check the map for emergency landing fields."

A moment later Bowman said, "I don't see any marked."

They were nearing the land now. It didn't look too promising. There was a ridge of low green hills just beyond the shore line. Chuck would clear them at his present altitude of two thousand feet, but a lot depended on the nature of the ground behind. Chuck didn't care to think about it.

"It won't be long now, Patch. Want to bail out and join the Caterpillar Club?" he asked.

"No thanks," said Patch. "I'll take my chances right back here."

CLEARING the hills, Chuck saw that the rolling land was hardly made to order for forced landings. There was only one possible spot where he might set down the little ship. He headed for it, then cursed whole-heartedly when he reached a point where he could see it clearer. It was dotted generously with grazing sheep.

Patch said, "I never did like mutton!"

Chuck didn't answer. He was thinking hard. He didn't know much about sheep, but he didn't think they were very brave—an important point just now. It might mean the difference between a safe landing and a crash. He had to gamble on it anyway. The gauge said no more gas. He lowered his landing gear.

He cut the motor and headed for the field in a long glide. Fifty feet from the ground he slapped his throttle open, and grunted with relief when the engine took hold with a surprised bellow. The field was just ahead, and Chuck dropped even lower as he roared above it.

His hunch worked, just as he had prayed it might. The terrified sheep scrambled frantically for safety from the howling monster which was almost close enough to yank the wool right off their backs. They split into two stampeding groups, as if a giant plow had barged right

through the middle of them, leaving a wide path. Now all Chuck had to do was to get back and take advantage of it.

He zoomed steeply, and clawed for all the altitude his remaining gas would give him. It wasn't much. When the motor conked Chuck still was in a bad spot.

He yanked back on the stick, kicked the rudder hard, and dropped off on a wing from his stall. Then, with all controls in neutral, he held his breath as the ship steadied in its dive. He was facing the field now, but he needed speed for his landing glide. He squeezed all he dared from the steep dive, then leveled off.

He heard his wheels flick leaves from the small trees bordering the field, but the contact was not great enough to slow his speed. He was headed directly toward the path the sheep had left between their ranks. He set the wheels down gently, eased pressure on the brakes, and came to a safe stop. He turned and grinned at Patch.

Patch was the color of pea soup. His lips moved stiffly for a moment before he could get words through.

"I still don't believe it!" he said hoarsely. "No one alive can fly like that. What did you use? Sky hooks?"

"It's a sweet little ship," said Chuck. "Smart, too. All you do is talk to it."

"Next time," declared Patch flatly, "I'm going to use my chute. Lemme out of here! I want to see how the ground feels."

Chuck followed the corporal from the plane. Chuck was too glad to get dirt under his feet to let the immediate future bother him. He decided to have a cigarette before tackling the problem of getting gas.

He was hauling the first puff gratefully into his lungs when an angry voice called behind him.

"What are you doing here? Get out of this field at once!"

It was a feminine voice, and definitely not cordial. Chuck strangled on the smoke

as he whirled about to face a furious, dark-eyed girl whose head came no higher than his shoulder. She had taken them by surprise from the opposite side of the plane.

SHE waited tensely while Chuck got his breath back. Between gasps Chuck got the vague impression that she was not beautiful, that she was wearing slacks, had a boyish figure, and was undoubtedly accustomed to meeting difficult situations head-on.

"Well?" she said, impatiently, as if she had decided that Chuck was stalling for time.

Chuck finally cleared his lungs of smoke. "Do you think I landed here because I wanted to?" he demanded irritably.

"From what I hear of you Americans, I wouldn't doubt it," she said flatly, clipping her words off in the British manner.

"What do you hear about Americans?" Chuck asked belligerently.

The girl's eyes widened at the unexpected shock of being placed on the defensive.

"Well," she said. "I—I've heard that they brag about being willing to try anything once. That—that they're irresponsible, and—and—"

Chuck laughed, and the girl regained her temper. "Now you get out of here at once. Hasn't it occurred to you that you might have hurt these sheep? They're valuable these days."

"So are our necks," said Chuck, motioning toward Patch Bowman, who was standing open-mouthed. "We were patrolling off shore. Got caught in a squall and ran short of gas. This was the first field we could find to land in. We'll get out, and gladly, as soon as I can find a phone and get more gas."

A slow color crept beneath the smooth

tan of the girl's face, "I'm sorry," she said. "And terribly ashamed. You, or any other of your men, can land here any time you want to after this. We had already planned to move the sheep to another pasture."

"Well thanks," said Chuck, embarrassed. "But I hope it won't be necessary. Is there a telephone around these parts? I'd better check in at the field before they waste gas hunting for me."

The girl suddenly became matter-of-fact and business-like.

"Yes, of course. We have a telephone at the house. It is just beyond the first rise. Come on, we can get there in a jiffy."

She started off, with Chuck on one side, and Corporal Bowman on the other. She walked with a free-swinging stride, which gave the impression that she could walk that way for miles. She began to talk with an easy lack of restraint which stood out in sharp contrast to her fiery manner of introduction.

"My name is Helen Forrester," she said. "What's yours?"

"I'm Chuck Lansing, and this is Patch Bowman."

"You're the first Americans I've ever met," she admitted frankly, "although there are probably thousands of you here now. Several of our men have gone into the service, which leaves a lot of extra work about the place. It keeps me busy. Sheep are a lot of work—dipping, shearing, and dozens of other things. I haven't been in Auckland for months."

Chuck stared at her. "You mean you do farm work?" he asked incredulously. "You're not big enough."

She laughed. "I've got to be," she said. "Someone has to."

CHUCK had a confused picture of Marcia Grant doing farm work, which brought about an inevitable comparison of Marcia and this girl beside him. There

seemed to be few points of contact between Marcia's pampered loveliness and Helen Forrester's capable efficiency. Chuck even began to feel that he might relax a little in the presence of this girl who seemed to lack dangerous femininity. This girl, he believed, could be met upon a man to man basis.

They reached the house, a long, low, white frame building, comfortable and home-like. Mr. Forrester was an angular man, grey at the temples. He had the quiet, natural air of a man accustomed to big estates. It was hard for Chuck to associate him with raising sheep. Mrs. Forrester was slightly on the rotund side, pink cheeked and motherly. They both accepted Chuck and Patch as cordially as if they had been expected guests.

Chuck called the air field, and reported his safe landing. His face was slightly rueful as he turned from the phone.

"They say they can't get gas out to me until tomorrow," he reported. "Is there a hotel near here, where the corporal and I could spend the night?"

"You're staying here," said Mr. Forrester with authority. "We insist on it, and will be more than pleased to have you."

So that was that. They were shown to a spacious room, where they had a chance to clean up as well as they could before dinner. Mr. Forrester had cocktails ready when they came down. A moment later Helen Forrester came into the room, and Chuck's hand jerked involuntarily, spilling some of the cocktail on his trousers.

It was a jolt he was entirely unprepared for. All his previous impressions of Helen Forrester exploded in a puff of smoke, and he wondered what crazy illusion had made him think the girl was not attractive.

He had seen her before without makeup. She wore only a little now, but that little made a startling difference. Her

dress, too, was far removed from the slacks and the work-worn jacket. Now she was wearing something soft and green which did things to her figure.

A warning bell clanged somewhere inside Chuck that he was confronted with the very thing he had sworn to avoid. He felt himself freeze up at the discovery that Helen Forrester was just another woman who was well equipped, too well in fact, to raise the very devil with a man.

Chuck clung desperately to his theory during dinner. His face was set in uncompromising, almost sullen lines, which drew curious glances from his hosts.

After dinner, they sat around the living room. Helen played the piano and sang. She did both well, and Chuck's resolve took a severe beating. He wanted to relax, but didn't dare. He was glad when bed-time came.

But he couldn't sleep. Patch Bowman's snoring got on his nerves. Finally he got up, slipped on his clothes, and went quietly outside for a smoke. He found a wicker chair on the dark veranda. As he eased down into it, a voice said:

"I couldn't sleep either. Nice out here, isn't it?"

Chuck jerked around in surprise. Helen Forrester was sitting near him in another chair. He could see her outline as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

He took a quick grip on himself. "Yes," he said. "Fine night. Have a cigarette?"

THIS was a mistake. She said "Yes, please," and Chuck had to get up and go over to her. This brought him closer to her than he wanted to be, particularly when he held the match. Chuck clamped his teeth down hard, and returned to his chair.

Helen said, "You changed suddenly this evening. What's wrong? Did we do something to offend you? I'm sorry if we did."

“You’ve all been more than kind,” Chuck answered stiffly.

“You puzzle me,” insisted Helen. “You seemed so friendly. Then suddenly you froze up. It seemed so strange.”

“I liked you better in your work clothes,” blurted Chuck.

She considered this in silence, then said, “That seems to suggest you have an antipathy for anything that’s feminine.”

“I have,” said Chuck, getting in deeper all the time, and wishing he could keep his mouth shut.

“She must have hurt you badly.”

“Bad enough. She was a woman, wasn’t she?”

“You’re generalizing, and that isn’t fair.”

“I’ve decided that you can’t treat women fairly.”

“What vast experience you must have had,” she said.

Chuck felt the cool irony of her voice. “I’ve had all I want, at any rate,” he said hoarsely.

“I see.” Her cigarette formed a bright arc as she tossed it to the lawn. “At least you don’t mince words. Goodnight.”

She was in the house before Chuck knew what had happened. His reaction was violent and unexpected. He felt like the lowest thing that ever crawled.

“You heel!” he gritted to himself. “You lousy heel!”

He hoped for a chance to square himself next morning, but Helen had already left on some job about the ranch. She had not returned by the time an Army jeep showed up with gas, so Chuck did his best to express his appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. Forrester. A short time later he was in the air, heading back toward Auckland.

He arrived in time to be called into a conference. It was a big pow-wow and a serious one. Major Bell had summoned all

the flyers at the field. When he faced them, his face was strained.

“THIS is a matter,” he began, “which we all must know about. Lieutenant Archer, and his observer, Sergeant Mills, were patrolling the northwest coast yesterday afternoon. Archer checked in at Reef Point. After that we must assume that he swung inland for some reason or other because his next message, just before dark, was brief and excited. He said, ‘Jap Zeros! Maungataniwa Mountain! I—’ The message chopped off short at that point. This morning we located what was left of his O-52 in an open spot near Hokianga. It was riddled with bullets. Both men were dead.”

There was a stunned silence. “But where would Zero fighters come from?” someone asked.

“That appears to be the mystery,” said the major. “It is hardly probable that Archer could have been mistaken, yet in that section there is no possible landing field for Zeros which we couldn’t spot immediately. A carrier is the only other possibility, and that makes no sense at all. They haven’t enough left to risk one for the improbable purpose of sending fighter ships over the mainland. Besides, our patrols or the Navy patrols would undoubtedly have spotted it. If they actually were Zeros, they must have come from the mainland. That’s why we’re here this morning. We’re scouring that section from the air. Any suggestions?”

In the following silence, Chuck Lansing’s brain began to work with a clarity which he hadn’t known in days. It must have been the bare mention of Zeros that turned the trick. At any rate, he heard himself speak up with an assurance which surprised him.

“Don’t you think, sir, that it might be a good idea at first to send another O-52 up

there by itself?"

Bell showed his surprise. "Why?" he demanded.

"Well," Chuck went on slowly, "if the Japs actually have some place around there where Zeros can take off and land, it must be so thoroughly camouflaged that we wouldn't stand much chance of spotting it from the air."

"That's true," said Bell. "Go ahead."

"It's just possible," said Chuck, "that Archer might have stumbled on something he wasn't supposed to see, something which forced them to down him. It's possible, too, that the Japs might have heard Archer's last call to this field. In that case they would lay low, expecting a search, and it might take us days to find them. They'd never tackle a flock of bombers and pursuit ships. Also an O-52 can get into spots where a faster or a bigger plane could not. It's my idea that if an O-52 began nosing around that mountain, and if it got dangerously close to the hide-out, the Japs might take the chance again of coming out to bag it."

The major thought that over carefully, and was a big enough man to give credit where it belonged.

"Sound strategy," he said. "But dangerous. I'm asking for a volunteer."

"Hell!" exploded Chuck. "That's what I was doing."

The major grinned at the breach of military etiquette.

"Okay, Chuck," he said. "You win. You can pick your own observer."

But Chuck didn't get a chance to make a choice. Instead, he got a considerable shock when Gil Randall said, "May I go with him, sir?"

Bell said, "Suits me, if it suits Lansing."

All eyes in the room were turned on Chuck. Most of the men knew that he and Gil hated each other's guts. Gil was

watching him with a covert expression of amusement. He knew he'd put Chuck on a spot, and he seemed to be enjoying it.

CHUCK had sense enough to see that he couldn't very well refuse what amounted to an open challenge. He braced himself, and said, "It suits me. When do we start, sir?"

"Better get there about the same time Archer did. If there are Japs in these parts, it may give them the chance to believe we don't know about Archer yet. Leave here at five-thirty."

Chuck's anticipation of the trip wore off swiftly when he learned he'd have Gil Randall in the back cockpit.

They had been in the air some time when Gil said through the interphone:

"Still sore about Marcia Grant?"

Chuck felt a quiver run along his spine, but he kept his mouth shut. He'd expected something of this sort.

"Still think I crossed you up," insisted Gil, "by telling her a lot of lies?"

Chuck clamped his jaws until the muscles at the angles bulged.

"I just got a letter from her," Gil went on. "I got it here. I'm going to read you part of it. Thought you might enjoy it."

Sweating with helpless rage, Chuck knew he had to take it. Gil's tantalizing voice went on:

"I won't give you all of it, just the meaty part. She says here, and I quote, 'So you see, Gil, I'm afraid this is the end. I learned, through a source I will not mention, that you were having a violent love affair with that red-headed girl, at the same time you were trying to make me believe you loved me. You know I can't condone that sort of thing. And so goodbye, and happy landings.' Incidentally, Chuck, she forgot to send her love to you."

Chuck felt as if someone had clipped him over the head with a sap.

“Don’t think I’m being personal, old clobber, but what color hair did she spring on you?” Gil went on.

“Also a redhead,” Chuck said hoarsely.

“Marcia disappoints me,” said Gil ruefully. “She’s lacking in imagination. She must use a phony redhead every time she wants to break off with a guy. Oh, well—it was fun while it lasted.”

When the silence reached the point where Chuck couldn’t stand it any longer, he blurted, “Damn it, Gil, I’m sorry! I was a lousy heel!”

“Yeah,” admitted Gil, “I guess you were. But women can do funny things to a guy.”

“You’re damn right!” exploded Chuck. “To hell with all of ‘em!”

“You’ll regret that some day, son,” said Gil. “And by the way, I owe you a sock on the jaw.”

“You can have it any time you want it.”

“Thanks,” said Gil. “Isn’t that our mountain up ahead?”

IT WAS. The wooded bulk of Mount Maungataniwa loomed up from the lower range of mountains they’d been following. There were clouds above the summit, too high to interfere with searching.

Chuck went about the job methodically, searching every valley he could find, flying as low as he dared, and keeping the motor throttled down to a bare flying speed.

It looked like a fruitless, pointless search. What possible hiding place for airplanes could exist in a tumbled mess like this? Yet the fact remained that Archer, in his final message, had mentioned Maungataniwa. There could be no mistaking a name like that, even though the idea of fighting planes down there was utterly fantastic. Dusk was closing in.

“We’ll try one more, and then go home,” Chuck said resignedly.

He picked a canyon with steep sides. Just why, he didn’t know. Half way through, Gil said, “Say! That’s funny.”

“What?”

“Raw dirt on the right hand side there. Not much, but it looks like—Hey! Look out!”

But Chuck saw the terrifying miracle as soon as Gil. It was completely beyond the bounds of reason, but, nevertheless, it happened. A small plane came shooting out from the very side of the mountain. It didn’t come straight out, but at an angle. It nosed toward the bottom of the canyon for an instant, then tilted swiftly upward as its propeller bit the air. Chuck got a clear sight of its wing tops. The emblems there were white stars in blue circles, but the ship was definitely a Zero.

Chuck acted automatically. He slapped the throttle wide, then came about in one of the tightest vertical turns he’d ever made. It had to be tight, there wasn’t room for anything else. As it was, his lower wing tip brushed the gigantic ferns on the steep sides of the canyon’s wall. Chuck held his breath, but got the ship around. He noted with a relieved grunt that the clouds still hung above the mountains, and he pointed the little ship toward them now with everything it had.

He figured that, with his head start, he had a fifty-fifty chance of reaching them before the Zero could come within firing range. A quick backward glance showed him that Gil was busy unlimbering the machine gun in the rear cockpit. It wouldn’t be of much more use than a pea shooter against the Zero’s arsenal, but Gil wasn’t overlooking any bets.

Chuck said, “Where is he now?”

“He’s made his turn, and he’s coming like a bat out of hell! Holy cats, how those crates can climb! Well, here goes. I can make him nervous anyway. Oh-oh, there’s another one behind him.”

Chuck heard the chatter of Gil's gun. "Any luck?" asked Chuck.

"Naw. He's still too far away—but he won't be long."

"That's what worries me," said Chuck, keeping his eyes on the clouds, and nursing the motor to its last ounce of speed.

When he'd done everything he could, but wait and pray, he tuned in to the Auckland field.

"They're Zeros, all right," he reported. "With American markings. Came right out of the Maungataniwa's belly—if you can figure that out. We can't. They're after us now. Hope to report later."

The protection of the clouds still seemed desperately far off. Gil's gun still blasted away, but the leading Jap seemed to be holding his fire until he was sure of the kill. His blunder was in holding it a bit too long, because a heavy cloud bank, about one hundred feet lower than the rest, came rolling toward the flimsy observation plane.

Chuck yelled, "Hang on, Gil!" and flipped the little ship toward its protection.

THE Jap below them opened up just as the first filmy tentacles of the cloud reached out to shelter them. Chuck saw the tracers streaking past his window. He saw a patch of daylight through the wing above him to his right. An instant later the cloud was thick and heavy all about him. He let his breath out slowly, hoping that the cloud was broad and deep. He paid attention now to the instruments before him.

"Are you okay, Gil?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"What do you make of it?"

"Hell, I'm stumped. The only thing I can dope out is that the Zero might have been shot from the mouth of a cave from a catapult. But how in the devil could he get back?"

"I don't know," admitted Chuck. "But I'm all for finding out."

"What's on your mind?"

"Well," said Chuck, "I made a forced landing yesterday on a sheep ranch not far east of here. I know about where it is, and there ought to be enough light left to make a landing. They ought to know enough about the country to give us a little dope we might use. We haven't got enough to take back home. They'll think we're nuts. I'd rather take back a better story. We might even find someone who knows that mountain well enough to take us back there tonight."

"Sounds kinda dizzy," Gil commented. "But I can't think of a better plan. Besides, those Nips will probably be waiting for us to pop out the south end of these clouds. Let's go."

When Chuck brought the ship into the clear again he shot a glance into the air and saw no Zeros there. He checked his bearings swiftly on the map, and confirmed his belief that he could find the Forrester ranch again, and land before it got too dark. He hoped the girl had meant it when she'd said the sheep would be transferred today.

His luck held. He found the ranch. There was still enough light left and no sheep. He had a guilty feeling, though, as he came in for his landing. He couldn't help but wonder how much of this strategy had been inspired by a desire to get back to the Forrester ranch again.

NOT until the ship's wheels had actually touched ground did a panicky thought assail him. He'd forgotten temporarily about Gil, whose specialty was women. Had he gone stark raving crazy to permit Gil Randall to meet this girl who—He caught himself up short, remembering his determination to avoid beautiful females.

He turned to Gil as they climbed out, and started suddenly. "Hell, Gil! You're hurt!"

Gil's right sleeve was soaked with blood. "Just a nick," Gil reassured him.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? I'd have got you right back to the hospital."

"It's not as bad as that," insisted Gil. "A slug of iodine and a clean rag'll fix it up. Anyway, I want to see what goes on back in that mountain."

They started for the house. Helen Forrester met them before they had covered half the distance.

She said, "Oh, it's you," when she got close enough to recognize Chuck in the dim light. "I heard your plane come in."

Chuck's heart, in spite of anything he could, pulled a ground loop on him. He tried to learn something from Helen's tone, but it was only matter of fact.

He said formally, "Miss Forrester, this is Lieutenant Randall."

Gil said smoothly, "How do you do, Miss Forrester." Then, upon a closer look, "I see now why Chuck suggested landing here."

"Lieutenant Randall's been wounded in the arm," Chuck cut in gruffly. "He says it isn't bad, but we'd better look at it."

Helen accepted the news calmly. "If it isn't serious," she said, "I can fix it. I've had a short nursing course. I'll run ahead and get things ready."

There were many times during the next half hour when Chuck Lansing wished he had been shot instead of Gil. It made him a little weak inside to see the sympathetic, efficient manner in which Helen worked on the nasty gash in the muscles of Gil's upper arm. He wondered what it would be like to have a girl like that for a nurse. Inwardly he groaned, and accepted the fact that the handsome guys got all the breaks.

He finally forced his mind back to the reason he was here. While Helen was

attending Gil, Chuck drew Mr. Forrester aside and told him what had happened during the past hour.

"Why, the filthy little blighters!" the older man exclaimed.

"What I'm up against is this," Chuck said. "I've got the spot marked on my map exactly, but I need more information. I want to see the layout from the ground. Is there a man about here who could guide me—someone who knows those hills?"

"Yes," said Forrester without hesitation. "Kaipo, a Maori, one of my own men. Kaipo knows those mountains better than any man in New Zealand. Not only that, but he'd rather hunt Japs than eat. He tried to enlist, but they wouldn't take him." He hesitated a moment. "Will you let me go along?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. The fewer the men on a job like this, the better."

"You're right, of course," said Forrester regretfully. "I'll go fetch Kaipo."

Kaipo was a striking figure of a man, powerful of build, and almost as tall as Chuck. He had the black, straight hair, the slightly broadened nose, and the proud, fierce bearing of his warrior race.

It was easy to see, however, why the Army had rejected him. There was no guessing the man's age, but it must have been considerable. His dark face was seamed with wrinkles which added dignity to his fine head. Even the old tattooing marks about his chin did not detract from this.

HE GRASPED the situation quickly, speaking seldom. He nodded when Chuck drew out a large scale map and pointed to the spot.

"I know the trails," Kaipo said. "I'll get you there."

"It would be best to be on hand at daylight," Chuck explained. "That would give me a better chance to see the layout.

Couldn't we travel most of the way by car?"

"Yes," said Forrester. "I have the car, but not the petrol. Rationing, you know. We don't get much these days. The tires, however, are quite good."

"There's plenty of gas in my plane," said Chuck. "We'll drain some out."

"Get sleep," said Kaipō, taking charge of things. "I call you when it's time to go."

Chuck went in to break the news to Gil. Gil was sleeping. Helen was still there.

"I gave him a sedative," she said. "He'll sleep through until morning."

"That's good," said Chuck. "If I'm not back when he wakes up, please tell him to call the flying field and report. He'll know what to say."

Chuck could have called the field right then, but he didn't want to take the risk of being forbidden to carry out his plans.

"You're leaving?" Helen asked quietly.

"A little later, yes." He wanted desperately to tell her where he was going, and why. He wanted to tell her a lot of things, in fact, but the wall between them was of his own building, and he couldn't find the means, just then, to scale it.

He saw the quick darkening of her eyes as they lost their cool impersonality. But she did not question him.

Chuck said, "Goodnight," abruptly. He thought, for a moment, that the girl might break the deadlock, but the hope died when she answered steadily:

"Goodnight, Lieutenant Lansing."

Chuck went to bed and tossed around until Kaipō entered quietly to wake him. "Time, now," Kaipō said.

"I'll be right with you," Chuck replied.

They siphoned some gas from the O-52 and transferred it to the tank of the old Hudson. Kaipō got behind the wheel, and drove in silence. This suited Chuck, because he didn't feel like talking. The roads were bad, and they got worse. The

old Maori wasn't the best driver in the world, but he was grim about it. Chuck was glad when Kaipō finally decided it was time to go ahead on foot. The road was little more than a goat trail.

THERE was a quarter moon in the sky, and Chuck was grateful for its dim light. He got the idea, however, that the light meant nothing to Kaipō, that he could have found his way blindfolded, as he started to climb with a smooth, deceptive stride which Chuck found it hard to match. He was soon breathing heavily, and Kaipō, noting this, pulled up and gave Chuck a chance to catch his breath. Chuck was ashamed of letting an old man show him up like this, but Kaipō tactfully made it easier for him.

"I walk all day," he said. "You sit in airplane. I couldn't fly one."

"Thanks, Kaipō," Chuck acknowledged. "How far now?"

"Not far, just over top. We go slower now. Make no noise. Japs maybe watching."

"Yeah, they'll have sentries posted," Chuck agreed. "I've got my wind back now."

They started on. The going was stiffer now, as the pitch of the mountain steepened. Kaipō moved like an animal, sometimes finding narrow trails, and sometimes taking short cuts through the thick, cool masses of the giant ferns. Chuck kept within reaching distance, aided by the fitful light of the moon which filtered through the leaves. He tried to match Kaipō's silent tread, but he might as well have tried to imitate a cat. His senses, too, were tuned to the keenest possible pitch, but they were no match for Kaipō's.

This was demonstrated when Kaipō stopped abruptly, and reached back a swift silencing hand. Kaipō heard something Chuck had missed. The Maori's whisper

was scarcely audible.

“Wait here.”

Chuck obeyed without question, and Kaipo became a part of the silent darkness. Twenty minutes later Chuck’s taut nerves were badly shaken as Kaipo appeared at his elbow like a spook.

Kaipo said, “Two sentries.”

“Where?” said Chuck.

“Dead,” said Kaipo. “Throats cut.”

An involuntary shiver traveled down Chuck’s spine at Kaipo’s calm report of his successful mission. It had been done silently, without fuss, and Kaipo had apparently enjoyed it thoroughly.

A few minutes later they crossed the summit, and started slithering down the other side like snakes. Once more Kaipo left upon a scouting mission. When he returned this time, there was a gruff exultation in his voice.

“I found it,” he reported simply.

Chuck was hard put to keep his excitement batted down. They were traveling cautiously on all fours, sometimes flat against the ground. He smiled tightly to himself as he recalled his optimistic belief that he might have done this job alone. When Kaipo finally stopped, Chuck was not even aware that they had reached their destination. They remained there in a heavy bed of moss and ferns.

The moon dimmed, and the sky began to grey with the first pale light of morning. Chuck saw nothing of significance, until suddenly the whole thing struck him with a numbing force that made him grunt.

He was lying not more than a few feet from a tremendous canopy of fern leaves, which followed the downward slope of the hill to cover a large area just before him. He stared incredulously for some time, waiting for his nerves to calm, and waiting also for more light. He was never able to solve the miracle of how Kaipo found this spot.

When he finally wiggled forward for a better look, he already had a good idea of what he would find beneath the awning. The great fern leaves were fastened upon coarse netting. The leaves were dry and brittle, but Chuck assumed that they had been sprayed with artificial color to match the shade of the growing ferns about them.

HE CAREFULLY made a small opening with his hand, and looked below to confirm his hunch. He saw a broad, concealed platform about the size of the landing deck of a carrier. He saw the rig for the automatic cables which would stop a plane a few feet after landing. The huge awning, he assumed, was built in sections, which could be pulled back individually when a plane came in to land. By craning his neck he could see six Zeros lined up near the inside of the platform.

“The clever little devils,” he breathed in grudging admiration.

Squirring back to his place beside Kaipo, he was about to give the word for the risky return trip when a thought hit him with a bang. This place would have to be bombed to kindling. But why not make it an easy target for the bombers?

He figured the angles, and found them good. He didn’t waste more time. He pulled out his match box, lighted a match and tossed it on the dry explosive surface of the camouflage. There was a quick spluttering, a small blaze, then a growing roar of flame. He heard the chatter of shrill voices down below, then he and Kaipo were scrambling toward the summit of the mountain.

That trip back to the car almost finished Chuck. He was weak-kneed and glassy-eyed when they finally reached the Hudson. Even Kaipo was breathing hard. A wide column of smoke still rose above the mountain.

“People think they got volcano,” Kaipo

chuckled, then started his wild trip toward the ranch.

Chuck wasted no time when he got there. He raced for his plane. He fumed impatiently while the motor warmed. He had started something which had to be finished fast.

Once in the air he called the field. He gave out no details, merely said that he had hot news for Major Bell. He gathered, however, from the operator at the other end, that Gil Randall had phoned in, and that Major Bell was already chewing nails.

The major was still chewing them when Chuck came to his office.

"What in the hell have you been up to?" thundered Bell. "Since when have lieutenants taken this war into their own hands? You've got a lot to account for, Lansing."

"I have a lot to report, too, sir," Chuck said quietly. "I've located the Jap base, and have made it possible for us to bomb it easily."

"That's different," said the major practically. "Let's have the dope."

CHUCK talked swiftly, yet tried carefully to recall all details. The major's jaw began to drop, then tightened. His eyes showed hard approval. He was already at the big map on the wall, studying the danger spot. When Chuck had finished, the major had the picture clearly in his mind.

"It sounds unbelievable," he said. "But you can see here how they did it. They gambled on their excavation work, but probably camouflaged it as they went along. All materials could easily have been brought in at night through the wide Hokianga River which cuts back to the base of the mountain almost like a fiord. The planes, of course, were brought in and assembled there. How many did you see?"

"Six. There could be more."

"I rather doubt it—yet. Do you gather the implication of this, Lansing?"

"I believe I do, sir. This first base is more or less experimental. If it works out, there would be a lot more. Maybe there already are, but we know now where to look for them. After a sufficient number had been established, the Japs would invade New Zealand. They haven't the air carriers for such an invasion, but they wouldn't need them with all these land based planes. That platform was big enough to handle dive bombers."

"You've got the idea in a nut shell," snapped the major. "Now, one more question. Why did you set fire to the place instead of letting us bomb them out without a fight?"

"Because," Chuck answered promptly, "they seem to have a complete set-up there. It's a safe bet that they picked up my message back to the base, which means that when they heard any concentration of planes coming their way, they'd take to the air for a last ditch stand. It would be their only chance. We'd have to fight anyway, and as it is, they won't have a chance to replace the camouflage before we get there. We'll have a perfect target."

"I'm satisfied," said Bell shortly. "You'll lead the way in a B-25."

"Please, sir, I'd rather not."

"What?"

"Give me a fighter, sir. It—it's pretty important, sir, that I have a single seater."

Bell stared hard at him. He read the desperate pleading in Chuck's eyes and made up his mind quickly.

"You've earned the right," he said. "Take a P-39."

Chuck was squirming now, but he stuck it out. "I—I'd rather take one of the old P-40's, sir," he said.

Bell swelled up to explode, then changed his mind. "Okay, have it your own way," he said. "Now get out. I'm busy."

Chuck came out of the office with a new lease on life. He had almost lost all hope of ever manning a fighting plane again, and the sudden, explosive development of events left him slightly dizzy. He was grinning broadly as he joined in the whirlwind preparations for the raid.

The airfield organization clicked at high speed. It looked like a wild scramble, but everything was orderly. Chuck had a feeling of warm gratitude as he settled himself in the seat of the P-40. Ten fighting planes were scheduled for the job. Six bombers, packed with eggs, would do the blasting.

THE entire attacking force climbed skyward in an amazingly short time. The bombers, below, maintained the low level at which they intended to go in. The fighters spread out in two small Vs above. Chuck was just behind the wingtip of the commander of the second flight, Bill Trask.

THE Japs were waiting for them, high in the clear sky. They'd fight, Chuck knew, to the last man. They'd have to.

He caught his breath as he squinted toward the Jap planes. He could count an even dozen. The others must have been in artificial caves beneath the overhang. Oh, well, he shrugged, the odds were still against the Japs.

The Zeros peeled off as a single ship, and streaked down to the attack. The Yank formations broke methodically, and each man proceeded to make himself as elusive a target as he could.

Chuck quickly spotted the Jap who had picked him for the kill. Chuck didn't climb to meet him, but zig-zagged across beneath him. The Jap made a frantic effort to line Chuck on his sights—and almost did. Chuck saw the muzzle flash of the Zero's guns, saw the ugly streak of tracers, and

felt the thud of bullets just behind his cockpit.

Chuck grunted with the relief at passing this first hurdle, then stood the ship on its ear as he whipped it about like a playing card flipped into the wind.

And even on that first maneuver Chuck caught the difference between this and his last attempt at single combat. There was a keen vibrance now to his mind and muscles. He felt the insane joyousness, which he had tried so hard to reach before, but couldn't touch. The ship leaped to his touch.

He came about in time to stay above and behind the Jap. The Zero, frustrated on its first dive, was trying to reach altitude for another. Chuck roared down at him, but before he could get the Zero on his sights, Bill Trask's sharp warning crackled in his head set.

"Behind yon, Chuck! Watch out!"

Chuck reacted automatically, knowing what had happened. The Japs had picked this old P-40 as a soft spot. Another Zero had jumped his tail, while he was lining up the one below.

He kicked into a steep bank. Tracers sprayed the spot he had just left. He flipped from the bank into a dive, and caught the second Jap flat-footed as the Nip tried a desperate climbing turn. Chuck rolled his crate and blasted the flimsy Zero with a full burst. It leaped from the impact of the fifty calibre slugs. Chuck was close enough to see the pilot's head snap back before he started his final dive.

"That's one!" Chuck rasped.

He saw two Zeros gang on Barney Holt. He called a quick warning through his phone. Barney heard it, tried to break away, but one of the Japs nailed him. Chuck's lips pressed back against his teeth.

He took the Jap who had downed young Holt, smothered the Zero in a hail of steel, and sent it flaming toward the hills

below.

HE DIDN'T remember much beyond that point, except that he had never flown or fought like that before.

He wasn't even certain how many Zeros he'd shot down as he flew with the savage intentness of a maniac. They told him later that he had bagged four. They told him, with some awe, that he had made his ship do things it was never built to do. It was riddled like a colander, but Chuck got through without a scratch.

He did not come entirely to his senses until he found himself tearing about the sky looking for more Zeros. The calming effect came from the fact that there weren't any more.

Cooling off, Chuck felt a little silly. He heard Trask's amused voice:

"Lay off, Chuck. It's all over. Can't you ever be satisfied?"

The fighters, the eight which still remained, hung around until the bombers had put the finishing touches to the Jap installations down below. They left nothing but a broad gap in the canyon's wall.

Chuck's elation lasted until he reached the air field. It began to wear off some after that, even after Major Bell had digested the report, and had assured him that he was a single seater man, and would be accepted in that role from this point on.

All this was fine. It was great. It should have kept Chuck floating in the clouds, but it didn't. The picture wasn't quite complete. It lacked entire fulfillment. Chuck avoided the issue as long as he could, then finally faced it squarely. He paid another visit to Major Bell.

"Well, what now?" Bell asked.

"May I use an O-52 for a little while? Lieutenant Randall is still out at the Forrester ranch. If he's feeling okay, I can bring him back."

The major was still too preoccupied with reports to be suspicious.

"Go ahead," he snapped.

Chuck let out his breath, and hurried away before the major had a chance to change his mind. A few minutes later Chuck was in the air.

HE TRIED to tell himself how big a fool he was to make this trip. He knew damn well that Gil hadn't been wasting any time, and Gil had the stuff to make that sort of time pay dividends. By now he probably had things all sewed up. Chuck almost turned around and headed for the base again, but he had a stubborn streak. He had to know.

He found Gil on the porch. His arm was in a sling, but he was looking fit.

"What happened?" Gil asked eagerly.

Chuck briefly sketched the action of the morning. When the subject was exhausted, there was an awkward silence. Gil broke it with a gesture of impatience.

"Listen, Chuck," he said. "I know what's on your mind. You're right, too, up to a certain point. I tried my damndest to make time with Helen, but I drew a blank."

"What?" gasped Chuck. "No kiddin'?"

"Straight stuff," Gil assured him. "And I can't dope it out. Why in hell she should fall for a pan like yours I just don't—"

"For me?" Chuck demanded. "Me?"

"Yeah, you," Gil said disgustedly. "Now beat it. She's over the hill there herdin' sheep. G'wan, scram."

Chuck didn't need a second invitation.