



## WINGS IN THE SPANISH LEGION

By LEE ROBINSON

*In the Spanish Foreign Legion little matters save that a man be a stark fighter and dead game to the end. What his past may have been means nothing—usually. But in the case of Jack Aldridge, one episode from bygone days came to mean the difference between life and death—not only to himself, but to his comrades as well*

**B**REATHLESSLY, dragging their wounded with them, the handful of *legionarios* crawled through the starlit Moroccan night from the wrecked Hassi Axdar blockhouse, and the mangled corpses that had been their comrades. A complete traverse of the machine gun on the blockhouse

roof, rolling back the crushing Riffian attack to its distant gullies and boulders, had made possible their unobserved escape through the dynamited wall and given them their lone chance-in-a-thousand of winning to the help that had not come to them.

Back at the blockhouse a bomb went

off. Triumphant yells resounded from the encircling desert. Here and there in the darkness, the rifles of the tribesmen boomed and echoed. Suddenly, drowning them out, the cocked machine-gun atop the blockhouse roared its mechanical fury as the candle burned through the cord holding the weight off its trigger. Viciously its bullets snapped over the heads of the crawling men in a faithful effort to open the way before them to the strong Spanish encampment at Sidi Dris.

Frantically the refugees hurried on.

At the bottom of the slope, preceded only by a crouching *legionario* with a bayoneted rifle, Jack Aldridge surged to his feet with the slim body of the wounded lieutenant on his back.

In front of him sounded an exclamation in the guttural *Tarifit* dialect of the Riffians. A shot splashed the warm darkness. Sping! went the ricocheting bullet past Aldridge's bowed head and over his crawling companions. Somewhere ahead there was a sound like that of a cleaver biting its way through a quarter of beef.

"Shake it up!" came a hiss from the advance guard, and Aldridge trudged on into the unknown, as the machine gun on the fort behind roared to the end of its belt.

Behind them the rifles were popping again. Forward, the boulderless plain having afforded no protection to the attackers, all was silent. For an hour they plodded on, with the fusillade growing in volume as it faded into the distance. Then came a series of dull explosions, a medley of far-off cries, and when these ceased no further sound was heard.

"They're in the blockhouse now," commented the lieutenant, as the panting refugees halted to rest and to listen for sounds of pursuit. "In a moment more they'll be on our trail!"

"You've got too much baggage, *campadres*," said a quiet voice in their midst.

"I'm ebbing, anyway; punctured past repair. Somebody kindly lend me his rifle."

"Nonsense, Norkoff," responded Aldridge heartily. "You'll get through all right. With only two wounded for us four huskies to carry, it's a cinch."

"Our American comrade is right," assented Catozzi, of Ventimiglia. "I'm willing to carry one of you all the way to Sidi Dris, Norkoff, old boy. As long as any of us are left, remember we're all musketeers!"

"Though I'm only baggage, myself," agreed the lieutenant, as he rode off on the Italian's broad shoulders, "I say that sentiment was well spoken. If we can get to that big hill called Djebel Messaua before they catch us, we can hold them off and send a heliogram to Sidi Dris for help. The Riffians can't locate us in the dark, off the trail as we are, and daylight ought to find us close enough to the hill to make for it at top speed."

Saving their precious breath, the weary *legionarios* stumbled blindly on.

THE pastel tints of dawn were streaking the sky, and the rocky cone of Djebel Messaua reared itself out of the flat desert a mile ahead, when a bullet yowled forward over the hurrying little column and a faint detonation floated up from the rear.

Back there, nothing was visible. No more than a hopeless glance they wasted. One of their first practical lessons in the Spanish Foreign Legion had been that, except in the furor of the *cucrpo á cuerpo*, the Moroccan is an adept in the art of effacing himself on the field of battle.

Another bullet soon followed the first, and the weary soldiers took up a desperate trot. Here was no place for a stand, as these veterans well knew. Such a move could only result in the loss of the hill and their only hope of salvation.

Bullets whined over them now in close succession, and ever more spiteful was their

song, and ever louder the crack of the distant weapons. Looking back, Aldridge saw a flitting horseman dismount and fling himself prone on the desert, saw another far beyond leap into his saddle and gallop forward.

“Drop a man off in a minute, to cover my retreat!” he called, twining his arms in his rifle sling and lying down with his face to the rear.

Calmly he set his sight, raised his sight-leaf and dug his elbows into the sand. With the slack of his trigger taken up, and his sights aligned, he tightened his grip on the rifle as the horseman’s feet struck the ground.

*Crack!*

Down went the Riffian, his rifle falling from his stricken hands. His horse cantered loosely across the desert as the other rider galloped past the silent white figure and bore down upon the hurrying *legionarios*.

Over on the right, several more horsemen appeared on the misty horizon. Still Aldridge held his position, gradually pivoting around his left elbow. When the nearest rider jerked his horse to its haunches and stepped lightly to the ground, Aldridge squeezed the trigger and a red-hot fang of steel and lead bored the tribesman through the vitals.

As the Riffian crumpled, Aldridge’s long legs twinkled across the smooth sand toward the hill which would mean either storm or haven. Past his kneeling comrade, *Sollano*, he bounded, noting that the other horsemen were Riffians and that they were rapidly approaching. In front of him Swede Jensen was snuggling himself into his favorite prone firing position, while beyond, with Norkoff on his back and his arm around the lieutenant, Catozzi was struggling through a belt of desert thorn that guarded the foot of the hill.

Some of the desert riders were dismounting in a flurry of voluminous garments. Jensen’s rifle was roaring. Sollano was coming up with long strides of his thin old legs. Catozzi and his wounded had

disappeared in the brown thicket. Bullets snapped overhead, whined up from the desert floor. And now a nearer Riffian horseman galloped around the side of the hill.

“Quick, Sollano!” shouted Aldridge, dropping to his knee and cuddling his cheek against his rifle stock. “Get to the top of the hill, and hold it. Jump!”

His weapon spoke as Sollano bounded past, and the Riffian came tumbling out of his saddle, his body strangely like some dancing butterfly in the hooded, fluttering, *djettaba*. Another Riffian and still another appeared behind him as his red sandals flew through the dust from his kicking bare heels.

Jensen was pumping steeljackets at the oncoming horsemen who now numbered, three—now four. As Aldridge leaped past him, cramming a clip of cartridges into his rifle, he saw Catozzi dragging his wounded up the hillside with Sollano rapidly overhauling them through the dusty thicket.

Behind a small boulder Aldridge plunged, drew a quick bead on his foremost antagonist and jerked the trigger. Quickly he fired again, saw the black-bearded horseman reel, and sprang to his feet under the horse’s foaming nostrils and the yelling rider’s whirring scimitar.

The American’s long bayonet flashed in the dawning sun as he sidestepped the plunging hoofs. Spanish steel clashed with Berber, hilts locked, and the scimitar whistled into the thorns as Jensen darted past and knelt with flaming rifle.

A splash of red appeared on the disarmed horseman’s breast, and he toppled from the saddle like a thing of wood—just as his comrades thundered up.

Rifles spat from the hands of the careering riders. Bullets ricocheted from the hard sand with unearthly shrieks. Somewhere another rifle was roaring, and Aldridge saw Catozzi firing from a depression halfway up the hill.

Through the clutching shrubbery he tore in the wake of Jensen. Far up the hillside, scrambling toward the summit, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Sollano. Then Jensen was firing from behind a boulder, and Aldridge bounded past him with a grin of triumph.

THE rattle of musketry ceased as he plunged into the depression that sheltered Catozzi and the wounded. Leveled rifles covered Jensen's dash up the slope. Out on the desert, leaving their comrades where they had fallen, the tribesmen were galloping into the hazy distance.

"How does it look, Sollano?" called Aldridge, unpacking the field heliograph from his belt as Sollano's twin-peaked cap appeared against the clear sky over the summit.

Sollano's rifle barked, barked again as a startled "*caramba!*" rattled from his throat, and a moment later he was crawfishing down the hillside in a cascade of stones and sand.

"Get down!" he shrieked, in his pellmell descent. "Riffians coming up the other side—a mob of them. A battle's going on at Sidi Dris. Knock their heads off as they peep over the top."

All was rapid movement within the little hollow. When Sollano's feet struck the bottom, and his rifle steadied toward the summit, two other rifles and the lieutenant's revolver pointed motionlessly in the same direction. One rifle still covered the desert below. The sixth man, the Russian Norkoff, lay gasping his life away through a hole in his chest received a dozen hours before.

Aldridge's rifle blazed as a cowed head centered in his sights. The head sank from view as another appeared, to be greeted by a slug from Jensen's barking weapon. Along the jagged crest of the hill, outlined sharply against the turquoise sky, no more heads appeared.

"Is that all of them, Sollano?" asked the lieutenant.

"*Caramba!* A dozen! A hundred!" chattered the old *legionario*. "And more in sight. Listen!"

In the dead silence could be heard a dull *boom-boom*.

"Spanish artillery at Sidi Dris," went on Sollano, his gray beard wagging in excitement. "A gunboat in the bay is also firing. The camp is surrounded by Riffians. We're cut off, that's what. Cut off by battle lines. No wonder they didn't send help in answer to our rockets."

"And we have no more," stated the lieutenant calmly. "We're in rather a bad fix, unless some of the air force is at Sidi Dris. If there is a plane or so, and we can get a message through, they might help us."

"You can't use the heliograph, Lieutenant," insisted Sollano. "The summit is occupied, as you see."

"Let's have suggestions, then," invited the lieutenant. "We haven't any food, and very little water."

"But plenty of ammunition," spoke up Aldridge. "Let's hike out for Sidi Dris."

"They'd finish us in short order," averred Sollano. "We'd better stay right in this hole. You ought to have seen what I did, compadre. I'm telling you, I got an eyeful."

"I'll take one look, at that," answered Aldridge, pulling his cap tighter on his head and starting to rise.

"Wait a minute," cautioned the lieutenant. "Hadn't we better stay here, after all, and get a little rest? Sidi Dris isn't more than two or three hours away. The more rested we are, the quicker we can make it. In the meantime, perhaps an airplane will fly over and see us."

"I'm hungry, Lieutenant," grinned the American.

HE WAS busily reaching out and breaking off handfuls of thorny branches. These he piled carefully in the deepest part of the hole and wreathed an empty ammunition bandolier over

them. Finally he got out his matchbox and set fire to the bottom twigs.

“Cold, too?” asked the lieutenant quizzically.

“Like hell, sir,” grinned the perspiring American, peeling off his tunic as a narrow column of black smoke grew slowly toward the glaring sky. “I’m going to send a message. How’s for somebody to hold two corners of my tunic?”

“Something I can do,” welcomed the lieutenant, gingerly lifting his bandaged leg toward the fire. “Sollano, you take the first watch. The rest of you had better sleep a few winks, while you have the chance. Smoke signal, Aldridge?”

“Yes, sir. Hold the corners, so! Now. Over— off— over— off——”

Insistently his voice droned on, the tunic was whisked over the smoldering fire and away, and a series of smoke blobs, some small and some large, mounted straight into the motionless air.

At length Aldridge kicked the fire out.

“Help. Send airplane,” he grinned, putting on his tunic. “With an airplane to convoy us, we can go through to Sidi Dris like a recruit through his enlistment bonus. The American Marines used airplanes that way, over the jungles of Santo Domingo. I tried to get into their air force, before I came to the Legion, but a washout in the army flying school wasn’t enough recommendation to suit the leathernecks.”

In the growing heat the little band sought comfortable positions and moistened their dry lips from thinly sloshing canteens. Norkoff groaned, and the few drops of water which Catozzi tried to pour down his throat ran out the side of his mouth.

A shimmering halo radiated from the glaring white garments of the twisted figures on the nearby desert. In the edge of the brown thicket a riderless horse foraged for something incomprehensible to any but a hard-bitten

desert charger.

Under their shaggy brows, Sollano’s sharp old eyes squinted toward the summit. With his scarlet bandanna over Norkoff’s eyes and his arm crooked over his own, the Italian snored. Whistling a lilting waltz between his teeth, Aldridge compared the Moroccan heat with that of the memorable August days when the Brooks Field “Laundry Board” ironed him out and a terse telegram summoned him to a still hotter session on the edge of the Mojave Desert with his long-suffering father.

The sudden crack of Sollano’s rifle brought all hands alert, fingers on triggers. Still watching the summit, the old *legionario’s* face crinkled in delight.

“Right in the eye!” he chuckled. “That’s the place to pot a Morucho!”

“Good work, Sollano,” commended the lieutenant. “But I’m afraid our airplane hope was a dud, Aldridge. They could have been here long ago.”

“Maybe they didn’t see our signal,” suggested the American, heaping his faggots and rags together, lighting them and getting out of his tunic again. “All right, Lieutenant, let’s try it again. Over—off— over——”

A sharp cry from Sollano halted them in the middle of the message. A rusty sardine can, tightly wrapped with rags, caromed off the hillside into their midst, scattered the fire and plunked against the trembling body of Norkoff.

IN UTTER disregard of the sudden storm of bullets over their heads from above, everybody in the hole lunged for the can. Too well they knew what was in that bit of apparent refuse.

With a supreme effort, Norkoff raised himself to a sitting posture, seized the can in both hands and rolled over upon it. The next instant there was a sickening explosion under him, and with a sigh he stretched out on his face, his hands clawing for a moment at the

hot sand.

Five living men emulated him under that plunging sleet of lead. A lone Mauser answered as Catozzi worked his bolt furiously from behind the boulder where he had slumbered a minute before. One by one, his comrades took up the fire as they worked to vantage points. Gradually the enemy's fire died out, and the cowed heads ceased their bobbing over the dazzling summit.

"Another name engraved in the Book of Gold," murmured the lieutenant softly. "Norkoff's gone west."

"What do you say, fellows?" breathed Aldridge, wriggling into his tunic and belts. "Who wants to take the hill?"

"I," responded Catozzi, and the word was instantly echoed by Spaniard and Swede.

There was a fluttering sound in the air, a rattling thump in the nearby brush, and five heads went down as if pulled by a string.

*Crash!* Sand, thorns and fragments of tin whistled overhead. Aldridge sprang to his lean height.

"Come on, gang!" he snapped.

Up the rocky slope he sprinted, the rattle of his comrades' hobnails behind him. Through the clatter came a sharp cry from the lieutenant.

"Listen!"

Three tattered figures flattened on the steep hillside. Three pairs of eyes glued themselves to the summit. Three sweaty forefingers tightened on slippery triggers. In the hush that followed could be heard the dull roar of an explosion beyond the hill, the distant crackle of musketry and a steadily rising drone.

"Hooray!" yelled Aldridge, digging toward the summit with his companions in hot pursuit.

From almost overhead came the unmistakable rumble of an airplane's motor, and as Aldridge lunged over the summit he saw a bomb explode near a running tribesman

whose *djellaba* stuck out behind him like a dirty tablecloth.

The Riffians were decamping, horse and foot, while over them swooped a low-hung amphibian biplane with the insignia of the Spanish Navy beside the bomb-racks on its lower wings.

Around the hill swerved the machine, its pilot waving his hand and the *legionarios* waving back. Out over the desert it swooped, its machine gun spraying death among the scuttling tribesmen. When the last fluttering *djellaba* was far beyond effective rifle range, the machine turned, settled lightly to the ground and waddled toward the hill like an overgrown penguin.

"WONDER where the observer is?" exclaimed Aldridge, his eyes on the glittering machine gun over the empty rear cockpit.

"How many men have you?" called the pilot, as the machine came to a purring halt.

"Six," answered the lieutenant, hopping and sliding down the thorny slope.

"Two at a time, then," rejoined the pilot. "It won't take many minutes. I left my observer, in expectation of possible passengers. Your call was relayed to us by radio, as we rounded Cape Quilate. We saw your next signal, broken off in the middle, and I took off by catapult while under way. I'm from the *Picador de Asturias*."

"Go ahead, two of you," said Aldridge. "Carry Norkoff to the plane, and make the lieutenant go with him on the first trip. Two of us will watch from here, while they take off."

Jensen and Catozzi scrambled down the slope and picked up the dead Russian.

"I'll wait for the last trip, fellows," called the lieutenant, at which a protesting chorus broke from his men. The naval aviator apparently adding his protest, the lieutenant was lifted in beside the Russian's body and gave Jensen his cigarettes. Jensen and the Italian turned the amphibian around, and it

immediately scooted across the flat sand, climbed into the air and swerved over the hill toward the coast.

“Simple, isn’t it?” remarked Aldridge, as the four *legionarios* sat atop the hill and lighted cigarettes while they watched the airplane dwindle out of sight toward the sparkling Mediterranean.

“Great stuff!” averred Jensen. “Ten years ago, we wouldn’t have had a chance. Airplanes are wonderful things.”

“They are that,” agreed Aldridge, taking off his cap and running his fingers through his perspiring hair. “I’m going to make another start in that game, myself, when I get out of the Legion. I didn’t see much hope a few minutes ago, though.”

“Neither did I,” admitted the Italian. “But now we sit comfortably waiting, and when the airplane gets back we’ll just step aboard and soar to our breakfast like millionaires. I could use some breakfast, what I mean! My stomach is flapping like an empty wine-bag. You two blondies need a haircut, too, the same as myself.”

“I’m going to get one, if I ever run across another barber,” replied Aldridge, holding up his joined palms with four twigs protruding. “The two short sticks remain for the last trip. The two long ones pile into the airplane as soon as it stops. Draw your tickets, gentlemen.”

Sheepishly they drew, and Jensen and Catozzi held tickets for the last trip.

“We’ll leave you all our guns and ammunition,” said Aldridge, shaking the last drop of brackish water from his canteen into his mouth. “In case the Riffians come again—*sangre de Cristo!* Look!”

Across the shimmering desert scores of tiny horsemen were converging toward Djebel Messaua. Unable to do a thing except watch, realizing that they occupied the safest position that could be found, the *legionarios* silently waited. Soon they could plainly see the

fluttering garments and glittering weapons of the tribal warriors.

As they came within range, the Riffians changed their course diagonally. Rapidly they came on, offering an impossible target as they spurred this way and that in their circular approach. And now the *legionarios* lay down upon their faces and cuddled their sweating Mausers.

“There she comes!” shouted Aldridge, as the first wild shots whined off the hillside and the returning airplane appeared high in the air behind the galloping horsemen.

STRAIGHT for its prey the machine dived, its wires screaming and its motor picking up with a mighty roar as it neared the ground. With a wing tip almost brushing the flat desert at moments, with its machine-gun drumming sporadically and a lengthening trail of kicking men and horses in its curved wake, it swept around the hill in a storm of bullets from the tribesmen’s rifles.

The watching *legionarios* gasped as a feather of dust followed the trailing wing tip. Suddenly the machine righted, swept the ground with its wheels, roared off toward Sidi Dris and sideslipped sickeningly through a vertical bank. In the nick of time, it leveled off over the charging Riffians and fluttered uncertainly earthward.

Roughly it struck the ground, bouncing from one wheel and alighting on the other and a wing-skid. Drunkenly it thumped back and careened to the opposite wheel. Lurching from side to side, it waddled forward with rapidly diminishing speed.

Risking a broken neck, Aldridge was charging down the slope. Through the spiny thicket he plunged, his trousers flying in tatters, his legs smarting, and the crash of stones and brush told him that his comrades were with him.

Madly they raced toward the machine as it stopped with idling motor. As madly, a

score of yelling tribesmen beyond spurred their horses forward. A bearded Riffian sprang from his saddle to one of the wings. After him in a steel-tipped dive went Aldridge, while his companions met the enemy in furious, clashing battle.

Pushing rifle, bayonet and transfixed Riffian from the wing, Aldridge leaped for the rear cockpit. Lying across the gun mount, he whirled the machine-gun around and pressed the trigger as it covered the howling tribesmen.

Like snow before a blowtorch, the charge melted. A few survivors whirled away, to be brought down after Aldridge had crawled into the cockpit and snuggled the gun in earnest. When he turned, his companions were lifting the pilot from his seat and laying him in the black shadow of a wing.

"Looks like the last roll, for him," breathed Jensen, kneeling over the limp figure. "He's got a slug right through the middle of his chest."

"A moment ago," murmured Catozzi, "we were talking about how simple it was."

"Strap him in, back there," ordered Aldridge, climbing into the front cockpit. "Here's where I use some of my education. Who wants to go along?"

"Are you an aviator?" marveled Catozzi.

"Not quite," answered Aldridge, "but I can run it away from here!"

"Let Sollano go," suggested the Italian. "He has a family."

"Perhaps he'd better stay, then," said Aldridge, dryly, as the now groaning pilot was lifted in. "Who wants to take a long chance?"

"I'll go," said Jensen, climbing in.

"I'll probably bump us both off," warned Aldridge.

"Small difference," retorted the imperturbable Swede.

"All right," said Aldridge. "Got a pencil and paper, anybody?"

"Here's a pencil," answered Jensen, "and I can use the empty cigarette package for paper."

"Fine!" called Aldridge, experimenting with the controls, his confidence rising. "Write on it, '*Two starving legionarios at bay on Djebel Messaua.*' Put it in your tunic pocket, and throw the tunic overside if we can get above any Spanish troops. Here, you fellows! Take our guns and ammunition, and hold out to the last button. We'll get help to you, if we don't crash. Up the hill you go! Ready, Jensen?"

"All ready," answered the Swede promptly, and Aldridge opened the throttle.

OUT over the blinding desert sped the amphibian, gathering speed rapidly. Recalling snatches of what he had learned at Brooks Field, Texas, before the renowned "Laundry Board" had washed him out, Aldridge eased the stick forward and crowed in delight as the tug of the tail-skid disappeared and the shimmering horizon rose over the motor cowling.

Doubting the landing but not the takeoff, he pulled back unflinchingly on the stick, and the amphibian climbed off the sand and roared obediently toward the dazzling sun.

Gingerly he manipulated the controls, his mind gripping back through the obliterating months for the scarcely grasped principles of flying. Gradually, while he risked a glance at the two forlorn *legionarios* arriving at the top of Djebel Messaua with their armloads of weapons, the horizon swung around until the blue Mediterranean was straight ahead.

Swiftly it came nearer. Almost underneath, it seemed, the beach was dotted with the regular lines of tents at Sidi Dris. The height of Talilit swarmed with men, bristled with guns. In the foreground, with shells breaking over their heads, the low ridges were fringed with countless tribesmen. Offshore a

gunboat was firing rapidly, a transport was discharging troops on lighters, and a gray cruiser which was probably the *Picador de Asturias* was coming to anchor.

Over the blue water soared the amphibian, and Aldridge turned in a wide arc and shoved forward cautiously on the stick. Before his vision swirled Sidi Dris with its guns, its swarms of soldiers and its tents. Beneath him stretched the wide beach.

Prayerfully he throttled the motor and glided toward the beach. Lower and lower he settled, until he expected every moment to strike the hard sand. Finally, having waited as long as he could to avoid pancaking, he pulled the stick back slowly.

With a rattling jolt, the tailskid struck. Aldridge's teeth clapped together as the wheels followed. Bucking wildly, inexorably turning seaward on the gently sloping beach, the amphibian splashed through a foam-crested breaker, came to a stop half afloat and was immediately surrounded by a swarm of drenched soldiers who pulled it ashore.

"That's what you call an amphibian landing, isn't it?" laughed a young officer in their midst.

"Unload," responded Aldridge, and Jensen climbed out after assisting the soldiers to remove the wounded naval aviator.

"What's this, *legionario*?" demanded an artillery general, arriving with his glittering staff.

"Out of the way, up there!" shouted Aldridge, easing open the throttle in desperation lest he be ordered to dismount.

"That Legion!" he heard an exclamation, as the amphibian moved. A cheer was drowned in his ears as he shoved the throttle open and careered wildly down the beach.

Far beyond the Spanish lines, with tribesmen shooting at him and the gunboat's shells geysering sand and smoke nearby, he pulled resolutely on the stick. Over the desert

climbed the powerful amphibian, roaring obediently toward the upthrust cone of Djebel Messaua.

Rapidly the hill marched toward him. Around it flitted dots which were undoubtedly Riffians. When he came closer he could see some of them lying on the desert among their slain comrades, shooting toward the hill while others advanced in wild zigzags. Atop the hill, glinting rifle barrels and pistoning right arms showed the two legionaries in businesslike action.

NOSING downward, Aldridge experimented with the breech of the synchronized machine-gun. Raucously he cheered as the drumming roar of gunfire suddenly joined that of the motor. Maneuvering the amphibian like a leaf in a whirlwind, and singing nothing in particular at the top of his voice, he ripped fantastic patterns of smoking tracers among the milling tribesmen.

Desperately he throttled his motor and whistled up to lose some of his terrific momentum. Far over the desert he turned, lowered the thrumming propeller in a long glide, and opened his way toward Djebel Messaua with a stream of bullets.

With a smooth mile in front of him, confident of making a perfect landing and trying to see how close he could skim the ground without touching it, he almost drove his backbone through his skull at the smashing impact. Four times he bounced, and each time something seemed to break, each time he landed nearer the ground. But the motor still thrummed without a flicker. When he waddled lopsidedly up to the hill, Sollano and Catozzi were running to meet him.

"That duck's got a broken leg!" shrieked the Italian excitedly.

"To hell with the leg!" retorted Aldridge. "What we need is wings. Turn her around, and get aboard. Look what's coming!"

With sidelong glances at the landing

gear, they turned the machine and climbed breathlessly in. A wave of yelling horsemen thundered toward them. Calmly Aldridge opened the throttle, pressed the machine-gun trigger and charged straight into their midst.

A wing tip fouled one of the horsemen, and the amphibian ground looped. Dizzily Aldridge jammed on the gas, lumbered off in the new direction and shoved the stick forward. Ahead of him was another wave of howling riders, and bullets were screaming off the metal cowling over the motor.

The nearest horsemen were almost under the roaring propeller when Aldridge pulled the stick back and felt the wheels leave the ground. The next instant there was a rattling jolt, a dragging sensation below, and as he leaned back on the tugging stick the amphibian rocketed toward the white-hot sky of Morocco like a thing frightened out of its wits.

Hot dog! This was living!

He caught himself wishing the cadets and instructors at Brooks Field could see him now, muddling through an experience for which any one of them would have given his back teeth. More than all, as he straightened toward the dancing Mediterranean with victory screaming from his wings, he wished his hardrock father might see him now, and be present at his triumphant landing.

A quick glance he stole toward his passengers, and grinned at the scared look on the faces of the two desert hellions who gripped the sides of the cockpit as if they were afraid of soaring up to heaven in heavy marching order, hobnails and all.

Again, while he wondered at the strangely increased propeller torque, Sidi Dris was streaming under him. Sollano and Catozzi were yelling fit to burst their throats, and Aldridge looked back to see them pointing excitedly toward the ground.

Down there all was confusion. Everybody seemed to be running around with

their hands describing circles in the air. Another backward glance revealed his passengers doing the same thing.

With the white-flecked waves dancing under him, Aldridge cut his motor and nosed downward in a long glide.

“Wheels!” he caught, in Sollano’s frenzied accents.

Turning in his seat, Aldridge nodded with an assured grin toward the water. To the best of his understanding, the landing gear had probably carried away at the impact with the charging horsemen. He wondered why all airplanes were not amphibians; certainly, if he ever bought one, it would be nothing else. As it was—well, he knew no special technique about landing on water, but he could certainly never learn up there in the air!

Settling rapidly toward the sunlit bay, he watched the unloading transport appear in front of him, and lowered the tail of the amphibian with the intention of skimming into the trough of the shallow waves.

Swiftly, while he unstrapped his safety belt and noted that his terrified passengers were following his example, the transport and the crowded lighters whizzed nearer. Directly between the transport and the cruiser he laid his course, wondering vaguely why both ships were hurriedly lowering lifeboats.

Suddenly his head snapped backward, almost breaking his craning neck, as the keel of the amphibian apparently snagged something. The next instant a raging torrent of heavy green water swirled over his head, a hundred giant hands tried to tear him limb from limb, and something struck him a resounding whack on the head.

The world went out——

FOR a long time he lay in a pleasant doze. Gradually came memory of the attack on Hassi Axdar, the forced march to Djebel Messaua, the triumphant flight in the amphibian and the unexplained crash.

He stared at a strange world, a world of the dim past.

To begin with, he was covered with a spotless sheet. Narrow white walls hemmed him in. To his ears came the throb of engines, the slap and swish of water. At sea!

Anxiously flexing his limbs, he was relieved to find that, barring a soreness in his lungs and an aching head, he was apparently intact. Weakly he climbed from the berth, discovered that he was attired in pajamas, that his head was bandaged and that he was almightily hungry. On a determined hunt for breakfast and information, he opened the door and stepped out.

Across the quarterdeck, off the starboard beam, he stared at the familiar brown heights of the Cape of Three Forks. From the port beam slanted the pristine rays of the morning sun.

Melilla bound!

“Hey, *legionario!*” called a voice, and Aldridge moved across the immaculate deck toward a group of beribboned officers and a gray-bearded civilian seated on deck chairs. A dapper young officer arose and shoved his chair behind Aldridge, who remained standing.

“Feel like taking another flight?” smiled the artillery general who had yelled at him on the beach at Sidi Dris.

“Yes, sir,” grinned the American, while a medical officer felt his pulse. “But I’d like to eat, first.”

“There goes your breakfast now,” pointed the general. “Take it into his stateroom,, steward. Er—Mr. Royos, here, wants to take your picture, *legionario*, for his paper. He’s a war correspondent. Any objections?”

“No, sir.”

“Good! And now tell us where on earth you learned to fly.”

“I half-learned, sir, with the United States Army, at Brooks Field, Texas. I washed

out there, though, and entered a civilian flying school. But my father snapped the pocketbook.”

“And you snapped your fingers!”

“I did, sir.”

“Father know where you are?”

“No, sir. And he doesn’t care a hell of a lot.”

“Oh, yes, he does.” disagreed the general, as the gray-bearded war correspondent squeezed the bulb of his camera. “I’m a father, myself. I have a couple of fire-crackery sons, and I know. How about it, Mr. Royos? You’re going to give the boy a good write-up, aren’t you?”

“You know I am, *mi general*. I saw both his landings.”

“Well, *legionario*, how would you like for Mr. Royos to send a copy of his paper containing the story to your father?”

“All right, sir,” grinned Aldridge.

“What’s the address?” asked Royos, producing pencil and notebook.

“Aldridge Mining Company, Salt Spring, Nevada, U. S. A. My sister can read it to him, I guess. She knows school Spanish, and he knows a little Mexican. What I can’t understand, though, is how I happened to crash yesterday.”

“Your landing gear was broken,” chuckled the general reminiscently. “There was something tangled in it—a *djellaba*, if nothing else—and the whole thing hung pretty low and fouled a wave. The machine turned a twisting somersault. You were fished up rather unconscious, with possible internal injuries, so we brought you on to Melilla. Your passengers were unhurt, and rejoined their company at Sidi Dris.”

“That’s what I want to do,” wailed Aldridge.

“He’ll be all right, sir,” said the medical officer, in answer to the general’s questioning glance.

“All right, *legianarlo*,” laughed the

general. "This ship goes back to Sidi Dris tonight with more troops, and you can remain aboard and report to your company commander upon arrival. That satisfactory?"

"Thank you, sir," said Aldridge, inching toward his stateroom as a warm odor of coffee, rolls and beefsteak emerged with the steward.

"By the way," called Royos, producing his notebook again. "Any message to go with the paper to your father? I speak and write English, and I'll fix up a good letter in your own words, if you'll give me a few pointers."

"Get a big red lumber pencil," directed Aldridge sardonically, in English, "and write in boxcar letters, across the whole page of the

paper: 'Dear Dad: Does this sound like an "adenoid aviator?'" Jack.' Be sure to put 'adenoid aviator' in quotation marks."

There was a roar of laughter from the group of officers as Royos explained.

"Why the quotation marks, *legionario?*" asked the general, his ample stomach shaking with mirth.

"They," grinned the American, from his stateroom door, "are to enclose the last two words the old boy spoke to me; his newest nickname for me, in fact. Say, Mr. Royos, how's to add a little postscript to that message? Something like—er—"love to you and Sis!"