



# DEATH TAKES WINGS

By WILLIAM MORRISON

***Army Aviator Don Morley Was Up Against a Blank Wall in Ferreting Out Treachery—Until a Nazi Agent Made Some Sabotage to Order for Him!***

**F**AR below him, the plane was twisting and turning end over end. As he drifted slowly down, Lieutenant Don Morley heard the crash, then the roar of an explosion. Seconds later, his feet hit the ground. He disentangled himself from his parachute, and stared at the flames rising

from the wreckage more than two miles away.

He made his way slowly through the fields that lay between him and what had been a new fighter plane. By the time he reached it, the wreckage was charred and blackened, and the flames had almost died away. A group of farmers stood at a respectful

distance, curious, but afraid to venture too close.

"Your plane, Mister?" one of them asked.

"It was." Morley spoke coldly to conceal the rage he felt. "Any of you men see what happened?"

"My boy was watchin' you. Personally, I ain't got time to keep lookin' up in the air. But he said a wing came off."

"Good boy. A wing *did* come off. Did he see where it fell?"

The boy himself, a ten-year-old, darted forward.

"I'll show you where it is, Captain!"

A few moments later Morley was staring at what was left of the wing. It told him nothing.

This was the fourth plane of the new Wyatt type that had crashed. Eight men dead so far—and he would have been the ninth if he hadn't been unusually alert and jumped just before the wing succeeded in tearing loose. It was lucky, too, that he had been flying alone. There wouldn't have been time for two men to get out of the plunging wreck.

"What happened, Captain?" the boy asked. "Was there sabotage?"

Morley nodded slowly. It was so evidently sabotage that not even a kid could mistake it. Four Wyatt fighters downed in two weeks—eight men murdered—his eyes were smoldering when he turned abruptly on his heel and tramped away.

**M**ORLEY sat around the conference table with three men who turned their heads whenever his eyes met theirs.

"That's the kind of plane you've been supplying to the army, gentlemen," he said bitterly. "They're supposed to be in first class condition when we get them."

"They are." It was Carter Wyatt himself, principal owner of the plant, who spoke. "It's easy enough to talk of sabotage, Lieutenant, but proof is another matter. Those planes were inspected thoroughly before we let them out of the factory. Are you sure that something didn't happen to them after they were delivered?"

Morley laughed without amusement.

"I'll stake my life that nothing happened to them. I know the mechanics who went over every bolt. They're personal friends of mine, and they're careful about their work. And I'll tell you something else, gentlemen. The F.B.I.'s pretty busy these days, and they didn't have too many men to assign to this job of investigation. That's one of the

reasons it was handed over to me."

"We don't doubt your competence to investigate, Lieutenant." It was Bracken, plant engineer, who spoke. "But we've had about a dozen private detectives assigned to the job, and they've found nothing."

"I'm not a detective myself, and I don't promise to find anything. But the second reason the job was handed over to me is this—I know planes. I know the way they're supposed to be made, and I know how they should operate. Most private detectives don't. And, gentlemen, I intend to go over this plant of yours from top to bottom."

"That's okay with us." Wyatt pushed back his chair. "If there's anything wrong here, we certainly want to find it. Would you like to take a look at the wing assembly building first?"

"Whatever you please. I know that a wing came off my own plane, but I don't know what happened to the others that crashed. No one saw them crash, and the reason for their cracking up remains a mystery. I don't insist that something's wrong with the wings. I just say that something's wrong *somewhere*."

Armstrong, the plant superintendent, was standing up.

"First I'll show you the plant personally, Lieutenant. After that, you'll be able to find your way around alone."

Morley nodded. Five minutes later he was in the wing assembly plant.

Most of the work was being done by men, but there were a few women, recently hired. The job required skill, no great muscular strength. A few of the workers looked up as he entered, then turned back to their jobs. Some of them did not even look up.

"They don't look it," Morley was thinking, "but among these men and women there's a good chance of my finding a murderer. Eight men are already dead. And more will die if I don't succeed."

He stepped close, watched one man's flying fingers. The man was about thirty, dark, close-shaven, with a small black moustache. For a second he caught Morley's eye, and a trace of a smile crossed his face. He was proud of his skill, liked to have his work observed.

Morley passed on to the next man, then to a woman. They did not even spare him a glance. On the wall was a huge poster:

## SMASH HITLER, MAKE THE RISING SUN SET

All of them, men and women, were working as if they took the words to heart.

Half an hour later, he was out of the wing assembly plant. He had seen nothing suspicious.

"We get some of our parts readymade," Armstrong explained. "They're inspected at the factories that send them out, and they're inspected again here. No chance for dirty work."

"I'd like to take a look at the inspectors."

"Sure."

**H**E SAW them. Here again, there was nothing suspicious. He passed through the huge building where the motors were being put together, examined planes that were almost ready to take the air. Nowhere was there anything wrong.

Morley felt exasperated. Somebody was being too clever for him. The saboteurs, whoever they were, were not doing the obvious things. No clogging of the gas lines, no sand in the bearings, no tampering with important instruments. Any such tricks would have been quickly discovered and traced to those responsible, and swift punishment would have followed. No, this was sabotage of an entirely different kind.

Armstrong was staring at him, trying to tell from the expression on his face whether he had discovered anything. Morley tried to look not too disappointed.

"So this is all there is," he said.

"Yep, you've seen everything. You don't have much chance to find anything wrong going through the place so fast. But you can poke around anywhere you please and take your time about it."

"How about the night shift?"

"They'll be on soon. We're running most of the plant one hundred and sixty-eight hours a week, but not all. You can stay here as long as you want and take a look at things."

Morley wandered through the plant again, this time alone. An hour after Armstrong had left him, a whistle blew, and the shifts changed. He watched the tired workmen file out, the new men take their places. Nowhere was there a sign of anything wrong.

And yet, four planes had crashed.

About eleven o'clock he had had enough. The plant was in a ramshackle neighborhood, full of old

frame houses and dark, muddy streets. Street lamps were few and far between. But the plant itself was guarded, with soldiers patrolling the entrances and the streets directly outside. There was almost no chance of any one breaking in unobserved.

All the same, the neighborhood interested him. Possibly somewhere among the hundreds of ugly houses, lived the man or men he wanted. He began to walk slowly through the muddy streets, examining the buildings. It was cold and threatened rain, and there were few people out of doors. Most of the people living here had to get up early and were already asleep. There were few lights to be seen through the drawn shades.

He was crossing a street when he felt something whistle past his ear. There was a *ping* on the other side of the street.

Another man might have stopped, wondering what the sounds were, and offered a perfect target. Morley had heard them before and dropped to the ground as a second and third shot tore past him.

Then there was silence.

**W**HEN he raised his head cautiously, there was no one in sight. But he had his own automatic out now, and he was no longer a helpless target. He was lying near a vacant lot, and judging from the sound as the bullets hit buildings behind him, the shooting had come from a small brick building less than a hundred feet away. He rose to a crouch and dashed for the building.

Another burst came. But his unexpected move had caught his assailant by surprise, and none of the bullets touched him. He reached the brick house, dashed around the corner. The whole width of the house was between him and the man who had fired at him.

He knew something about house-to-house fighting, and the chances were that the gunman didn't. He smiled grimly as he thought of the other man's predicament. Was Morley trying to creep up in back of him, or was he coming around in front? The other man, trying to guess, must be in a cold sweat.

He didn't have to be, thought Morley. Morley didn't want to kill him, just capture him alive, find out who had put him up to this attempt to commit murder.

There was a narrow ledge running around the house about four feet above the ground. Morley leaped to the ledge. It wasn't as high as he would

have liked, but it would do for his purpose.

He moved along the ledge slowly. When he had turned the corner, he found no man in sight. He made his way toward the next corner, and peered cautiously around it.

The would-be murderer was lying on the ground, his eyes shifting uneasily. Which way would Morley come?

He was looking too low, and Morley, from his perch up in the air, almost laughed. He pointed his gun at the nervous figure on the ground, and gave cool orders.

“Drop that gun. Put up your hands!”

Startled, the gunman looked around in bewilderment. It took him a full second to see Morley. Then his gun leaped into action.

The slight *pop* that came from the silenced weapon was drowned out by the roar of Morley’s own automatic. The figure on the ground stiffened in agony, and the arm holding the weapon relaxed. The gun fell to the ground.

Morley leaped down from the ledge. Although the man’s shot had torn a hole in his left trouser cuff, it hadn’t touched his leg. The man himself was not yet dead, but the bright arterial blood pouring from the wounds in his side didn’t look too good.

Morley cursed quietly. He had meant to hurt and disarm the man, not to kill him. But he had reacted to the man’s attempt to commit murder intuitively, without a chance to think, and his own training had been too good. He himself had shot to kill.

“Who hired you to kill me?” Morley snapped. “Quick!”

The man opened his mouth, and a gush of blood poured through it. The face was coarse and pockmarked, and the eyes, before Morley’s bullets had dulled them, must have been hard and shifty. Morley stared helplessly. In the short time left him, this man wouldn’t talk. He’d die, but he wouldn’t talk.

**A** PAIR of policemen made their appearance, guns drawn and ready for action. Their eyes popped when they saw the dying man with Morley in mud-stained mufti bending over him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” one of the cops demanded.

“Get a doctor before he passes out,” Morley ordered.

“You killed him!” And then the policemen’s

eyes widened still further. “Why it’s Big-Foot McCrea! He’s poison. What the—”

Big-Foot McCrae shuddered for the last time and lay still.

“Cancel that call for the doctor,” Morley said. “Call the morgue.”

“What did you kill him for?”

“Because he tried to kill me.”

“Why?”

That *why* was the important thing. Somebody had hired this gunman to put him out of the way because he was dangerous to the saboteurs. The funny thing was that Morley himself didn’t see how he was dangerous. He had examined the factory and found nothing wrong. What were the saboteurs afraid of?

About a dozen private detectives had looked for the guilty men too. Nobody, so far as he knew, had taken a shot at them. He’d have to speak to Bracken and Wyatt about it tomorrow. Meanwhile, the cop wanted an answer to his question.

Morley made the answer short, but that wasn’t enough for the cops. A man had been killed, and they wanted to know all about it. They kept on asking questions, and then other cops arrived and asked questions, too. It was two o’clock before Morley got to bed.

He was up at six in the morning. He had seen the workers on two shifts, and he wanted to see the men on the third before they went off at eight. He got to the plant at six-thirty and looked around. The men on this shift worked in the same way as did those on the others, steadily and fast, knowing that they had an important job to do. Wanting to show everyone they meant business. There was no sign of anything wrong.

The men went off at eight, and the day-workers came on. Morley racked his brains and cursed himself for a fool. Somebody figured he knew enough to be dangerous. But he himself couldn’t get it.

From the wing assembly plant he could see a light on in one of the offices across the yard. Some of the office workers must be here before their usual hours for checking in. That was a break. Morley left the assembly plant, stepped across the yard. He’d have a chance to talk to Wyatt or Bracken.

As he moved toward the door, he heard the shrill sound of a scream. His hand fell to his gun again as he raced forward. Throwing the door open,

he almost bumped into a stenographer who was groping for the handle from the inside.

**W**YATT was on the floor unconscious, a trickle of blood streaming down his forehead. The only other door led to an inner office. It was closed. Morley pulled at the knob. The door was locked.

A bullet took care of the lock, and he threw the door open. This was Wyatt's private office. Somebody had been tampering with the safe. The heavy outer door was ajar. Inside, however, was a thin door that was opened by means of a key. This was still shut.

Wyatt's private office had another door. This door was closed, but not locked. Morley went through it, passed through a room where the stenographer was supposed to work, found himself in Bracken's office.

Bracken was at his desk, facing the other way, leaning back in his swivel chair. Morley barked at him.

"Bracken, did anybody come through here?"

There was no answer. It was only then that Morley saw the swelling on the man's head, the thin stream of blood on his face.

Bracken was unconscious, and Morley decided that he could be left alone for a while. He hastened back to where Wyatt was lying on the floor.

Armstrong was now bending over him. As Morley watched, he saw Wyatt stir and heard him groan. He was coming to. A half-minute later, he sat up.

A doctor arrived, and it was not long before both Bracken and Wyatt were fit to talk.

"What happened?" Morley asked.

It was Wyatt who answered.

"I got here about eight with Bracken. We both had a lot of work to do, and we went to our offices. My stenographer was at work in her own room.

"I stepped in to give her some dictation and thought I heard a noise out here. I came out to investigate—and that's all I know."

"I wanted to see Mr. Wyatt," the girl said, "but found the door to his office locked. I had to go around the building. When I came in, he was lying on the floor."

Morley nodded.

"I guess your arrival scared the crook, and he made off through your office."

"He must have found me in the way of his

escape," Bracken said weakly. "So he hit me over the head and got out of the building as you were entering it at the other end."

"What was the crook after?" Morley's voice was sharp.

"I don't know." Wyatt looked puzzled. "There's some money in that safe, but not much. Not enough for him to take a chance like this. There are some valuable papers. But as the crook didn't get a chance to lay his hands on them, I don't know which ones he wanted."

"Where were you, Armstrong, when all this was happening?" Morley snapped suddenly.

"Why," Armstrong stammered. "I—I was in the locker room."

"Anybody see you there?"

"I don't know."

**T**HEY were all gazing at Morley tensely, wondering what he was thinking. His face was expressionless.

"Well," he said, "as the crook didn't get away with anything, you may as well return to your work. I don't think he'll try the same thing twice."

Wyatt spoke hesitantly.

"Lieutenant, did you discover—"

"What?"

"What you were looking for. Any sort of sabotage. You were around last night, weren't you?"

"I was. But I didn't find anything."

Some of the tenseness seemed to go out of the faces watching him.

"I suppose," Wyatt remarked, "I'm expecting too much, hoping for results so soon."

Morley's face was grim.

"I'm afraid you are. I haven't found a thing. I'm going out to the plant again and keep on looking."

Wyatt excused himself, hurried away. As the others left, Morley walked out of the office and back to the plant.

It would have been foolish to tell anyone at this stage what he suspected—foolish, because he didn't believe it himself. What was more, he not only had no proof, but no evidence. And he couldn't hope to convince others while he wasn't convinced himself.

This time, while he was in the plant, he spoke to the men. They wanted to work, but he interrupted them, forced some of them to answer his questions. He could have asked the same questions of Wyatt

or Bracken or Armstrong, but he preferred to ask the men in the plant.

Slowly his ideas became more definite. And then, shortly after noon, came the last piece of evidence he needed. He saw Armstrong hastening toward him, his face troubled.

"Lieutenant—" Armstrong said hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"We've found some sabotage."

Morley's eyes narrowed. This was more than he expected.

"Where?"

"Among the finished planes. Some of the wing struts were weakened. And there were small spare metal parts scattered through the motors. Once the motors started, the pieces of metal would tear heck out of them."

"Who discovered this?"

"One of the inspectors. He saw a slash on a wing, and that made him suspicious."

It was all he needed.

"Have you told Mr. Wyatt?"

"Not yet. I thought you ought to be the first one to know."

"All right, we'll tell him together."

**W**YATT and Bracken were talking over a new plane when Morley and the plant superintendent burst in upon them. They seemed startled when they heard the news.

"It sounds incredible!" Bracken cried.

Wyatt shook his head.

"I don't believe it. Those finished planes were well-guarded."

"What do you say, Armstrong?"

"A man who knows the plant could get into the building without being seen. I could do it myself," said Armstrong.

"Nobody could stop you or Bracken or Wyatt," agreed Morley. He turned to Wyatt. "I'd like to take a look at your safe."

Wyatt stiffened.

"I don't see any reason for that. What's in that safe is my business, Lieutenant."

"Any objection to letting me see the blueprints in it?"

Wyatt's eyes opened wide.

"How did you know there were blueprints?"

"I guessed. You said there were valuable papers, and blueprints of new planes seem pretty valuable to me."

"Well, if you insist—but I can't see what good it'll do you."

"You let me worry about that," Morley told him. "I know who the saboteur is, Wyatt, and the blueprints in your safe will furnish the proof."

Wyatt was suddenly pink with excitement.

"You mean you know who got to those finished planes? You haven't had time to investigate them, Lieutenant. And I thought you said earlier this morning that you hadn't found anything."

"I've found enough by now. And the guilty man handed me a couple of good hints on a platter." His eyes swept the three men coldly. "Last night a gunman tried to kill me."

Wyatt looked astonished.

"What happened?"

"You'll find it in this morning's papers when you get time to read them. I got him first. Unfortunately, my aim was too good, and he died before he could tell me who hired him."

"Why did anybody want you out of the way?" Armstrong demanded. "We had a dozen detectives here before. Nobody tried to kill them."

"That's exactly what I told myself. The answer is that I'm not a detective. I know planes. The men you hired didn't know them."

"There's something in that," admitted Wyatt.

"I told you three I knew planes. That was why somebody decided to kill me."

"It doesn't make sense. You didn't discover anything wrong yesterday," objected Bracken.

"No, but somebody figured I'd discover what was wrong soon. It was inevitable. If I could be killed and my body hidden so that it wouldn't be discovered right away, the saboteur figured he would have time to cover his tracks."

**W**YATT drummed with his fingers nervously on a desk.

"What did he need time for?"

"To get those blueprints. They were the only real evidence in the case. He tried getting them this morning and failed. He was going to try again soon. I suspected then what the trouble was, even though at first it didn't seem possible."

"Then came this sabotage of the finished planes. That was the first time anything as obvious as that had happened. It was clear that somebody wanted us to find what was wrong with those planes."

"I knew at once that it was a desperate attempt to set me on the wrong track. That failed too."

“How was the actual sabotage carried out?” Armstrong asked nervously.

“It was clever. I spoke to some of the workmen in the plant and checked my suspicions. You three men know that before this fighter plane was accepted by the army you had to build a model and have it tested. It passed every test. You got orders to go ahead and build.”

“It’s a good plane,” stated Wyatt.

“The first one was. So were the next few models. But those planes were built in your small experimental plant, a couple of hundred miles from here. And that plant didn’t have facilities for large-scale production. So you started work here.

“Your machinists made dies according to plan, your assembly workers put finished parts together. But the men you had working here hadn’t worked on this plane before. They didn’t notice that the plans had been changed. You weren’t building exactly the same plane.”

“You’re crazy.” Armstrong snarled.

“Like fun I am! The plane was different. But you couldn’t notice the difference by looking at it. Slight, very slight changes in the motor—tiny changes in the angles at which the wings were set.

“Everything was done to weaken the plane, to make it easy for the motor to fail, the wings to drop off. You couldn’t tell that anything was wrong no matter how carefully you inspected it. But that plane was just as much sabotaged as if somebody had put sugar in the fuel line.”

“Somebody substituted different blueprints!” Wyatt exclaimed.

“Sure. And the beauty of it, from the saboteur’s point of view, was that once the job was done, it

was done for every plane. Every last one was weakened, set to fail when it got a real test.”

“The change should have been noticed,” said Armstrong.

“Only by somebody who had occasion to study the blueprints. Only by somebody who knew the plane backwards and forwards. Only by the same man who had done the dirty work.”

Wyatt’s face was red with anger.

“Bracken!” he shouted.

“He’s the man. He’s a plane designer. He’s the only one who had a chance to substitute different blueprints. This morning, realizing his danger, he hit you over the head and tried to get them back. But he was interrupted, had to fake knocking himself out.”

“He went for a trip to Germany four years ago,” Wyatt said. “I didn’t realize when he came back that he had changed, but he had. I thought he went to study plane designs. What he did was sell out. He admired those Nazis, and he sold out.”

“He’s not the only one. But I think you’ll find it wasn’t admiration alone. He probably got paid plenty. How much was it, Bracken?”

Bracken’s face was green. He was up suddenly, making for the door. This time Morley did not shoot before thinking.

His bullet tore through Bracken’s arm just as the latter’s hand tightened on the door knob. The arm fell to Bracken’s side, useless.

“That’ll give you an idea of how a flyer feels when a wing comes off,” Morley told the groaning man. “Just a faint idea. And after you go before a judge and jury, you’ll know how a man feels when he crashes.”

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