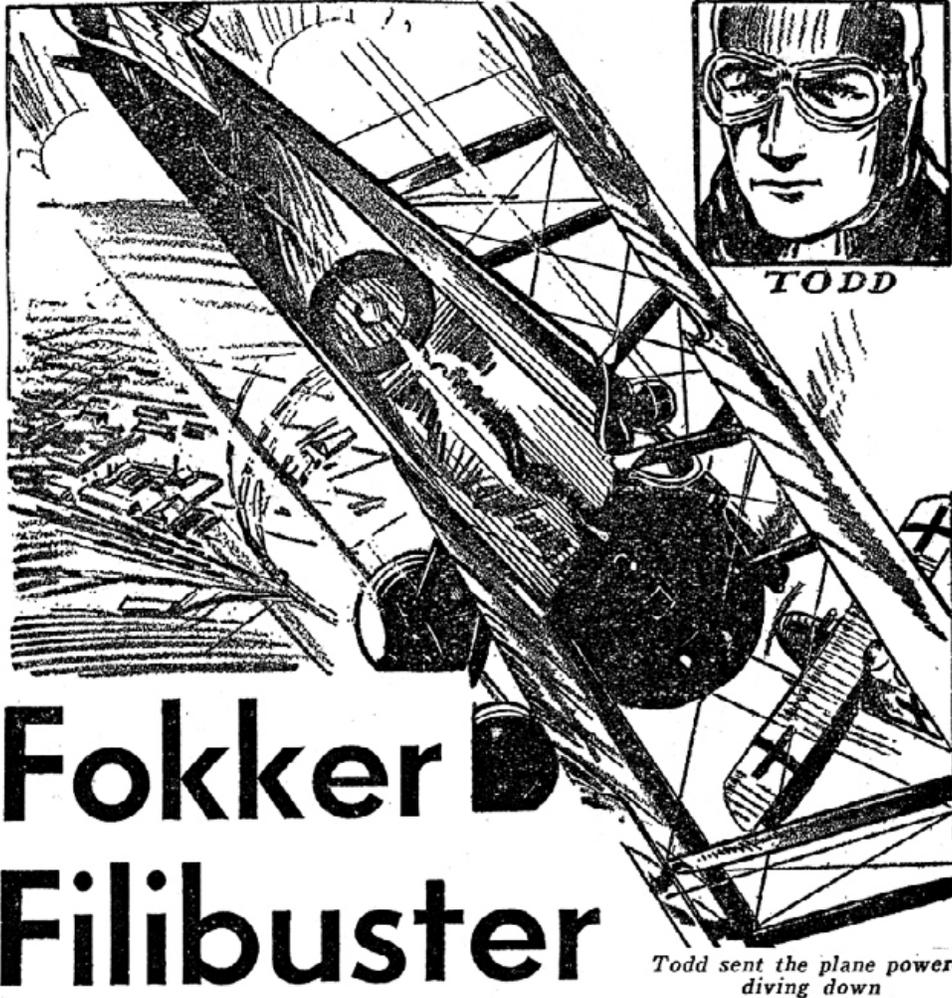


*Grim Necessity Forces Flight Lieutenant Todd to Land
in a Hun Field—with a Crash!*



Fokker Filibuster

Todd sent the plane power-diving down

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Author of "The Wild Ace," "Commander Satan," etc.

MAKING full use of a stout hickory cane to take most of his weight when he moved his slowly healing, Spandau-plugged leg, Major George Jackson, C.O. of the Twenty-fourth Pursuit Squadron, walked slowly from the squadron office over to the tarmac and buttonholed the flight sergeant.

"Hasn't 'A' Flight returned yet?" he demanded.

"No, sir," the non-com replied. "But they've only been out a couple of hours. And—"

"That's right," the C.O. grunted. "I forgot they took off an hour later on this show. Well, when they do buzz in, tell Lieutenant Todd I want to see him in the squadron office. And don't forget to give him the message, man."

The flight sergeant nodded, and a half sad, look stole over his wrinkled face.

"Yes, sir," he said. Then, after a pause, "I sure hope it isn't orders—Well, I mean, I kinda like the lieutenant, sir."

"So do I, Sergeant," the C.O. murmured. "But it does happen to be what you think."

There's not enough ships to go around as it is. And—oh, hell, I argued with the Wing colonel, but unless Lieutenant Todd does something miraculous within the next few hours—like winning the war—it's just no go. So you can see how it is. Anyway, tell him I want to see him."

THE non-com nodded again, saluted and went over to lounge in front of "B" Flight hangar. Twenty minutes later six Camels came winging out of the east. The non-com counted them, sighed with relief, then fixed his eyes on Number Four, on the right. In the pit of that ship sat Lieutenant Joseph Todd, a member of the Twenty-fourth Squadron for the past seven days.

With the others he slid down to land, but at that point he became very different from the rest. They landed normally and taxied up to the line. But Lieutenant Todd bounced clear across the field, crabbed a wingtip on the ground, and came within an ace of tipping up on his nose and falling over on his back. As it was, his prop hit the ground and broke into a million pieces.

The flight sergeant groaned and ran out. "I guess I'll have to take charge of her now, sir," he said. "By the way, the C.O. wants to see you in his office."

The pilot's body stiffened. He looked at the wreck, then at the flight sergeant, and then back at the wreck again. A long sigh issued from his lips and his big body seemed to grow smaller.

"Okay, Sergeant," he grunted.

"And thanks." A couple of minutes later he stood before Major Jackson.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked, parrotlike.

"Sit down, Todd," the C.O. said, and waved at a chair. Then, "Todd, I've got bad news for you, but I want you to know that personally I'm damn sorry. I've got orders here from the Wing colonel to take you off active flying and send you back to Pau."

"My bad landings, eh?" the pilot breathed after a long silence.

"Your crash landings, Todd," the other said quietly. "You've been here seven days, and you've washed out four ships landing on this field. I don't know. Maybe something has gone haywire with your eyesight. Or perhaps you're just not cut out to get a ship down into the postage stamp fields we have here at the Front."

"But what about that Hun I shot down the other day!" Todd blurted out. "Doesn't that count for something in my favor?"

"A lot, Todd. And you may be sure I reminded the colonel of it when he called to tell me of his decision. I'm sorry, Todd, but back you go. Perhaps after a few weeks of good landings at Pau you'll come back and prove yourself to be a whirlwind. I damn well hope so."

The pilot stood up, clenched his fists and held them close to his sides.

"Thanks for the hope, sir," he said with an effort. "But we both know there's not a chance in the world. Once a pilot gets sent back to Pau, he stays there. When do I leave? Pack and get out in the next five minutes, or less? Maybe that would make the colonel feel more relieved!"

"Don't take it like a kid, Todd!" the C.O. snapped with an edge to his voice. "The colonel didn't do it because he wanted to. We've got damn few ships, and we've got to get the most out of them. No, stick around for a while and take your time about leaving."

Without bothering to salute Todd stumbled out of the squadron office and slowly made his way toward the mess hall. But he didn't go in. Some of the other pilots were there, tossing down a few and horsing around with each other. A dull ache engulfed his heart. He wasn't one of them any longer. He had failed to make the grade as a Front line pilot. He was headed back to Pau. Something close to tears blurring his

eyes, he shuffled over to his hutment, pushed inside and threw himself down on his cot to suffer his heart-aching misery alone.

For a long time he lay there motionless, a million and one familiar sounds filtering through his numbed senses. He heard pilots yelling, heard the roar of engines as planes took off on patrol. But those sounds came to him like faded memories out of the dim past, and he didn't raise his head or even move a muscle.

Then after a long time a sound closer than all the others brought him up to a sitting position. The door had been pushed open, and Major Jackson, leaning heavily on his cane, stood on the step outside. The C.O. made an impatient gesture with his free hand.

"Grab your helmet and goggles and get out here, Todd!" he barked.

The pilot didn't wait to ask questions. He did as ordered, and then popped the question.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"A special job that's got to be done at once," the C.O. snapped. "The Wing colonel just phoned me. A German Rumpler is sneaking over toward the railhead in front of Issy. It's a camera ship, of course, and it's after pictures. The railhead is jammed with troop trains we're going to use in the coming drive. If the Germans get pictures of those cars, they'll be able to figure just what our infantry strength will be in that sector. You've got to hike up there and nail that Rumpler—if it's the last thing you do in this world!"

"Me?" Todd gulped. "But I thought I—"

"Don't you suppose I know it, too?" Major Jackson cut him off short. "But all the others are out on patrol, and I can't fly a kite with this bum leg of mine. So, it's up to you. Dammit, don't you want to tackle it?" Jackson fumed.

"Don't I?" Todd roared. "Ring the

colonel and tell him that Rumpler's already in flames. It will be by the time the connection's made!"

WITH a nod for emphasis, Todd raced out to the tarmac, leaped into a ship the mechanics already had ticking over, and went booming off the field. Ramming her up in a steep climb to five thousand, he swung a trifle toward the northeast and headed for the Issy sector. Fifteen minutes later the sector came into view ahead and below. And some five seconds after that Todd spotted the Rumpler, coasting about in a series of lazy circles above the train-jammed railhead.

"Probably your last flight in this war, kid," he muttered to himself grimly. "So make it a honey, and make it good!"

Sliding his thumbs up to the trigger trips, he tapped rudder until the Rumpler was in his sights, and then held his thumbs poised as he sent the Camel power-diving down across the sky. But at that exact moment the Rumpler whirled about on wingtip and went streaking across No Man's Land toward the safety of its own lines. Todd's sneak-up trick had fallen flat. The Rumpler's pilot and observer had both spotted him when he was still a long ways out of range, and now they were doing their utmost to keep him that way.

However, no Rumpler ever built can run away from a Camel unless it has a ten-mile lead or so. And by the time the German craft was a mile inside its own lines, the Yank was right on its tail, showering it with made-in-America bullets. Realizing that flight was useless, the Rumpler pilot whipped over and around in a flash roll and then streaked off to the south, as though he intended to escape that way.

"Not while I'm around, you bums!" Todd bellowed, and sent his own ship around in a half-dime turn and then streaked down.

A SPLIT second later he realized that he'd been played for a sucker. The Rumpler's maneuver, and his own half-dime turn, put him in perfect position for the German observer now standing up in his pit. Jetting flame spewed up from his guns and Spandau bullets bounced off the Camel's engine cowling, as a sliver of strut flapped back to sting Todd in the cheek.

Cursing his stupidity, Todd started to cartwheel off to the left, but checked the maneuver. Instead, he let the plane fall crazily over on one wing, and hauled back his throttle to make it appear that his Bentley had been hit. Instantly the German plane swung around and came boring in for its pilot to make sure of the kill. Bracing himself, Todd waited until Spandau bullets were almost picking off his goggles. Then he rammed the throttle open wide, and went into action.

The German pilot and his observer didn't have a chance then. It is highly probable, in fact, that neither knew what struck them. One moment they were boiling in to polish off a crippled plane and its seemingly wounded pilot. And the next they were hurtling earthward in the midst of a great seething ball of flame.

"Give the devil my regards!" Todd shouted and banked west. "Tell him that—"

He stopped short as realization came suddenly to him. The job was done. It had been a cinch, but now it was all over. Back to Twenty-four's field. And from there, back to Pau. Getting the Rumpler might make a difference? Hell no! He just couldn't seem to sit down in small fields. He'd probably groundloop this ship and ruin everything. He looked down at the falling ball of fire again.

"Tell him that I guess I won't be sending any more of you bums his way," he murmured sadly. "Aw, nuts!"

Perhaps the gods of war had been waiting for that last exclamation. At any

rate, no sooner had it left Todd's lips than the Bentley in the nose began to spit and sputter. Then, as oil came streaming back into Todd's face, the engine sputtered once more and then died cold. Glancing down, the American sucked in air, then cursed softly. He was a good two miles behind the German lines, and at his altitude he didn't stand a hope in hell of making the Allied lines.

"What a sweet windup!" he growled. "A damn German prisoner for the rest of the war. Oh, well, maybe that'll be better than Pau."

Resigned to his fate he hauled back the throttle, cut the ignition and went coasting down through a light ground haze. Then, when he could see the ground clearly, he spotted a field off to his right. Banking around he headed toward it, then suddenly sat up straight in the seat and gulped. In the field were two German Fokkers! Twisting, he glanced off toward the other side.

A mile away he saw two more Fokkers in another field.

"What the devil—" he grunted.

Then in a flash it came to him. The Germans were expecting an Allied drive, and so they had moved their strafing squadrons up close to the lines and located the ships by pairs in fields that could be used to advantage. Thus when the business got underway, the strafing ships would not have so far to return to load up with fresh ammo belts and twenty-pound bombs.

"So?" Todd breathed. "Now ain't that somethin'! Well, there's two of you babies anyway, that won't help out the Kaiser much longer. And wouldn't the colonel love to see this—damn his hide!"

Tapping rudder a bit so that he headed directly toward the two ships, he held the stick steady with one hand and unsnapped his safety belt with the other. Two or three figures appeared from under the wings of the ground ships and started waving their

hands frantically. But he paid them no attention. A few seconds later he hauled all the way back on the stick and stalled the plane. It dropped like a runaway elevator, straight down on top of the two Fokkers.

A thousand red demons took punches at Todd's brain. And a thousand others jabbed spears into his body. Then invisible hands grabbed hold of him and flung him out onto the ground—

Presently human hands grabbed him and jerked him up onto his feet. Eyes glittering with hate glared into his. Thin lips twisted in a snarl.

"*Schweinhund!* I shall shoot you for this!"

The blood left Todd's veins and ran down into his feet. Lights still dancing all about him, he was impelled by the necessity of thinking fast.

"Shot—wounded?" he mumbled. "My eyes. I could not see. What has happened?"

His answer was a curse in German and a smacking clip on the jaw that sent him reeling. As he hit the ground something seemed to snap in his brain. Right or wrong, no squarehead Hun was going to belt *him* one and get away with it!

He started to scramble up on his feet, then suddenly spun around and dived headlong into an old shell hole. From out of the west all hell had broken loose! The American barrage before the start of the drive was getting underway, and shells had begun whistling into the field like snowflakes.

The barrage only lasted but a moment before it moved on to blast German-held ground farther back. But to Todd, striving to bury himself deeper and deeper in that old shell hole, it seemed a thousand years before the last pile of earth fountained toward the sky. Gingerly feeling himself to make sure he wasn't minus life or limb, Todd crawled out of the shell hole and got to his feet. Straight ahead of him was a huge

smoking hole where the tangled-up Camel and the two Fokkers had been. And scattered about were the gruesome remains of what had been two German pilots and a mechanic.

TODD grunted and looked down at his right hand, and slowly bunched it into a fist.

"I couldn't have done it that good," he murmured. "Or could I?"

Then as he realized just where he was, he forgot about further wisecracks, and took stock of the situation. He was less than two miles from the German lines. There was a chance he might sneak through during the advance, but—

"That field north of here!" he gasped. "Unless the barrage got those ships too, I— Well, why not?"

Determining north from the position of the sun, Todd started hiking forward, hugging woods as often as he could, and keeping a sharp eye out for enemy infantrymen moving up. And then, at the end of an hour, he came to the edge of a small wood. He pulled up short and sucked in air softly. He had reached the field, and the two Fokkers were there with props ticking over.

Off to one side a group of three men were bending over a row of boxes. One look at those boxes, and Todd knew that they contained strafing bombs that were to be attached to the wings of the Fokkers. Attached to the wings and flown away—if he didn't whirl into action and risk everything on one lightninglike lunge.

For the brief part of a split second he stood perfectly still, fought down his heart that was trying to leap up and clog his throat. Then he dashed forward, tore out of the woods and bounded over to the nearest Fokker. He was in the pit before the Germans realized what had happened. Yells of rage came to his ears as he banged the

Mercedes throttle wide open. And as the ship hurtled forward, a Luger serenade banged out behind him. But he simply bent low over the stick and kept on going, got up sufficient speed and pulled the plane clear. Once in the air he turned in the seat, looked down at the group with fire-spitting Lugers in their hands, and thumbed his nose.

"Thanks, chumps!" he shouted. "And nuts to your Kaiser!"

Laughing, he faced front and started to bank toward the American lines. But in that moment the laughter died on his lips. As a matter of fact, it was a blast of Spandau fire right in front of his face that came close to ramming the laughter right down his throat.

A FOKKER was slamming in at him, guns blazing. So intent had he been on stealing this plane that he hadn't even noticed the ship cruising around above. Its pilot had undoubtedly been waiting for the two others to come up. But the fellow wasn't waiting now. He was going into action, and the cold hand of Death was reaching for Todd's heart.

Caught like a rat in a trap, the Yank had the choice of but two things. One, he could risk slamming right up past the charging German. Or, two, he could roll out from under and risk smacking the ground. Either way, it seemed certain that he'd wake up in some other world. So—

"We'll take it fighting!" he grated, and pulled the nose of his ship straight up into the withering blast pouring down on him.

Only a fool or a crazy man would try such a maneuver, but somehow it worked. It worked because the German was so surprised that he suspected some kind of trap, and pulled off to the side. Instantly, Todd slammed over and around on wingtip and let fly with both guns. Realizing his mistake, the Boche tried to cut back in again. But he had lost the advantage once and forever. The Yank's burst of bullets

caught him square in the chest and smashed him back against the head-rest—a dead man. Seconds later the Fokker plowed into the ground and burst into flame.

Todd didn't wait to see that, however. The instant the German went down, he cut his fire, spun around on wingtip and went thundering back toward the American lines. Forty minutes later he eased back the throttle and coasted down for a landing on Twenty-four's field. From the corner of his eye he saw mechanics running out onto the field. Funny—with a Hun warplane over the field, they should be scurrying for cover.

"Yeah, it's me," he grunted. "But you wouldn't know it. You—"

He didn't finish the rest. At that moment the Fokker settled and rolled to a gentle stop. With a whoop Todd sat up straight in the seat.

"Can't land in a small field?" he bellowed and belted the throttle wide open again. "Says who? Take a look, everybody!"

And off and around he went again and again, each landing a perfect three-point job. He had made six consecutive landings before one of the mechanics grabbed hold of his wings and swung him around in a half circle, so that the others could grab the ship and hold him back. Then Major Jackson came limping out. Right behind him was the Wing colonel. The C.O.'s eyes popped open as he recognized the pilot of the perpetual-landing Fokker.

"My God, it's you, Todd!" he gasped. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

Todd leaped to the ground. "Did you see 'em, Major?" he cried. "Did you see those landings?"

"Yes, yes!" the other snapped. "How could I miss them? Good Lord! You shoot down a Rumpler, you land on two Fokkers and smash them up—Craig saw you from the air—you steal a Fokker, and then you shoot down another one. This war is getting

too damn complicated for me!”

“But those landings!” Todd cried. “That shows you I *can* get into a small field! Hell, Major, do—do I still go back to Pau?”

Jackson scowled and glanced at the Wing colonel.

“I guess you’ll have to answer that yourself, Colonel,” he said quietly.

The Wing C.O. tried to look stern, but a twinge of humor kept tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Well, we’ll postpone it for awhile,” he conceded. Then added, “Perhaps in the meantime, Lieutenant, we can figure out some way for you to fly an enemy ship and still fight for us.”

“Then I’m here to stay!” Todd grinned happily. “Didn’t I do that little thing just now?”

The Wing colonel didn’t have an answer ready, so he let it ride.