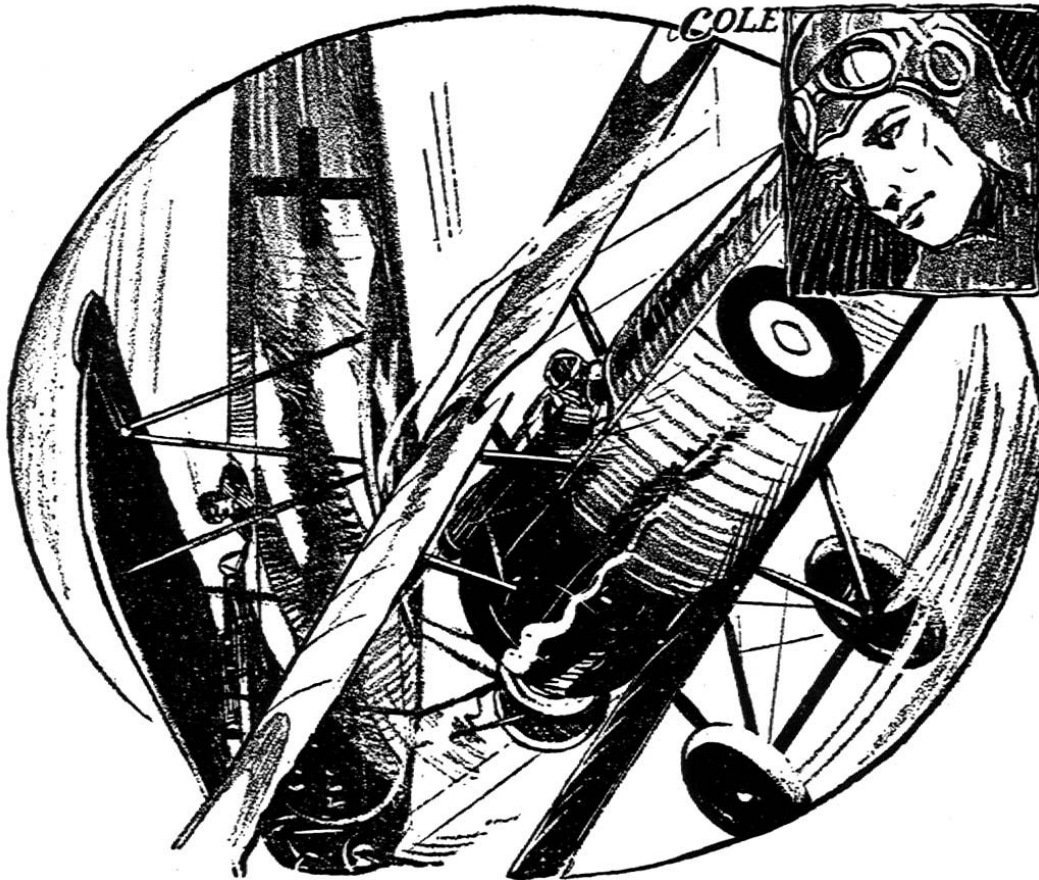


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# Haywire Ace



*Cole fired at the German*

*Young Cole Plays Hide-and-Seek With Fate While Air Intelligence Puts Him to a Test!*

**By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN**

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**C**LICKING his heels together, and snapping his hand up in a smart salute, the wing dispatch rider held out the yellow-tinted official envelope.

"From Colonel Manders, sir," he said.

Major Harmon, C.O. of the 16th Yank Pursuits, known also as Harmon's Hellions,

returned the salute, took the envelope, and dismissed the dispatch rider with a nod. Ripping open the envelope he pulled out the sheet inside and stared at the typed words. He read a few of them and then his brows went up in a look of mild surprise. A few more and his eyes tightened in speculative concern. When he had finished the

communication he handed it over to "Jeff" Sparks, "A" Flight leader, who stood beside him on the tarmac.

"Well, there's one thing about this war," he grunted. "It doesn't get too damn boring. Something popping every day. Have a look at this from the colonel."

Sparks took the communication. It read:

To: Major Harmon  
From: Colonel Manders  
Subject: 2nd Lt. Frederick Cole.

This flying officer assigned to your unit yesterday for active duty is under suspicion by Intelligence of possessing enemy affiliations and sympathies.

It is believed that he was born of German parentage although this fact has not been definitely established as yet. It is known, however, that prior to our entry in the war he received considerable mail from Germany, and several Germans who have since returned to their own country, were among his friends.

Therefore you are to maintain a strict observance of this officer and if you detect any attempt on his part to communicate with the enemy in any way whatever, you are to place him under close arrest and inform me immediately.

This officer had the highest score in aerial gun marksmanship during his regular training period. I mention this so that you may judge his actions accordingly.

Colonel Manders  
C.O. 42nd Wing  
U.S.A.A.S., A.E.F.

Making a queer sound in his throat, Jeff Sparks handed the communication back.

"The big bugs are spy-crazy, if you ask me," he grunted, and glanced down the tarmac at a lean straw-haired youth working on his Bentley Camel. "True, the kid has the hair of a Hun, but that's as far as it goes."

"Check," the C.O. nodded. "Still you know how dizzy this damn war can be at times. Birds that look like spies aren't. And those that don't look like 'em have got wireless sets hidden under their hats. You took Cole up last evening for a short look-see patrol. How'd he act?"

"Like any greenhorn," the 'A' Flight leader

replied. "Scared as hell at his first Archie, but with enough guts to keep on tagging along. Of course I kept clear of any Hun ships. They all rate that much of a break. But today I'm going to have a look at him in action. In fact, I'm taking 'A' out on the usual morning show in a few minutes."

"Fair enough," the C.O. said, and heeled out his cigarette. "I'll be waiting to hear what you have to pay when you get back. Luck."

It was fifteen minutes before Jeff Sparks raised his hand in signal to the five ships in V formation on the ground behind him, and then shoved the stick forward. Taking off with the bored nonchalance of a veteran pilot, he "lifted" the Camel up to seven thousand feet, took a look back to see that the others were in place, and then winged around and headed for No Man's Land and Germany-controlled air beyond.

On the way, he glanced back now and then to take a peek at the new replacement under suspicion by Intelligence. Green though he was, young Cole was flying every bit as well as the next man. And to a war eagle like Sparks that's what counted most.

"Nuts to Intelligence!" he growled into the smooth roar of his Bentley. "Those crummy bums have to stir up a lot of prop-wash now and then for fear they won't get any publicity out of this mess. Why, hell, they—"

He stopped short and forgot all about how crummy Intelligence was. Dead ahead of him and a couple of miles behind the German lines were ten things that occupied his entire attention immediately. They were ten Fokkers led by the black-and-white striped plane of von Khole, Germany's deadliest ace in that sector. Von Khole had been very much of a thorn in the side of 16, and in the side of Jeff Sparks in particular.

Five times the "A" Flight leader had crossed props with the Hun ace. Four times it had been a draw, and the fifth time von Khole had come close to shooting the pants right off Sparks. In fact, if a couple of 16th's pilots hadn't piled down into the scrap, and as a result scared the German off, von Khole might have succeeded in doing just that little thing.

"My old pal, von Khole, eh?" Sparks said grimly. "Fair enough! I've got a hunch that six is going to be a lucky number for me."

Signaling to the rest of the flight for more

speed and altitude, he led the way up to the same level as that of the enemy planes, and then maneuvered southward to rob the Germans of the advantage of the sun at their back should they attack, instead of waiting to be attacked.

But Sparks knew that they would attack because, while von Khole was all kinds of a German bum, he had what it took to fly combat planes. Thus, by the time Sparks had led his flight halfway through the maneuver, the Hun pilots rammed their throttles wide open and came tearing in, hell for leather.

Kicking left rudder hard, Sparks lined up the striped plane in his sights, and let go with both guns. Had von Khole continued his roaring charge, he would never have enjoyed another jug of schnapps in this world. However, he banked in a wing-screaming maneuver that came close to taking both of them clean off, whipped out from under Spark's blasting fire and went scooting away into the clear.

A curse in his throat, the Yank "A" Flight leader heeled around on wing tip and started in savage pursuit. But that was all; he just started. Two other Fokker pilots decided that he might just as well be turned into cold meat for them as for their commander. And they came plowing in, guns blazing. For the next couple of seconds Sparks had all he could do to slam-bang his way through a web of tracers' smoke and hissing bullets that tried to slap down and envelope him, plane and all.

One of the pair of Fokker pilots paid with his life for his foolishness, and the other had one hell of a tough job limping down to a ground-loop landing in the middle of No Man's Land. Sparks didn't take a second look at either plane. No sooner had they started down, than he pulled out to the rim of the fight and took a look around for von Khole's plane. He spotted the German ace, and also something else that brought a grunt of surprise to his lips. It was young Cole slamming in on the German like nobody's business.

"Boy!" Sparks shouted aloud. "If he clips von Khole in his very first scrap, will I write a razz letter to Intelligence H.Q.! And how, I'll love to!"

**E**NGINE roaring full out, the Yank replacement had piled in so close to the

German's ship that he could have reached out and smacked him on the nose with his fist. But he didn't; neither did he fire either of his guns. From where Sparks flew he thought he saw the suspected replacement raise his free hand in some sort of signal, and then careen away to the right.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Sparks choked. "He must be a—"

The rest of that remark was never finished. Cole's guns had suddenly started hammering, and a Fokker heeled over on wing tip and headed out of control toward the ground. Yet, as Sparks watched, he wondered if Cole had tried to miss the Fokker and had come too close. He had gone in at the enemy plane from a crazy angle, and if he had missed it could not be held against him. Yet—

Sparks snapped out of his thought trance and started back to work again. However, there wasn't any more work to do. With three of their comrades in a heap of flames on the ground, the German survivors obviously decided that they weren't so hot that morning, and called all bets off. A red Very light arced out from the pit of von Khole's striped plane, and the others promptly made themselves scarce toward the east. For half a moment Sparks was tempted to give the signal to chase. But on second thought he changed his mind. The dizzy actions of the young replacement hadn't jelled with him so good. So he signaled to head for 16th's drome.

**T**HE C.O. listened silently right through to the end of Spark's report. Then he scowled and pensively rubbed the stubble growth on his chin.

"If he did signal to von Khole," he presently grunted, "we're suckers to give him a second opportunity. Yet, if he actually did nail that Fokker with trick shooting, and meant to do it, it's a cinch he's not doing any cheering for the Kaiser's gang. Damned if I know what to say. Got any suggestions?"

"One that's bound to work, I think," Sparks said promptly. "Maybe you've forgotten, but it's my turn to challenge von Khole to a personal show. So how about this? I'll drop von Khole my challenge, then I'll tell the kid that I want him to find out if he likes the way my ship is rigged. You know—I'll say that he didn't seem to be getting the maneuverability that he should out of the way his job's rigged. I'll tell him to test flight it over to

Issy and back. Of course, I'll have arranged for von Khole to meet me this side of Issy. And—"

"Are you crazy?" the C.O. broke in angrily. "Suppose the kid is all right, and von Khole slaps him down in flames? Why, damn your eyes, we'd be no less than a couple of murderers. A greenhorn sent up against von Khole in a solo scrap? Hell, no!"

"Now, wait, wait!" Sparks barked. "Of course I'm not that dumb. And I'm not that kind of a louse. I'm going to slide over in the clouds right after him and see what happens. If von Khole goes to work on him, then I'll go to work on von Khole, and signal the kid to clear out. But if they start signaling, and tossing kisses at each other—well, then I'll go to work on the kid. Okay?"

"Sure," Harmon nodded. "Why the devil didn't you say that in the first place? And you know something?"

"What?" Sparks demanded as his commanding officer, and closest friend in France, hesitated.

"I hope both our fears are all wet," Harmon grunted. "My idea of nothing at all is a lousy spy who'll eat and drink with the guys he's planning to push under."

"He's my idea of less than nothing," Sparks agreed savagely.

Some five hours later Sparks stood on the tarmac and watched young Cole take off in his own ship and climb slowly up for altitude. A strange, eerie sensation was stealing through him and he didn't like it at all. Somehow, he had half a hunch that the replacement was wise to the real motive for the test flight.

Yet damned if Sparks could decide whether grim amusement or sullen hatred had burned in the youngster's eyes while he listened to his instructions. At any rate, Cole hadn't said a word. He had simply nodded quietly, saluted, and gone down the tarmac to make his flight leader's ship ready for flight. And now, he was on his way east to—what?

Sparks finished the thought with a curse, waited until the replacement had slid up into some low-hanging clouds, then signaled to a waiting mechanic and leaped into the pit of a spare ship. Three minutes later he yanked it off the field, and without wasting time getting altitude, headed on a

bee-line course toward the southern end of the sector. Then when he was a mile or so over on the German side he started climbing up through the clouds and around toward the north. The instant the Camel's nose poked up through the top of the layer, he flattened off, eased back the throttle a bit and let the plane more or less mush forward, practically all of it hidden in the milky crest of the cloud layer.

Ten minutes later he saw the flash of wings in the sun, and in the next second was able to make out the black-and-white stripes of von Khole's plane. Snapping his eyes westward, he peered hard at the cloud crest, breath clamped in his lungs, and his heart pounding against his ribs like a trip-hammer gone haywire. And then, suddenly, he saw it. His own plane zoomed up through the cloud crest and leveled off in the general direction of the half-Allied and half-German war village of Issy. Snapping his eyes back to von Khole's plane, he saw the Fokker suddenly streak forward and up for attack position advantage.

"Now for it!" Sparks breathed, and started to close in on von Khole's rear. "Now for it. And am I hoping!"

For several breathless seconds the young Yank fledgling obviously didn't see the German Fokker swooping down toward him. But the instant the air trembled with Spandaus yammering, the greenhorn was right up on his toes. In a whirlwind maneuver that even brought a gasp of admiration from the veteran Sparks, the fledgling practically turned his ship inside out, made von Khole's marksmanship a total loss, and then went whanging down to get in a few shots of his own.

Sparks saw the tiny muzzle flash of a single shot from one of the kid's guns. But that was all. Guns had jammed, or else the fledgling had recognized who was in the pit of the Fokker. But at any rate the greenhorn didn't continue firing. Instead, he whizzed by von Khole's plane like a comet in high gear, stuck out his free hand and pointed toward the ground. Then up, around, and down he came on the German's tail. Then, and then only, his guns crackled in earnest, but Sparks saw the tracers skipping by wide of von Khole's plane, and knew that the fledgling couldn't get to first base with that kind of shooting. And then

when von Khole started to go to town, started to give the greenhorn a good taste of made-in-Germany bullets, Sparks made up his mind.

"Okay, kid!" he shouted in the roar of his engine and went zooming up to join in the scrap. "That's good enough for me. Now, I'll help you take the tramp."

**B**UT even as the last word raced off Sparks' lips, the greenhorn suddenly cut away from von Khole's twisting ship and came piling down alongside Sparks' ship. Across the few feet of space Sparks saw the set features of the kid's face, the mad glint in his eyes, and also the savage gesture for him to get the hell out and stay the hell out. Sparks grinned and waved one hand.

"Check, youngster!" he shouted. "You knew we wanted to find out, and now you're damn well going to show us, eh? Let's go, then!"

Of course the fledgling didn't hear any part of it, but he certainly went to town as he tore away from Sparks' wings. Von Khole, seeing two enemy ships instead of one in the sky, tried with all the tricks he knew to pull out and head for home. In fact, in all of their previous meetings, Sparks had never seen the German ace fly as he was flying now. But there was something more than just a pilot in the pit of the fledgling's plane. There was a fighting Yank eagle gone completely wild.

A dozen times Sparks swore that the greenhorn was going to crash straight into the Fokker and carry them both down to a burning hell. But each time the fledgling pulled away in the nick of time. Pulled away while von Khole had another attack of "nerves" and went into another mad dive for the ground. And all the time not a single shot ripped out from the greenhorn's guns.

"Is he rubbing it in?" Sparks cried. "He's going to force that bum to land. Right! Damned if he isn't showing me how he can get his man the hard way. Intelligence, you lugs, are you going to hear about this, and how!"

**E**XACTLY eight minutes later the German ace was so completely jammed with the jitters that he was about ready to pile out of his pit and jump the rest of the way to the ground. Being shot at is bad enough any day in the week, but when

some crazy fool lets his guns slide and, instead, practically parts your hair with his wing tips and nicks your wings with his prop tips and more or less rolls his wheels up the back of your neck, and comes within a hair's breadth of turning your ship into a load of failing junk a dozen times each minute, it's too much for even an ace of aces.

And so von Khole finally took the hint. He cut his throttle and went sliding down to a scared man's landing in a small field some half a mile in back of the American lines. Hardly had his wheels stopped rolling, than the fledgling wind-braked his own plane to a quick landing, leaped out and ran over to his prisoner, service automatic in his hand and ready for business. Two minutes later, Sparks was out of his ship and had joined the kid.

"Well, are you satisfied, Captain Sparks?" Cole asked before the "A" Flight leader could open his mouth.

"You were wise, eh?" Sparks grunted. "I'm sorry, Cole. But we received a dispatch from Wing, and—"

"I suspected as much," the kid broke in, "That sort of thing's been happening ever since I joined up."

"But I saw you wave to this German this morning!" Sparks said. "You passed up a chance to wing him. And it looked like you nailed the other Fokker by mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake in either case," the fledgling said. "The mistake I made was requesting assignment to Harmon's Hellions. I mean, I didn't know he was in front of Sixteen. Captain Sparks, this is my brother, Karl. He chose the Fatherland, and I chose my own country, America. When Karl went back to Germany he took our real family name. I kept the American one."

"Then you didn't know until—"

"Not until I recognized Karl in the air this morning," Cole said. "I—well, I couldn't shoot down my own brother. But when you sent me over alone, I guessed what was in your mind. You certainly made it tough, sir. But, then, I always was better than Karl in most things. May I ask you a favor, sir?"

"Shoot, Cole. Anything, and consider it granted."

"I'm a little tired of Intelligence men sitting on my neck," the fledgling said. "Now that I've

removed the only thing German I just could not kill, you can take my word that I'll concentrate on all the rest. Will you please write Intelligence H.Q. to that effect?"

"A pleasure!" Sparks grinned broadly. "In fact, Cole, you and I will compose that letter together. It'll be a masterpiece, and how!"