

Fokker Fodder

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Food was piled on the table, Huns laid out on the floor

A Big Appetite is Pilot Cox's Weakness Until a Tail-Spin Drops Him into the Frying Pan

MAJOR JACK HARMON, C.O. of the Eighty-fourth Yank Pursuits slammed the phone receiver back on the hook and a beautiful red spread from the collar of his tunic up to his hair line. Then presently he jerked his head around to the orderly sitting in the corner.

"Go out and wait for Lieutenant Cox," Harmon snapped. "When he lands, bring him in here at once!"

The orderly ducked out and Harmon glared at the desk top and muttered things

unprintable under his breath. Some twenty minutes later the door opened and close to two hundred pounds of wind-bronzed pilot oozed inside. Bill Cox grinned and flicked a finger to his cap in a trick salute.

"You wanted to see me, Major?" he asked.

Harmon swallowed, counted ten to himself, and then nodded.

"I do!" he said curtly and leveled a stiff forefinger. "Just what the hell are you trying to do, Cox, work up a rep for me that I starve my pilots, that I cut down the

food around here and stick the extra dough in my pocket?"

The pilot's eyes widened in injured surprise.

"Heck, no, Major!" he exclaimed.

"What in the devil caused you to think—"

"Twenty-five Squadron just had me on the phone," the major cut in harshly. "It seems that you force-landed on their drome a while ago with a couple of missing cylinders. They fixed you up but in the mean time you stayed for lunch. And, according to Major Blake, you damn near ate them out of house and home. What's more, you made some crack about not getting enough grub here at Eighty-four!"

"I was only kidding, Major," Cox said, and tried to soften it with a grin. "Hell, it was just about feedbag time. Well, I figured that—"

"Skip the details. I know them by heart!" Harmon rasped. "This happens to be the umpteenth time you've force-landed at other dromes at just about meal time. Cut it out. Just pull that forced landing gag once more, and I'll bounce you back to Pau in nothing flat. Now, beat it!"

Harmon waited until the door closed on Eighty-four's biggest eater, let out a long sigh and shook his head.

"If he wasn't one of the sweetest pilots in France," he grunted, "damned if I wouldn't make a present of him to the Huns. He'd eat them into suing for peace in a week."

With another sigh for emphasis Harmon tore into the mess of paper work on his desk. Half an hour later, however, he was interrupted. The door pushed open and no less than Colonel Tracey, C.O. of Wing, came striding inside.

Harmon secretly crossed his fingers and prayed as he saluted and greeted the

senior officer.

"Didn't expect you today, sir," he smiled. "Any special reason for this courtesy?"

"A very special reason," the other nodded and dropped into a chair.

"I've got a mighty important job for six of your best pilots, including yourself, of course. I might have gone to some other squadron in Wing, but after careful consideration I decided that Eighty-four had just the pilots for this job."

"As you know," the colonel said presently, "extensive preparations are being made for a general attack tomorrow by our troops against the Basel sector. Now, in the middle of the spear-head of the attack is the Basel swamp. A damn dirty piece of ground to cross, and should the Huns bog us down before we cross it our chances of success would be cut in half right then and there. You follow me?"

HARMON nodded.

"Now," the colonel continued and spread a map on the desk. "Now, there is one way we can make certain that German strafing airplanes won't bother our advancing troops. That's to have our planes drive them off. So—"

"Quite true, sir," Harmon interrupted quietly. "However, that swamp section is a good twenty-five miles from here, and even with my pilots working in relays it's doubtful if we could keep ships in contact with the ground troops continually. We'd have to return here for new loads of ammo, and Cooper bomb. And . . ."

"Don't you suppose I know that?" the colonel barked. "Exactly the reason I'm here, confound it! Now, be quiet, and pay attention. Here, where I've got my finger, is the southern end of that swamp. Well, there's four or five acres of hard ground next to a strip of woods. There's an old weather-beaten building there.

“Now, you are to pick six of your best pilots, including yourself, and set yourselves up on that field as a shock unit. You can fly over all the ammo, bombs, and food you’ll need, and when the drive starts tomorrow you’ll work out of that field until our troops have crossed that swamp section. You get the idea?”

Harmon had to admit that he did, and he also admitted to himself that it was a damn good idea, even if it had been born in the colonel’s brain. Half a dozen pursuit jobs working out of that small field could do wonders for the benefit of the advancing ground troops. It was almost like flying off the parapet of a trench at zero hour.

“When do you want us to start work, sir?” he asked.

“At once,” the colonel ordered. “You’ll have to make several trips to get all your supplies over. I want you to be set and ready by late afternoon. Too damn bad a bomber can’t get in there to take all your supplies in one load, but the field is so damn small only pursuit ships could get in and out of it. And even then there’s no room for more than half a dozen of them. Good luck, Major, and don’t worry, you and your pilots will be mentioned in dispatches tomorrow.”

An hour later Harmon had selected the five pilots to accompany him and had explained the plan to them in detail.

“Now,” he concluded folding up the map, “if there are no questions, we’ll get started. Well?”

The grim-faced pilots shook their heads and walked over toward the waiting S.E.5s. They had been loaded to the loading edges with extra ammo belts, and stuff, and it was certain proof that Harmon had selected pukka pilots when nobody crashed taking his over-loaded ship off the field.

Four times the special shock unit flew

to the emergency field, and when finally the sun started easing down over the western lip of the world the six aerial adventurers had dug in at the pin-head sized field, and made themselves as comfortable as possible. Now they had only to wait for the morrow and the zero hour of the Yank attack.

However, as Harmon made his umpteenth check of everything he was far from a satisfied man. There was a feeling of faint dread in him. A bit of a puzzle he couldn’t figure out himself, but didn’t want to mention to the others in case it might build up an increased sense of uneasiness in them. Each knew he had a real man’s job to do the next day and it wouldn’t help any to worry him.

JUST the same, Harmon was damn nervous inside, and for good reason. In short, on each of the four trips they’d made to the field he had sighted German Fokkers. What’s more, he’d spotted them as belonging to Baron von Stoltz’ brood, a gang of war flying veterans who were always ready to scrap, even though they were German.

Yet, those Fokker pilots had sheered off, kept at a very safe distance, and not once made an attempt to close in for battle.

The thought was still taunting Harmon’s brain when he rejoined the others seated on the ground in front of the battered building and smoking cigarettes. Perhaps Mullins, “A” Flight leader, was a mind-reader, or perhaps he’d been thinking thoughts, himself. At any rate he stared hard at Harmon and spoke the thought aloud.

“Why didn’t those tramps pick a scrap, Major?” he said. “You saw them, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Harmon grunted. “And I’m wondering plenty, myself. Maybe they had an off day for courage.”

“Fat chance!” spoke up Young, a red-headed member of the group. “That’s the only thing I can say in favor of von Stoltz and his bums. They definitely aren’t yellow.”

“Then why didn’t they make a pass at us?” Mullins persisted. “Overloaded as we were, they could have raised hell in six different languages.”

“You want to know what I think?” Cox spoke up, taking a banana away from his face. “They didn’t attack because they’re smart.”

“Afraid of us?” Major Harmon asked caustically; “Nuts! That banana’s gone to your head, Cox. Incidentally, cut the eating. We’re all on emergency rations, here.”

“No, I don’t mean they’re afraid, sir,” Cox said. “I mean, they’re smart. It’s like this. We thought up this neat little idea, and we’ve done all the hard work. I’ll bet that it’s von Stoltz’ idea to cash in on it, that’s all.”

Harmon sat up straight, then relaxed with a grunt of disgust.

“You mean come down and establish themselves here?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Cox nodded and waved one hand. “There’s ammo, bombs, grub, and everything else here for a shock unit. Just think of the hell raising half a dozen of von Stoltz’ pilots could do working out of here tomorrow instead of us.”

“They could do plenty, yes,” Harmon nodded. Then with an edge in his voice, “Except for several things! Those machine guns we’ve mounted here just in case they try to take the field from us. Better stop trying to think, Cox. The six of us here could hold off the whole German army, to say nothing of half a dozen Fokker pilots trying to land and take charge.”

“You’re dead right, sir,” Cox nodded and gazed eastward. “Only, I’m wondering about another, angle. What’s going to stop

them from taking over tomorrow while we’re out on strafing patrol?”

Harmon sat up straight again, and this time with a yelp of alarm.

“By God, that is something!” he breathed. “All six of us will be helping the troops, and there won’t be a damn soul to protect this place. Von Stoltz could land some of his bunch, and—”

Harmon more or less choked on the rest and stared flint-eyed at his pilots.

“Our heavy eating pal has had a brainstorm,” he said slowly. “And damned if he hasn’t belted the nail on the head. Von Stoltz is smart, and maybe he has just that idea in mind.”

FOR emphasis the C.O. nodded, snapped his fingers and stood up. “On your toes, fellows!” he snapped. “There’s still some light left. We’ll go back to the field, and each of us fly a mechanic back on the wing. They can hold the field tomorrow while we’re out doing our stuff for the ground troops. Come on!”

Ignition switches were snapped up, props were twisted, and presently the six Yanks went piling back to Eighty-four’s field. They stayed for about fifteen minutes until six greaseballs volunteered for special duty and climbed up on the wing stubs of the S.E.5s. Then the six ships roared up into the air and eastward for the fifth time.

Flying in the lead as usual, Harmon unconsciously kept his free hand jammed against the already wide open throttle, as though in doing so he might get more speed out of his ship. There was a tingling at the back of his neck and a strange tightening in the pit of his stomach. Not being a believer in crystal-ball gazing he tried to brush it off as excitement of the moment.

However, when he came within sight of the emergency field and started to cut

his throttle for the glide down, he knew for sure that that mysterious thing which science has called, a sixth sense, for the want of a better explanation, had been at work in his system.

There, lined up in front, were six German Fokkers at the strip of woods that bordered one side of the emergency field! And a couple of seconds later six German pilots manned the machine guns the Yanks had set up and began blasting away at the S.E.5s. Harmon cursed savagely through clenched teeth, started to jam his ship down into a whirlwind vertical strafe dive, and then suddenly realized he had a white-faced greaseball standing on the lower right wing stub and clinging frantically to the center section struts for support against the propwash.

With a groan, Harmon pulled up out of his dive and went banking away from the shower of bullets being spewed upward. Each of his pilots had a mechanic on the wing and it would have spelled their doom to dive down and try to take the field by storm. Even without the mechanics it would be practically impossible to recapture the field. And with the mechanics it was plain suicide.

Blind rage flaming up in his brain, and his heart sliding down into his boots, Harmon gave the signal and led the flight back to Eighty-four's field. There they unloaded the mechanics and looked at each other helplessly. No one seemed able to think of anything to say. That is, no one but Cox. He looked very unhappy.

"A hell of a lot of good it does, me being right," he groaned. "Gosh, when I think of them tramps eating all that stuff we lugged over. Major! Let's go take it away from them. Dammit! They can't do that to us!"

Harmon glanced at the shadows of night racing up from the east, started to shake his head, but checked the movement

as he suddenly saw a car came sliding around the corner of the end hangar. There was a little flag on each of the two front fenders and that meant Colonel Tracey was in the car. Harman took one look, swallowed hard and leaped for his ship.

"I'm trying it, anyway!" he shouted. "If you others want to come, okay!"

They did, and the roar of revving engines once more blasted across Eighty-four's field. Like six bats out of hell, Harmon and his pilots went high-balling eastward to strafe hell out of the emergency field and take it back by hook or by crook. But, they didn't have a chance! That is, they didn't have a chance to even strafe the field. They didn't because when they reached the air space over the field they ran smack into a German bomber with a strong Fokker patrol. The bomber was easing down inch by inch for the small field.

ONE look at the big ship and Harmon knew that it wasn't loaded with bombs, or anything like that. On the contrary it was loaded with mechanics. Mechanics to hold the field while its pilots were in the air tomorrow worrying hell out of the advancing troops. Perhaps the bomber would crash getting into that field, but it was worth a crashed bomber if some greaseballs could be landed safely.

One look, and Harmon let out a howl of rage, and went wing-whamming downward, both Vickers guns blazing.

"The hell you will, tramps!" he bellowed. "If we can't, you can't!"

Lining up the nearest Fokker in his sights he practically knocked it clean out of the world in a savage blast of shots. Cutting away he tried to get in close to the bomber, but the bomber's pilot had opened up his engines and postponed a tricky landing on the field. He had banked around and was heading hell bent eastward

as fast as his twin props could churn the air.

Unable to get to the bomber Harmon gave all of his attention to the escort Fokkers. They were from von Stolz' outfit, and were not flown by any yellow-bellies. And so in less than no time, the sky deeply shadowed by approaching night, became a whirlpool of twisting and turning bullet spitting metal hornets of death. Shouting and cursing at the top of his voice Harmon tore into everything with German crosses on the wings. And he had the satisfaction, at least, of seeing three Fokkers go down under his blazing guns.

By then, though, night had settled down for keeps. The ground below was little more than a lot of smudgy blurs to Harmon, and as he took a second or so to pull out of the scrap he saw that the fight had drifted far to the north. Even if they did drive off the Fokkers they'd never in God's world find that emergency field in the dark. And added to that it was getting so dark he could hardly distinguish a Fokker from one of his own S.E.5s.

For a long moment he hesitated, then yanked his Very light pistol from out of the cockpit rack and fired three green lights over the side. At the same time he took one more last bullet blast at a Fokker and then banked eastward. One by one his pilots closed in to take up formation position behind him. That is, one by one until they totaled three. Harmon stared at them, prayed hard, and clenched his free fist in a helpless gesture. Cox and Young, the redhead, were not among those present. The instant Harmon landed on Eighty-four he asked the inevitable question.

"Anybody see what happened to Cox and Young?"

There was silence for a moment, and then Flight Leader Mullins spoke up.

"Young went down a flamer," he said in a hollow voice. "The last I saw of Cox he was flying east like hell after that bomber. I didn't see him after that."

Nor had anybody else, and as Harmon walked slowly over to the mess his heart was heavy with dread. No sooner had he entered the mess and ordered a drink than Colonel Tracey came boiling in.

"What the devil's been happening?" the senior officer roared. "I thought—"

"So did I!" Harmon cut him off curtly, and told the story.

COLONEL TRACEY looked as though he was going to throw a fit, and, in fact, came damn close to making good.

"I'll try again at dawn," Harmon said evenly. "We'll—"

"Tonight!" Colonel Tracey shouted.

"Tonight, hell!" Harmon roared back. "We wouldn't be able to find the damn field now. We'll try at dawn, and if you don't like that idea, then—then break me, and be damned!"

The colonel's eyes flashed anger, then he took a look at the group of grim-faced pilots watching him closely, and shrugged.

"Very well, at dawn, then," he said in a weak voice. "And God! I hope you make it."

It lacked just an hour to dawn when Harmon and five pilots climbed into their ships. All night the entire squadron had stayed up in the mess hoping against hope for a phone call saying that Cox had simply run out of gas chasing the bomber, or had force-landed on the American side. However, there hadn't been any phone call, and everybody knew that Cox was gone, for good. A prisoner, or a flamer, nobody knew which. Nobody felt like guessing.

"We six will try it," Harmon said tight lipped, just before he gave the signal for the take-off. "If we miss, then six more

will try it. Okay, give them hell, fellows. Just think of Young and Cox!”

An hour later Harmon had his flight at an altitude of ten thousand feet over the isolated emergency field. There were six Fokkers down there, lined up in front of the strip of woods just as they had been the evening before.

Six noses dropped as one, and six Hisso-Viper powered S.E.5s went wing screaming earthward in a surprise attack. Eyes glued to the ground, Harmon rested his thumbs on the trigger trips waiting for the first German pilot to come bursting out the door of the battered building and make for the defense machine guns. But no one came out. In fact, nothing happened until Harmon and the others were less than a thousand feet off the ground.

Then a figure did come busting out of the building, and when Harmon saw it he let out a wild yell of dumfounded amazement and jerked his thumbs down from the trips. The figure was not that of a Hun. On the contrary it was over two hundred pounds of Yank pilot named Cox, with a napkin tucked well into his collar. In less than no time Harmon landed, leaped from the pit and raced over to grab hold of the hefty pilot.

“You, Cox!” he shouted, still unable to believe his eyes. “What the devil happened? How in hell do you happen to be here?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Major.” Cox grinned, and jerked a thumb toward the battered building. “Come in and have a look.”

In a daze, Harmon and the others followed Cox inside. And once there they pulled up stiff with more amazement. At one side of the room was a huge table

piled with food. And on the other side of the room, on the floor, were six angry-eyed German pilots bound hand and foot.

“It was this way, Major,” Cox’s voice broke into Harmon’s spinning thoughts. “I went chasing after that bomber last night but couldn’t catch it. Met a couple of Fokkers on the way back, and one of the bums nicked my fuel line. I had to force-land. Honest to God, I had to this time, sir! And so I headed for the swamp.

“I guess I sort of got thinking of these bums and all this food. I sat down in the swamp okay, but had to quit the ship. It was kind of dark, and when I got here these guys’ were piling into our grub. Well, I had my automatic, and—well, I sort of caught them by surprise. I had them tie each other up. I was sort of hungry so I had a bite. Must have fallen asleep, I guess. Anyway, I just woke up. But, boy, am I glad you weren’t more Huns!”

“Yeah, guess you are,” Harmon said, and grinned. “I hear the grub in a Hun prison camp is lousy. Now, take my ship and tear back and have Colonel Tracey send over some two seaters with mechanics. This time we’ll stick here.”

“And I guess I’d better bring back some more grub, huh?” Cox suggested hopefully.

Harmon glanced from the stack of half emptied dishes to Cox’s stomach and shook his head.

“No!” he rasped. “One more mouthful and you’d explode to blow us and this field right off the map. Get going, and come back the same weight you are now, understand?”

Cox sighed unhappily and went outside.