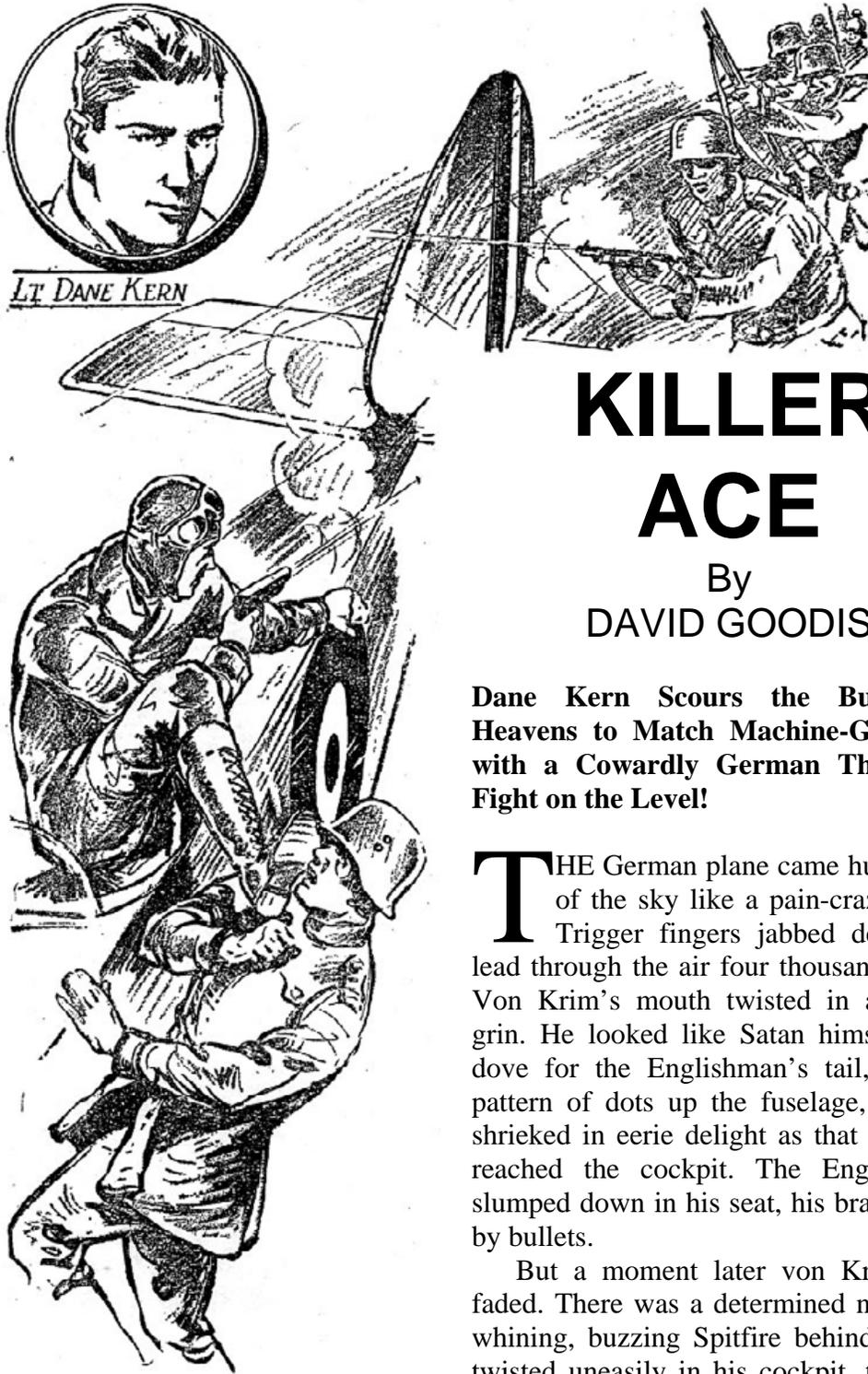




LT DANE KERN



Kern kicked the German in the face, shot at the others

KILLER ACE

By
DAVID GOODIS

Dane Kern Scours the Bullet-Torn Heavens to Match Machine-Gun Slugs with a Cowardly German That Can't Fight on the Level!

THE German plane came hurtling out of the sky like a pain-crazed eagle. Trigger fingers jabbed death-filled lead through the air four thousand feet up. Von Krim's mouth twisted in a devilish grin. He looked like Satan himself as he dove for the Englishman's tail, traced a pattern of dots up the fuselage, and then shrieked in eerie delight as that death-line reached the cockpit. The English pilot slumped down in his seat, his brain riddled by bullets.

But a moment later von Krim's grin faded. There was a determined note in the whining, buzzing Spitfire behind him. He twisted uneasily in his cockpit, turned his head—and saw crimson flames spurt from the guns in the ship fifty yards away. He felt the slugs whistle by his cheek. He ducked low, and dove.

The Englishman dove also. Von Krim banked. The Englishman did likewise. Then the Hun went into another dive, twisted sharply and rolled out, zooming up and above the Englishman. Then he came down on him almost vertically, his guns barking.

Von Krim's screech blended with the sound of his guns, as he saw the second English boy go down—dying a death of horror in a flame-filled plane.

Then the German waved his arm, and signaled the three remaining Boche to head for home. But the two Englishmen—the only two remaining out of the original seven who had started out that morning—had other ideas about the matter.

They were fighting like madmen. The tears in their eyes were not tears of fright or horror. They were tears of sorrow, tears of rage, tears of vengeance. But the English flyers needed more than sobs to combat the ruthless von Krim and his squadron of devils.

The English planes were fast, but they weren't as fast as the Messerschmitts used by von Krim and his flying hellions.

That fact proved itself in the next few moments. One by one, in quick succession, the Boche took their chances on the two English flyers. It was four against two now. Grinning like a madman set for the kill, von Krim zoomed his ship to gain more altitude. Then he aimed his ship as if it was an arrow, and dove like a bullet at the first of the now faltering Spitfires. The outcome of the battle was decided.

For the Nazi now repeated what he had done exactly thirty-three times before. He sent snarling slugs of death into that ship, and then soared upward. His screech of triumph carried over and above the angry roar of the motor.

But there was one Englishman left—an Englishman only because of the outfit he flew for. Dane Kern was as American as

ham and eggs. He had been studying at Oxford when the war broke out—had been there as a student of advanced physics. And because he was scientifically minded, planes fascinated him. He had joined the Royal Air Force not so much because of a love for the British, but because the war would give him a chance to play around with planes. He knew his ships, he knew his flight and attack methods—and most important of all—he had guts. And he was showing that now to the German pilots.

KERN acted the coward on purpose. He wanted them to think he was grounding the plane, giving up the fight. He kept on losing altitude. Then he looked up to see a Boche slowly gaining on him, saw the German signal him to ground. He pictured the Nazi's face wreathed in smug triumph.

"Oh yeah?" he muttered grimly, and zoomed his ship up like a streak, made a complete loop and came down hard and fast on the German's tail. Both his guns barked their message of death. The Boche never knew what happened. He dove a hundred feet to the ground, and when he spilled out of the cockpit he was a corpse.

That was all Kern wanted. That one last German. He knew he wouldn't have a chance with the three others, particularly when von Krim was one of those three. So now he streaked for home, even as the Boche flyers started down after him.

They chased, grim determination in their eyes. Looking back, Kern figured that he was about done. They were gaining on him too fast. But suddenly the ground artillery began hurling shells at the Boche as they passed over the English coastline. Von Krim had a special dislike for Archies. He signaled his men home. . . .

The commander and the adjutant and the rest of the men were waiting for him on the home tarmac. Dane Kern couldn't see

their faces but he knew what expressions those faces held. He was coming back alone. Seven had gone out that morning and only one was coming back.

If this had been the first time, it wouldn't have been so tragic. But this was just a repetition of what was happening to Commander Russell's flyers day after day. It wasn't even a fight anymore. It was a slaughter.

Kern taxied his ship across the field. For the first time he felt the groping weariness that first sets in the eyes then seems to work back to the brain, and finally fills the entire body. That dull, throbbing, ache of exhaustion that only men who live with death constantly can know.

He climbed out of the cockpit and shook his head as the other flyers and mechanics clustered about, eager to help. Russell put an arm around Kern as he wiped grease from around his eyes.

"What happened?" Russell asked wearily. He was a tall, spare figure in his late forties. He was a quiet man, respected because he never flaunted his authority.

"The old story," Kern muttered. "It was von Krim again. He must have a special agreement with every cloud in the sky—that Hun. The clouds are always with him. They were with him today. He took us completely by surprise. He hid in the clouds and dove on us too fast. We didn't have a chance."

"And there's nothing we can do about it," Russell said, dejected.

"Yes, there is," Kern said angrily. He looked square at the commander and said, "Von Krim's the brains of that outfit. They don't make a single move without him. He's about the smartest man in the air today. And the dirtiest fighter—"

"Well?" Russell demanded.

"There's only one way to deal with him," Kern said.

"And that is?"

"Kill him." Kern said it slowly, almost casually.

RUSSELL frowned. "Are you kidding me?" he said. "What have we been trying to do these past three months—play cricket with him?"

"You don't understand, sir," Kern said. "I don't mean to kill him in the air. I mean, murder him. Send some one over there and do away with him. That's the only way we'll ever be able to meet those Boche on an equal basis, because—"

"You're crazy, Kern!" Russell snapped. "And besides, I don't believe in fighting that way. We have a certain code, you know."

Kern's eyes flashed angrily.

"Code be damned!" he yelled. "I went up there today with six of the finest boys I ever knew. Where are they now? You tell me! And why? Because that dirty Hun never comes out in the open. Because he has what I call uncanny luck in being ready for us. He hides behind clouds—big clouds—and dives on us before we know what's happened! It's either von Krim or us! That's the set-up. And if we don't get that German, he'll get us!"

Russell's face was emotionless. He barely moved his lips as he said:

"We're not doing things that way, Kern."

Kern's lips tightened. For an instant his eyes narrowed and his fists clenched hard. Then he gained control over himself.

"Well, what are you going to do—stand by and let him erase us out of the air completely?" he asked.

Russell straightened.

"Perhaps you're forgetting, Kern, that I'm your superior officer."

That was too much. Kern was an American, and Americans have a habit of saying what's on their minds, come what may.

"You're not proving it!" Kern yelled, loud enough for other flyers to hear.

There was a silence that lasted only a moment, but it seemed like an eternity. And in that interval Kern was calling himself all kinds of names for not keeping his mouth shut. He knew what was coming. It came, all right.

"Go to your quarters, Lieutenant!" Russell shouted. "And consider yourself under arrest!"

Kern stiffened. In that moment he hated Russell. But there was nothing else for him to do. He saluted, walked away quickly.

In the quiet confines of his room Kern's thoughts were filled with von Krim, about what happened every time he had engaged the wily German. . . .

We fly in V formation at 8,000 feet over the German positions. We fly over the blood and shambles that marks what is perhaps the bloodiest battle in the history of the world since Hannibal's advance at Carthage.

And suddenly an avalanche of death drops on us in the form of seven Messerschmitts. Their noses are painted in the famous checkerboard design. At the head of the Hun's squadron is von Krim. His mouth spreads in a grin that widens as his ears take in the maddening chorus of Boche machine guns pouring death into Englishmen. . . .

KERN heard the men talking about the last flight in the corridor outside his room. What he heard made him clench his fists and bring them a slowly up at a level with his eyes. That scrap lasted only three minutes. And this time none came back! There is nothing so futile as the knowledge that something can be done, and yet someone is keeping you from doing it. Several times in the past day Kern had thought about leaving his room to see Russell again. But he had lost his nerve.

It's these quiet, subdued officers that are the hardest to deal with in the long run, he thought. Kern remembered that phrase, "a barking dog never bites."

It would have been simple, though, to knock on Russell's door, which was next to his, and to apologize, then plead for a chance to deal with von Krim. And yet—

Like lightning the thought struck him. And as if the souls of his dead comrades had caused a thing to happen, a strange coincidence occurred at that very moment—a grim but enlightening coincidence!

For as Kern frowned, and wondered just why Russell should have such a decided objection to his idea, there was a peculiar sound in the next room—Russell's room. Kern barely caught it, it was so faint. Now he remembered having heard it before. He thought it was just another field insect in the grass outside.

He kept his ear to the wall, and listened, straining his sense of hearing. Suddenly, his eyes widened, then narrowed. He looked at his watch. It was only mid-afternoon. For what he wanted to do now he would have to wait until evening. And yet, evening would be too late, because tomorrow morning seven more men would go up. No—he had to do this now!

But as the thought became an icy determination in his mind, Kern heard a key click in the lock of his door. It opened, and an orderly came in.

"Commander Russell wants to see you," the orderly said.

Kern smiled. And as if he were playing of game of chess he looked ahead a few moves. When you take advanced physics at Oxford you learn to use your head for something more than a hat rack. And that's what Kern was doing now.

Russell was polite when he entered. He even smiled.

"I've given your idea some careful thought, Kern," he said. "Discounting the fact that you were guilty of insubordination, I've decided to let you have a shot at the plan. In fact, I've thought out an ideal schedule for you to use." And then he proceeded to outline his plan. He drew up a chair for Kern, then spread out a map on the table.

"That's the only way you'll be able to do it," Russell was saying ten minutes later. "You'll start at six o'clock this evening. Carry a green light so our artillery will know. It'll be dark by then and you'll have to be careful."

"Yes, sir," Kern said.

They looked into each other's eyes. And it was Russell who blinked first. . . .

A few flyers and mechanics were standing around as Kern came out on the field. He lit a cigarette and walked past the group without saying a word. Usually early evening was a time for gabbing. The flyers stared at him.

"What's the matter with Kern?" one asked.

"Had a run-in with the commander today," another replied.

"What's he all buttoned up for?"

"Night observation, probably, although I thought he was due for some real trouble. The squadron leader was jolly well angry."

THEY weren't supposed to know. Russell's instructions had been specific on that point. It was to be a matter of confidence between Kern and himself. Russell was waiting there at the plane when Kern came over. Without a word he stationed himself at the prop. Kern climbed into the cockpit.

"Contact," Kern said commandingly.

"Contact," Russell replied.

The motor reared. Kern stared at Russell. He saw the commander standing there to one side looking straight back at

him, his face expressionless. Russell grinned when Kern toiled the ship across the field. Kern caught only a glimpse of it—but there was something startlingly familiar about that grin. . . .

It was pitch black up there, although when Kern looked down he could see hundreds of thousands of lights brought out by the Very signal pistols. Sometimes there was a wide flash of lightning like blue light, and he could see the forms of men moving down there. The Nazis had to do little fighting since the French had given up.

HE WAS flying as per directions at 9,000 feet carrying that green light under his wings. He pulled a map from his inner pocket, and studied it a moment. Then he looked down to get his bearings and was guided by the various lights beneath. And then, he stopped following the appointed course!

He switched the green light off. The Spitfire veered sharply to the left. After gaining altitude, instead of pointing toward Germany, the Spitfire made a crazy zigzag course. The simple reason was that Kern had only a vague idea of where he was going. But he knew what he was trying to get away from. He knew that in spades!

Guided only by his wrist-watch now—for he was using time and time alone as the means by which he should reach a certain spot behind the German lines—Kern maneuvered his fast plane fully thirty miles along the Rhone, then turned again and started over the German lines. He kept a straight course for five miles, and then turned to the right again.

Finally, he started to lose altitude. And then, when he saw what he wanted to see, when his eyes lighted up and a Yankee grin came over his lips, he cut off his motor. Then he started to circle a dark area that seemed to be a patch of flat meadow. He

couldn't take a chance on throwing down a flare. He could only land and hope that he wouldn't have to face a welcoming committee.

But his luck lost out.

The plane came to a stop. And when Kern started to climb out of the cockpit, a gruff voice sounded out of the darkness. The gleam of approaching helmets nearby caught Kern's eye. He didn't wait for a big hello. With a lightning quick movement he whipped out his gun. Then he kicked out viciously at the nearest German, and sent a bullet whistling at the oncoming soldiers. At the same time he sped up the idling motor and started to swing the ship around.

GERMAN soldiers were swarming around Kern's plane now, their angry guttural voices giving way to shots. Three bullets whistled by Kern's head. He discouraged them by dropping two German's with his pistol—and then letting go full blast with the machine-gun.

They went down like tall grass before a scythe, those Nazis. But they weren't giving up. They were still shooting at him. And just before he got into the air, Kern felt a sickening plop directly in front of him, as a bullet pierced the motor. The propeller stopped turning. The ship nosed over—and Kern was hurled into the air twenty feet above ground. And as he spun around like a doll thrown by a child from the second story window, he lost consciousness. . . .

It was a very angry German who flew back to his *Jagstaffel* that night. As von Krim brought his ship to a landing he spat disgustedly over the side of the cockpit. The other flyers came up as the Bache leader took off his helmet and goggles.

"Well, Captain, it was easy, ja?" one of his subordinates said, grinning.

Von Krim's face was like stone.

"Something is wrong," he said. "Something is very wrong."

The other flyers did not question him further. They knew better than to annoy von Krim when his plans went wrong.

Cursing and muttering to himself, von Krim entered the low barracks at the side of the airdrome. But even as he set foot in the doorway he turned around, and stared curiously.

A group of soldiers were hurrying across the field toward the barracks. Two of them were carrying a still form, and they were yelling excitedly. Von Krim hurried over, and before he could ask any questions, a soldier supplied him with all necessary information.

"An American flyer," the German said. "He just crashed in that field over there—"

Von Krim looked down at the still, pale face of the American flyer.

"Very unfortunate," he murmured, grinning thinly. "Yes. It is very unfortunate." Then the grin faded, and a snarl burst from his lips. "Take him into the barracks," he ordered. "Tie him up."

"But *Herr* Captain," one of the soldiers protested. "The American, he is injured."

"Do as I say!" Von Krim yelled savagely. . . .

When Kern opened his eyes he was sitting upright. He tried to move his arms and legs and found that it was impossible. He was tied to the chair. His head felt like white hot lead had been poured into it. There was a sharp pain in his left leg. And as consciousness fully returned to him, it seemed that every inch of his body was filled with a dull, throbbing ache.

A guttural voice, speaking broken English, caused Kern to look up suddenly. He saw a heavy-set, brutal-looking man looking down at him. There was a grin on that man's lips. His narrow eyes—his beak of a nose—Kern had seen that face before thousands of feet in the air. He had seen it

framed behind the ring-sights of barking Spandaus. And he had seen it some place else, too—

“You’re Von Krim,” Kern said weakly.

“Correct,” snapped the Nazi. “Are you comfortable?” He grinned mockingly.

“When we capture a Boche flyer, we don’t tie him up like this,” Kern said angrily.

“You don’t capture any of my flyers,” von Krim said haughtily. He bared his teeth now in an ugly grimace.

DANE KERN nodded slowly. His mind went back to the physics classroom at Oxford, where it was nothing more than a job of thinking things out slowly and using plain American horse-sense. That’s what Kern was doing now—using his brains, figuring things out, moving ahead. For the next few minutes, it was a matter of looking the situation over and coming to a few conclusions.

“You came here to kill me,” von Krim said, breaking into his thoughts.

Kern’s eyes widened.

“Kill you?” he muttered. “You’re crazy. I was on night observation and lost my way. Of course, if you put it that way, my job’s to kill every German I can.”

Von Krim shook his head in a taunting gesture.

“No,” he said. “You came here with one idea in mind—to kill me and me alone. Didn’t you?”

Kern started to deny it, but von Krim’s hard knuckles jammed the words back in his teeth. The German drew back his fist again, then let it lash out once more. Kern took it full in the jaw, then threw himself back hard against the chair. He made almost a complete somersault. When he landed he came down hard, breaking the chair. He got to his feet, and he was still tied—but not to the chair. His hands and feet were free, although splinters of wood

still kept him from full liberty of movement.

He was able to act fast now, and the first thing he did was to leap at von Krim. The Boche wasn’t used to a square fight. He stepped back, opened his mouth to shout an alarm. But Kern silenced him with a smashing right to the jaw that nearly took his head off. The German crumbled in an inert heap. If he had wanted to, Kern could have killed the man then and there. But he didn’t want to kill him then and there. He wanted to kill von Krim at another time, another place. . . .

It was a queer hour for a ship to be leaving the airdrome, but the German flyers were too busy drinking beer in the canteen to even think twice about the matter. Besides, von Krim had a habit of going off on night flights alone at certain times, and that was the conclusion reached by most of the Nazi aviators as they sat at their drinks. But if they would have looked into the cockpit of that Messerschmitt, they would have seen a much different story.

Dane Kern was speeding back toward his home drome. He had an easy time of it as he flew over the German lines. But when he hit the English coast he was shot at by Archies. He had to leave the Messerschmitt out to the limit to get away from them.

But the worst trouble came when he reached home. And yet it started as trouble and ended as a joke.

As Kern circled the field, his fellow flyers, looking up, recognized von Krim’s plane. Kern saw them running for their ships. Here comes trouble, he thought. And then, as he stared down, he saw a figure running around excitedly. He needed only one guess. He knew who that was—what that figure was doing. Only one man down there wanted von Krim to be alive and safe—

The English flyers didn’t go up after him, for the simple reason that they were

commanded to stay down. Kern's lips tightened. He brought the ship down at the far end of the field. The flyers and mechanics were running toward him with drawn guns as he got out of the cockpit. One of the men was a little excited and took a shot at him. Kern grinned and put his hands up.

"Why—it's Kern!" one of the men yelled.

Russell was bringing up the rear of the group running toward the plane. As the flyer yelled in recognition, Russell stopped short. He stiffened as if struck by lightning. Then Kern saw him raise his pistol, take aim—

Kern jumped to one side as Russell fired. The commander would have fired again had not an orderly grabbed his arm and yelled:

"It's not von Krim, Commander! It's Kern!"

Russell nodded shortly. He seemed to move in a daze. Then Kern brought him out of it. He ignored the excited queries of the other pilots, and stepped up to Russell.

"Surprised to see me, aren't you?" he said with a noticeable lack of respect.

"I—" Russell stammered.

"Well, here's another surprise—a pleasant surprise for you, Commander. Von Krim is still alive. I failed in my mission."

Relief passed across Russell's eyes. He couldn't hold that expression back. He scarcely noticed that the other flyers were clustered about them now, questions in their eyes. He stared blankly at Kern. Then he found himself. He stiffened, and his eyes narrowed.

"Consider yourself under arrest!" he snapped. "Go to your quarters!"

Kern saluted, started to walk away, then came back.

"I have something important for you, sir," he said.

"Well?" Russell murmured, sardonic triumph in his eyes.

"This!" Kern swung from the knee. His hard right fist smashed against Russell's jaw. The commander went out cold. Then, as his buddies closed in on him, he shouted, "Okay, I'm under arrest. But before you guys jump me, here's a funny story for you! This guy Russell is as English as Hitler! He's a spy. And if you don't believe me, take a good look at his room. You'll find an interesting little toy there. They call it a telegraph! He's been sending code messages to von Krim. He's the guy that's responsible for us losing five, six, seven men every time we fight the Boche!"

"I thought something was wrong when I heard that thing buzzing away yesterday. No wonder von Krim's been ready for us every time we've gone up against him. No wonder he's known exactly where to surprise us! Russell sent me over last night with instructions to get that damned Nazi. That was the only convenient way to get rid of me. He wired the Hun, told him where to get me, and provided me with a green light so von Krim would have an easy job of it. But von Krim's through with easy meat. From now on it's our turn. . . ."

Seven English planes moved slowly across the Allied lines two days later. Flying above the others, Flight Leader Dane Kern scanned the skies around him. He fingered his Vickers with itching fingers. The urge to kill was burning high within him, although half of his job had been completed that same morning, when a certain "English" officer was shot at dawn for high treason. And as he died, there was this same smile on Russell's lips—the smile that recalled a strangely similar smile on the face of another man—

KERN'S thoughts on the subject were blotted out as his eyes took in seven

dots. Then they became larger, and were coming toward his flight at almost the same altitude. Kern looked closely at those oncoming ships—and gasped. It was von Krim’s squadron, and the murderous killer was leading the flight himself!

“You’ve had your last bite of easy meat, Boche,” Kern muttered. “Now *we’ll* take a chunk!” Grimly, he signaled his men into battle formation. The Englishmen dived, looped, came out above and behind the German planes. The Huns broke formation fast, streaked for low altitude. But this time the English flyers had the advantage of first attack. In two minutes three Germans went down.

From then on it was a field day for the Britons. They were victory-starved, and they made the most of their opportunity—if an even break could be called an opportunity. Their guns chattered away incessantly, their trigger fingers became part of those guns. They fought like madmen.

Away to one side—almost a full mile away now—two planes fought it out on an even basis. Von Krim wasn’t grinning now, he was fighting for his life. And he knew who he was fighting. He passed close enough to Kern to recognize that face—the face of the devil who had escaped him only two nights ago. And it was this burning rage that made the Hun fight with his old fury, that made him forget the fact that he wasn’t fighting a surprised, helpless Englishman. Any fear that might have tugged at von Krim was now blotted out by anger.

He slammed down at Kern, put lead through the side of the Hurricane’s fuselage. But Kern rolled out, slipped to one side, dived, and came up in a full loop that brought him on von Krim’s trail. But the Boche was smart. He knew how to fly, knew how to slip out when he was in

trouble. They kept on this way—endless circles, whizzing streaks of machine and man fighting for that precious combination of space and time—occasionally getting on the other’s tail.

Finally, von Krim did it. He maneuvered himself only sixty feet away, followed Kern like a hawk, and the Yank heard the bark of a machine-gun, felt hot lead smack into his shoulder. He cursed, dove, and behind him a surprised Boche, thinking the Englishman would side-slip, was fooled into passing beyond Kern.

Kern cursed again. He felt that throb in his shoulder become a sickening dullness in his brain. But he told himself that in this one last minute he had a big job to do.

And he did it. He came up behind the German and his trigger fingers sent white-hot lead into a Messerschmitt motor. Von Krim plummeted to the earth. This time his screech was not one of victory. . . .

A white-coated hospital orderly stepped up beside his bed. Kern opened his eyes and grinned.

“Think I’ll pull out of it?” he asked.

The orderly grinned back.

“You jolly well better. They have a Victoria Cross all ready for you.” Then his grin faded. “Say, I have an odd story for you—”

“About what?” Kern asked.

The orderly bit his lip.

“That blighter you shot down this morning,” the orderly said. “We didn’t want to tell you up to now, because the shock might have proven dangerous. But you’re all right now. . . . Well, your friend von Krim died only a few hours ago. It’s amazing that he lived so long, after that burning crash. And before he died he whispered a last request. He begged us to bury him next to his brother, Otto von Krim, otherwise known as—Commander Russell!”