

Murder Rides High

By LEONARD FINLEY HILTS



Buzz reached blindly for the crash phone and began to bellow instructions

They told Buzz his flying days were over. But when a killer broke loose he remembered that a man may have bad nerves but an excellent nerve!

BUZZ FORD was sore. His anger hung over his desk in the Operations Office like a nimbo-cumulus getting ready to spit thunder and lightning. He stretched his long legs and moved his arms nervously, trying to accustom himself to the feel of a swivel chair. He scowled as his knees knocked into the sides of the desk. Damn it, he wasn't built for a desk. It had been a week since he took over as Operations Officer, and he still felt like a ship in dry dock.

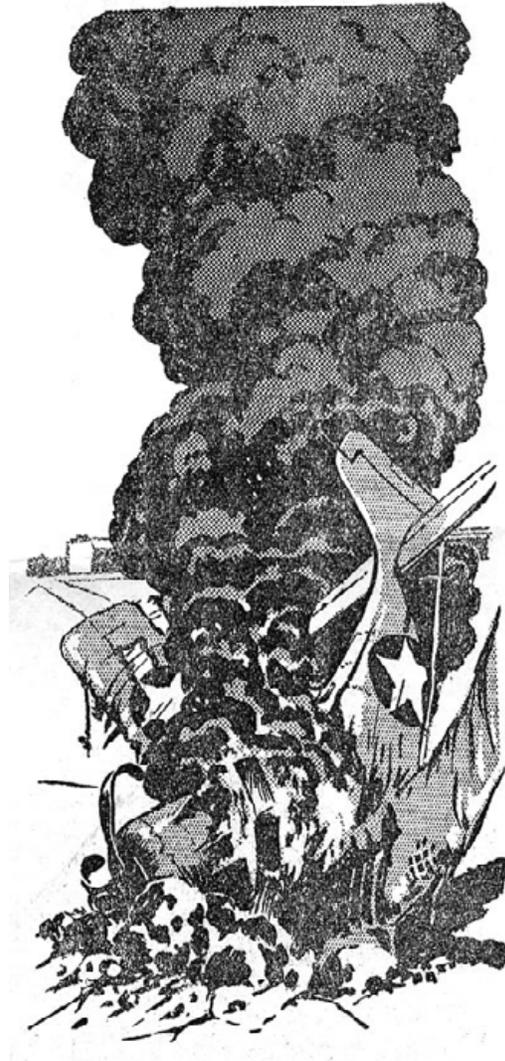
Swivel chair jockey, that's what he was. From fighter pilot to pencil pusher in one easy physical exam.

He held his hands up and examined them closely, then dropped them back to the desk blotter. They shook a little, but hell, that didn't mean a guy couldn't fly. Fifteen months of punching fifty caliber holes in Jap Zeros would make anyone a little shaky, but it didn't necessarily affect his ability to throw a Hellcat around the sky. But just try and tell a flight surgeon that. Yeah, just try.

Tommy Reynolds glided up to his desk. He was still in flight coveralls and helmet, and his face was grimy from his recent hop.

"Hi, Buzz boy," Tommy grinned. "You look as though you need a few of the chaplain's choice words of sympathy. What's corroding your soul?"

Buzz glared at the stocky blonde flyer and growled. "He'll be reading a memorial service for you in a minute, chum," he replied, "if you don't cut the merry sunshine act." Then he added, "Damn it, I'll bet you're even cheerful with a hangover."



Tommy pushed a pile of papers from the corner of the desk and deposited his bulky frame where they had been. "Okay," he said, "so you're not happy in the Navy. Tell me the sad story."

Buzz pushed himself out of the swivel chair so hard that the chair bounced off the wall in back of his desk. "Nuts! You'd be griped too, if you'd got the keelhauling I just had."

Tommy's face softened. "The Skipper give you hell this morning because of the crashes?" he asked.

Buzz nodded and combed his unruly black hair with his fingers. He took three strides across the office and whipped

around. "Look, Tommy, I didn't ask for a damned desk job. The flight surgeon just said, 'You look nervous, better sit on the ground for three months.'"

"I know that, Buzz," Tommy said soothingly. "But what did the Skipper say?"

"Oh hell," Buzz shrugged, "he just said that he would give me twenty-four hours to prove that the two crashes this morning weren't my responsibility. If I don't prove it, he's going to court martial me for gross negligence in the line of duty."

Tommy looked at him, startled. "Hey, that's serious. But how can they court martial you? You had nothing to do with them."

"No, but my men did. They're supposed to see that every plane that takes off is ready for flight. Both of these planes took off, then dived for the end of the runway. Of course, they exploded and burned when they hit, but the Skipper says it looks like the planes weren't checked and took off with faulty controls."

"So you get the rap," Tommy put in, "because your men dropped the ball."

Buzz nodded. "Skipper said I didn't stay on 'em enough. That I was griped about being grounded, and didn't do the job I was given. So I'm all set for a pack of trouble."

BEFORE Tommy could add his opinion, the wail of the crash siren split the air. The two officers looked at each other for a fraction of a second. Tommy's eyes were full of sympathy, Buzz's full of fear. Here came more trouble.

Buzz jumped to his feet and grabbed at the crash phone beside his desk in one motion. His eyes swept the crisscrossing runways of the Lake Monroe Naval Air Station. At the far end of the runway-in-

use a plume of black smoke spiraled skyward from a burning heap of shattered plane. It had hit with terrific impact from a hundred feet in the air, and flames licked at the broken fuselage.

The yellow trucks of the field crash crew were already streaking across the field toward the scene.

"Stand by on the crash circuit," Buzz intoned in a deep voice that was surprisingly steady. "An F6F has just spun in on the downwind end of runway two-seven, and is burning. Dispensary, send an ambulance and doctor; photo jeep, crane, and engineering crew go to the scene. No further action need be taken for the present. Secure your phones."

Now a mixture of different voiced sirens filled the air. The ambulance from the dispensary and the photo jeep howled from their posts. Knots of people gathered in front of the hangars and stared across the field at the frantic efforts of the crash crew to save the pilot's life.

Tommy was examining the crash through powerful field glasses. "The crash crew has the fire under control," he reported. "But it looks as if the pilot hadn't a chance." Buzz took the glasses and nodded in agreement.

He watched the flames surrender to the foamite hoses of the crash crew. He could see now that all that was left of the plane was a smouldering mass of molten metal. He had seen men die often enough, but it still made him sick. When they died in a plane crash you stood by and watched, as helpless as if it were happening on a movie screen in front of your eyes. You kept saying to yourself, "He'll get out," but you knew he wouldn't.

"No chance at all, Tommy," Buzz said. "And that makes three in one day." He reached across his desk and pushed a button on the intercom box. "Tower from Operations. Who was the pilot of that

plane?”

“Lieutenant Nichols, sir,” the tower answered. “The plane was Fox seven two. It happened just like the other two crashes this morning. We couldn’t see any reason for it happening.”

Buzz made a few notes in his log while Tommy lit a cigarette and drew heavily on it.

“Wow!” Tommy said finally, shaking his head and exhaling an expanding cloud of bluish smoke. “Three senior instructors in one day! That just doesn’t make good sense.”

“It’ll make sense to the Skipper,” Buzz said gloomily. “He’s probably convening the court martial board right now.”

Tommy smoked in silence for a while. Then his face brightened. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he said, hoping to change the subject. “I came here in the first place to tell you about the sight I saw at the gate when I came in this morning.”

Buzz was sitting behind his desk again, building steeples with his fingers. He looked up without much interest.

“I drove up just behind a taxi cab,” Tommy went on cheerfully, “just in time to see a strange character get out. He claimed that he was an ensign going through operational training here. But the funny thing was, all that guy had on was his underwear. I almost croaked when I saw him.”

Buzz grinned in spite of himself. “I’ll bet the Marine Guard had a great time with him,” he said.

Tommy nodded. “Yeah, they gave him a pretty bad time. His story was that somebody conked him and stole his uniform, his money and his identification card. I think they threw him in the brig until they could check his story.”

“Probably got tangled up with some local witch,” Buzz noted dryly, “and had to make a hasty exit before her old man

could aim his shot gun.”

“Speaking from experience?” Tommy asked with a sidelong glance at him.

Buzz reached for his telephone and shrugged. “Could be,” he answered. He started twirling the dial with a pencil. “Now I’ve got to see if I can find out what these crashes are all about.”

Tommy gave him a farewell pat on the shoulder. “See you later. I’ve got a hop now. And I hope you have some luck.”

AN HOUR later Buzz studied the notes on his scratch pad. A deep frown creased his forehead, and his blue eyes were clouded with worry. There was something screwy somewhere, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Three instructors, all of them back from the fleet and all of them pilots with several thousand hours in the air, had spun in. They got off the ground and began to turn away from the field when suddenly they peeled off, dived into the runway and exploded. And when the debris was cleared away after each crash there was nothing but the charred remains of the pilot and a twisted mound of metal. No way of telling what had caused the crash.

Buzz drew figure eights on the scratch pad and the furrows in his forehead got deeper. He checked his notes again.

“Line crew says planes were checked this morning before takeoff,” he read. “Only people seen around the planes all day were mechs, students, and instructors. Each of the three men who crashed was flying his own plane.”

There was nothing there to excite his suspicions. Everything was normal. Too normal, considering what had happened. Buzz rested his forehead on the palm of his hand and tried to figure it out. He was sure that some fact was eluding him, but he couldn’t grab it.

His eyes avoided the last note on the

page.

“Report to the Skipper’s office at ten in the morning.”

The note was as crisp and impersonal as the Skipper’s voice had been when he phoned. Buzz was to be court martialled for “gross negligence in the line of duty,” and “being partially responsible for the death of three men.”

Buzz put the thought of what he had to face in the morning out of his head. Instead he drove himself by thinking that he had until that time to find that elusive fact, to prove that he hadn’t been responsible for the crashes. He knew that such proof was the only thing that could save him from the court martial.

He paced back and forth in his office. “There’s something missing,” he kept saying to himself. “Something that I know already but can’t remember.” He slugged and cudged his brain until it cringed at the idea of thinking any more.

And then he got it.

What he got didn’t make sense, but it was something to work on. He headed out of the Operations Office. He stopped in the Records Office long enough to find the dossiers of the three men who had been killed. He took the bulging manila folders to his office and settled down at his desk. He made a chart for each of the men, showing a general outline of his career in the Navy. Then he sat back to study what he had.

He didn’t know what he was looking for, but he hoped he would recognize it when he found it.

“**W**HITEY GARNER,” he read from his irregular scrawl, “trained at Pensacola and Jacksonville. Spent eleven months in the fleet, got nine Japs definitely. Received the Purple Heart, a DFC, two Air Medals. Was returned to the Lake Monroe Naval Air Station as an

instructor.”

Buzz scowled. Nothing there that gave any indications as to why the crashes might have occurred. He continued to read.

“Garner put seven flights through the training syllabus and was rated as an A-I instructor. As a senior instructor he sat on the Washout Board for three months.”

“Doesn’t prove anything except that it shouldn’t have happened,” Buzz said aloud.

He turned to Tim Muslowski’s record. It was substantially the same as Garner’s. And so was Pete Nichol’s. The awards and the number of Japs shot down were different, but the records were similar in all other respects.

Similar! An idea flashed across the back of Buzz’s mind like a streak of lightning. Of course they were similar. They had all sat on the Washout Board together. The three of them, plus Tommy Reynolds, had sat on the same Washout Board for three months.

Now the ideas began to marshal themselves in Buzz’s head. Same Washout Board, killed the same day, in the same way. Buzz ground his knuckles into the top of his desk. Altogether too many similarities.

Suddenly, in Buzz’s mind, two and two added up to murder. But knowing that he had a murderer on his hands was no help. Who did it and why? Would he try it again? The questions nagged at him.

Then Buzz thought of a way to check his murder theory. He had to have some definite proof and this might give it to him. He grabbed at his hat as he left the office.

“**L**ISTEN, Tommy,” Buzz told him an hour later, “you’re grounded for the rest of the day. No more flying.”

Tommy all but jumped him. “What the

hell do you mean, grounded? I've got a flight of students who have to finish here next week. Knock off the baloney."

Buzz pulled a length of control cable from his desk drawer. "Since that last crash I've been checking up a little. You've been flying a spare plane all day, haven't you?"

Tommy nodded. "My own plane was getting a new set of spark plugs and having the radio checked."

"Well, I went down to have a look at your own plane. That cable came from the ailerons. Have a good look at it."

Tommy fingered the cable carefully. At one point it was frayed almost to the breaking point. Someone had taken a sharp instrument and had worked on it.

"When you took off you would have made a turn as soon as you were clear of the end of the runway," Buzz told him. "And when you turned, the strain would have broken the cable. You would have joined Nichols and the others. See what I mean?"

Tommy whistled. "Jeez, Buzz, that was a narrow one. I owe you a lot for catching this before it caught me. But how do you know someone else isn't going to get it? It looks like sabotage to me. Better cancel flying for the day, until you can have every plane carefully checked."

Buzz shook his head. "Hope. I don't think we have to worry. There were four marked men on this base. All of you sat on the Washout Board together. The other three got it, and you were the next victim."

"Okay, okay," Tommy said hastily. "Consider me grounded until further notice. But how about catching the guy who's doing all of this. Do you know who it is?"

Buzz shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I knew the answer to that one myself, but I don't. I haven't even got a lead in that direction, except that it's probably

someone you washed out, and who has a grudge."

"Hell," exploded Tommy. "There are a lot of people in that group. And I don't think any of them are around here now. That doesn't make too much sense to me."

Buzz shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "Maybe you're right. But what else can we work on? It's got to be somebody on the base. And from the way things look, it might have been anyone. Any man aboard this station could have gotten near those planes without arousing suspicion."

Tommy frowned, which was an unusual facial display for him. "I can't think of any enemies I have who'd go so far as to want to kill me. And I damn sure can't think of any that all four of us might have made, unless some of the boys we washed out resented it. But as I said, they shipped out of here after the board meeting."

Buzz sat down again and stared at the point of his pencil, concentrating until his eyes crossed. He threw the pencil down quickly. "That's enough of that," he told himself. "Better forget it for a while."

"Hey Tommy," he said suddenly. "What happened to the guy in his underwear? Did you ever find out?"

Tommy grinned. "Yeah, I heard that they checked his identification through his fingerprints. He was stationed here all right. Then I guess they checked his story in town, and it seems to fit. Some guy actually sapped the kid and stole all of his stuff."

Buzz laughed, thinking of a man standing in the middle of the street in nothing but his skivvies, hailing a taxi cab. "I wonder why the hell anyone would want to steal. . . ." He stopped, his hand poised in midair. "Hey, wait a minute! That might be the answer," he yelled.

Tommy jumped, a puzzled expression

playing about his features. “Whaddayamean—answer? Are we playing games now?”

BUZZ left his desk and walked over to his friend. “Don’t you see, Tommy. Somebody stole that kid’s uniform and ID card. He could get on the base with them. And he could be running around loose on the base now. He could have gone down to the planes and fixed those cables, and nobody would have noticed him. He would look like anyone of the two hundred students we have here. That must be it.”

Tommy placed a thoughtful finger at the point of his chin and nodded slowly. “Yeah, Buzz. That could be.” He thought for a while longer. “Say, maybe this ensign has some idea as to what his attacker looks like. I’ll tear over and have a little talk with him.”

“Okay,” Buzz answered. “And call me when you have the dope, so I can start working on it down here.”

Tommy left without saying more, while Buzz continued to ponder the thing. He alternately rocked violently in his swivel chair and paced the floor in long, nervous strides.

Spun in? Buzz knew how that had been worked. The murderer had nosed around the ready room until he discovered which planes his intended victims were to fly. Then he went down to the flight line and fixed the cables in those planes. It was customary for student pilots to examine the planes thoroughly before their first flight. And anyone seeing him in an ensign’s uniform would take it for granted he was familiarizing himself with the control mechanisms of the plane.

The beauty of the setup was that when the planes hit from a hundred feet they exploded, leaving no traces. Fortunately Buzz had the cable from Tommy’s plane for evidence. And then, when the murderer

had finished his business, he would go out the same way he came in. Through the main gate on the stolen pass and in the stolen uniform. He would just disappear.

Buzz reached for the phone again. “There’s one sure way to stop that.” He dialed the number of the Marine Guard at the gate.

“Hello, Marine Guard? This is the Operations Officer. What was the name of the ensign who came in without his uniform today? R. J. McDaniels? Well, I want all officers leaving the base checked very carefully. Compare the pictures on their ID cards with the men themselves. And when Ensign R. J. McDaniels attempts to go through the gate, stop him at all costs, even if you have to shoot. Got that?”

When he put down the phone, Buzz looked up into the ugly muzzle of a small automatic.

“**V**ERY clever, *sir*,” the man behind the gun snarled. He was dressed in the uniform of an ensign. His face was young, clean shaven, and masculine looking. Buzz thought that he could almost have been called handsome. But his eyes changed that. They were the wild, glazed eyes of a mad man.

“What the hell do you want?” Buzz demanded and started to his feet.

The man laughed and then his laugh faded into a snarl. “Don’t move yet, *sir*.” The “*sir*” came out as a bitter, sarcastic slur. “I wouldn’t want to have to kill you too. You’re not on my list.”

Buzz had felt the cold fear of death before going into battle many times, and he felt it again when he first looked up the businesslike muzzle of the gun. But now, as always happened, the fear wore off quickly and his nerves became as taut and tough as piano wire. He settled back in his chair nonchalantly.

“So I was right,” he said calmly to the man with the gun. “I don’t know your name, but I know how you got here. I know you murdered three men this morning. I can’t tell you why you murdered them, but I have a pretty good idea.”

The man sat opposite Buzz, so that he could watch the door of the office and the Operations Officer. “You *are* clever, *sir*.” Again the “*sir*” was heavily accented. “I may have to kill you too. You know that four men decided to sit judgment on me, and decided that I wasn’t fit to be a Navy flier. They washed me out and I was made a civilian again. I’m going to be drafted soon as a private in the army, thanks to them, and I wanted to square things before I went. So I came back to show them that they weren’t as smart as they thought.”

“When the Navy washes a man out there’s always a good reason for it,” Buzz reminded him. “It was probably better for you that way.”

The man waved his gun. “That’s for me to decide. And I decided that they didn’t give me a fair break.” His eyes gleamed dangerously. “I think you know too much,” he said, squinting, “so I’d better put you on my list too. And as long as you’re going to die, you might as well have the satisfaction of knowing my name. I’m Bill DeWitt.”

“I can’t say that I’m glad to meet you, DeWitt,” Buzz answered. “But I promise you that you’ll never get away with this.”

DeWitt grinned. “No? Well, we’ll see. You threw a monkey wrench into my original plans, but I think I can change them and still accomplish my work.”

Buzz was silent, memorizing the features of the man in front of him.

DeWitt consulted his watch. “Time to start,” he said. “Stand up!”

Buzz shrugged his shoulders and did as he was told.

“Now pick up the phone,” DeWitt ordered, “and tell the line chief to warm up a fighter for you. Make it one of those parked right in front of the building here.”

So that was his plan of escape! Buzz had thought that he had his man trapped, but now he saw that he was outwitted. He whirled and plunged for the figure standing half way across the room from him.

“I will like hell,” he shouted as he plunged.

FLAME spewed from the gun, and Buzz felt his shoulder rip open. At the same time De Witt brought his foot up and caught Buzz in the stomach. The distance between them had been too great for Buzz. He fell back against the wall, hit his head against it, and slouched down, groggy and winded.

One thing stayed in his mind. No help would come to the office because most likely the sound of the shot had been drowned out by the roar of the planes warming up and taking off. He tried to move as he saw DeWitt pick up the phone, but he couldn’t. His arm was nearly paralyzed, and his head was spinning.

“This is the Operations Officer,” DeWitt said in low tones into the phone. “I want a fighter warmed up in front of my office, ready to go in five minutes. Put a parachute in it.”

He looked over at Buzz as he hung up the phone. “I see that I didn’t need your help after all. As soon as I said Operations Officer that boy was ready to jump. Now I’ll wait here a few minutes, until my plane is ready to take off, and then I’ll leave you to your dreams. They will probably be very nice dreams, full of hot lead and things like that, because you’ll be dead.”

Buzz was furious. He had been outwitted and beaten. Now he was

cringing on the floor before the man who had beaten him. He felt his anger rising in his throat. Rage blinded him. Summoning his last bit of strength, he pulled himself from the floor and started for DeWitt. DeWitt backed away and pulled the trigger, but the gun misfired. Buzz tackled him.

They rolled around on the floor.

Buzz flailed his fists into his opponent as hard as he was able, but he was still groggy and his left arm was almost useless, while DeWitt was fresh and whole. DeWitt got his right arm free and planted a terrific uppercut under Buzz's chin. The flyer went down in a heap, still fighting for consciousness.

DeWitt got up and brushed himself off. He checked his gun to see that the faulty round was out. But before he could get the round changed, he heard footsteps in the corridor outside of the office. Without waiting for anything else, he jammed the gun deep in his pocket and walked from the office. Two men were at the far end of the hall, approaching. He walked away from them quickly, came to a stairway, and started running for the plane.

IT WAS several minutes before Buzz was able to rouse himself again. His stomach hurt and his jaw hurt. His vision was fuzzy and his left arm screamed whenever he moved it. But finally he was able to drag himself over to the squawk box.

"Tower from Operations," he said into the box. "Radio the crash truck at the end of the runway that the field is closed. No more planes will take off until further notice."

The voice of the tower operator came back filled with amazement. "Aye aye, sir," he answered, but he meant, "You're nuts, sir."

Just then there was a roar in front of

the hangar. Buzz staggered to the window in time to see DeWitt start to taxi out to the takeoff strip. When he was part of the way out, DeWitt noticed that the crash crew was stopping all planes from taking off. The taxiway he was on was only twenty degrees out of the wind, so he gunned his plane and took off down the taxiway.

Buzz chewed his lip. Damn it, couldn't anything stop that madman?

His senses were beginning to return again, and he knew that there was only one thing to do. He called and had another fighter warmed up. "And see that the guns are loaded," he added before he hung up.

Then he called the tower again on the squawk box. "Keep an eye on that plane that just took off from the taxiway. I'm going after him and I'll want to know which direction he went in."

While he waited for the plane crew to warm and load his ship, he went into the washroom and bathed his head in cold water. He moved his left arm gingerly, found that it responded but that the movement was painful. He wrapped a towel around the wound to stop the flow of blood.

He got into his flight gear without once remembering that he was grounded for three months. All he thought of was the fact that here at last he had the answer to the questions the court martial board would ask.

Before leaving the washroom he took a long pull from the refrigerated fountain. The cold water took the heavy taste of blood from his mouth, and his head cleared a little.

Once ready for flight, Buzz dashed back into the office before going to the plane, and made a hurried call to the Marine Guard. "This is the Operations Officer again," he said. "I'll be taking off in a few minutes in an F6F, and I want a

jeep with four fully armed marines to follow the plane as rapidly as possible.”

He stopped while the information was passed around the gate house.

“I’m going to have to shoot down a plane,” he went on, “and if the pilot gets out alive I want him caught. So I want the men to be on the spot as soon as they can. I’ll fly low over the gate house and rock my wings so that you can identify me. Got that?”

He slammed the phone into its cradle and went down to the plane.

WITHIN five minutes Buzz was buckled into his plane, with the engine turning over. The chocks were pulled and he moved away from the flight line. He didn’t taxi all the way out, but followed DeWitt’s example, and took off down the taxiway. As soon as he was off the ground, Buzz horsed back on the stick and headed for altitude. He passed over the gatehouse and saw the jeep start out.

“Navy Monroe Tower, this is Ford. Over.”

“Go ahead, Mr. Ford,” the tower returned.

“What’s the position of that runaway plane now?” Buzz asked.

“Take a heading of three-three-zero, sir. He’s about fifteen miles ahead of you on that course. We had the glasses on him until he disappeared.”

“Wilco from Ford.”

Buzz moved his throttle to the full position after setting his prop at maximum RPM. The Hellcat began to pick up speed. Then he brought the RPM back to its most efficient point for a climb. He leveled off at 5000 feet, and his eyes scanned the horizon.

A speck appeared ahead and slightly below him. Buzz glued his eyes to it, sure that here was his quarry. Two Hellcats, he thought, tangled up in a dogfight, with the

same speed and maneuverability. That meant it would be strictly a question of pilots. Buzz knew that he had the experience on his side.

He adjusted the throttle and mixture control to get the most speed from the two thousand horses that were pulling him along. He hoped that the pilot of the other plane didn’t know a Hellcat too well. A man with a lot of hours in it can always make fine adjustments in the trimming of the ship and in the engine to squeeze a few extra knots out of it. Otherwise the chase would go on until they both ran low on fuel.

“You aren’t going to get away this time, mister,” Buzz said through his teeth as he urged his plane on. “You’ll never get a chance to tell your story now. Not if I can help it.”

Wait a minute, Buzz thought. I can’t kill him. If I do I won’t have any proof. If he dies I won’t be able to tie up the crashes with the incident at the gate. No, he’s got to come back alive, so that he can tell the Skipper all about it. Okay, brother, you’re going to get winged where it won’t hurt, but you aren’t going to be able to fly any more.

The speck ahead of him was growing larger. Buzz coaxed a few more knots from his ship. Then his eye caught the cylinder head temperature gauge. The engine was getting hot from running at maximum speed for so long a period. The red pointer on the dial had already gone into the zone marked “danger.” Buzz knew that in a few minutes the engine would start running rough, and then would cut out altogether.

But he couldn’t cut down his speed. He couldn’t afford to lose his man now, just when he had him. Too much depended on him.

“I’ll have to risk it,” Buzz told himself. The speck was now another plane and

Buzz could see the markings clearly. He picked up another thousand feet of altitude, and then nosed over into a shallow dive. The added speed of the gentle dive brought him up to his opponent quickly. Buzz charged his guns and gave them a test burst.

The pilot of the other plane saw him now, and began evasive maneuvers. He made a sharp turn toward Buzz, and before Buzz could react the other plane had passed below him. Buzz pulled his nose up and made a tight nose-high turn. His opponent attempted to turn back into him again, but he had waited too long. Buzz made another tight turn as DeWitt passed under him for the second time, and was on his tail.

He grinned. DeWitt didn't know much about the fundamentals of dog-fighting. After he made his first turn he had flown in a straight line too long before turning again, and had given Buzz the opportunity he was waiting for. It was a common mistake of beginners.

"O.K., guy, you're through now," Buzz yelled over the roar of his engine. He followed the flipper turn that DeWitt executed and pulled his nose inside of the turn. Through his illuminated gunsight he computed the lead necessary to hit the engine of the other plane without injuring the pilot.

But before he could squeeze the trigger, his engine cut out. Buzz had been so interested in following the other plane that he hadn't noticed the period of rough running, and now it had quit cold. Buzz swore fluently and leveled off. He went to work in the cockpit, trying to get the engine turning over again.

HE OPENED the cooling vents, turned his emergency fuel pump on, and jockeyed the throttle. He was gliding downwards, losing five hundred feet of his

precious altitude every minute. He leaned to the side of the cockpit and picked out an empty field below for an emergency landing.

But he pulled his head back quickly. The spat-spat of fifty caliber machine gun bullets plunking into his plane came to his ears. Damn the bastard, Buzz thought. He must have stolen one of the gunnery planes, all loaded up for a gunnery practice hop. Buzz saw that the first burst had peppered his wing tip with neat round holes.

Buzz heard the second burst now, splattering against the armor plate in back of him. Buzz squirmed, knowing that a fifty caliber would puncture armor plate. The guy had the aim but he was firing at the extreme range. Otherwise Buzz would have been finished. But Buzz knew it wouldn't be long before DeWitt closed that range. And then. . . .

Buzz went after the cockpit controls with renewed interest. Now it was either get the engine started or get shot up. He checked the temperature gauge and found that the open cooling vents had brought it almost back to normal. Buzz was perspiring as he checked the switches.

Another burst from the plane behind him! This time the sliding hatch over Buzz's head shattered. And then with a roar of power, Buzz's engine cut back in again.

With a whoop of relief Buzz laid his Hellcat over in a vertical turn to the right. Then he snapped the stick back into his stomach, did a vertical reverse so that he came out in a tight turn to the left. The sudden maneuver caught DeWitt by surprise. He was still following Buzz's first turn when Buzz brought his guns to bear.

He let go a heavy blast at close range, directly into the engine of the other Hellcat. It was a head-on shot and his

slugs tore great holes in the banked cylinders. Black oil smoke poured from the gaping wounds. Buzz swerved from the staggering path of the crippled fighter to avoid a collision. Then he circled and watched.

Nothing happened at first. "Get out of that thing, you bastard," Buzz screamed. "You've got to get out!"

Then he saw DeWitt slide the hatch back and go over the side. Within a few seconds the white parachute blossomed out. Buzz went down to a thousand feet and circled the figure dangling from the end of the shroud lines.

"I ought to chop you up with this prop for what you've done," Buzz said, "but I need you too much." Then he grinned as he thought of shroud lines. Yes, those silken cords by which DeWitt was hanging from his chute were shroud lines in more ways than one.

Buzz followed the gently oscillating parachute until it had settled in a clearing below him. He watched DeWitt struggle with the lines until he was cleared. Then he saw him start running across the field toward a patch of woods.

"No you don't," Buzz shouted. "You're staying here until the marines come. You've gotten away often enough today."

Measuring the fleeing pilot's path, Buzz opened up with a burst of fifties right in front of him. DeWitt dived to the ground. Every time he moved Buzz let a burst dig up the earth near him. DeWitt cringed, staring up at the plane. He hugged the ground but made few attempts to break away.

Finally the jeep with the marines in it came into sight, bouncing down a little side road. Buzz grinned as he thought of the rugged ride they must have had to arrive as quickly as they had.

He flew lower and did a tight circle over the spot where DeWitt lay huddled. The advancing marines saw him and waved. The jeep turned off the road and headed out into the clearing. It stopped a hundred feet from DeWitt, and the four marines, with Thompson sub-machine guns, approached him. DeWitt, seeing that resistance in the face of so much fire power was useless, gave up without a struggle.

Even from the air, Buzz could see that DeWitt had been badly frightened by his chattering fifties.

When Buzz saw the marines leading their prisoner toward the jeep, he rocked his wings and turned the nose of his ship for home.

"See you later, DeWitt," he shouted happily.

WHEN Buzz walked into the Operations Office, Commander Cales, the Skipper, was sitting behind his desk waiting for him. Before Buzz could open his mouth, Cales lit in.

"Ford, this has gone far enough. First you are indirectly responsible for the deaths of three of our best instructors. And then you have the gall to fly one of our planes when you know that you're grounded. I hope you've got a good explanation, because if you haven't, you're going to see the insides of hell before your time."

Buzz started to explain, but the Skipper cut in again. "Say, what in hell happened to you? You look as though you tangled with a prop and came out on the short end."

Buzz grinned sheepishly and looked down at himself. Blood from his shoulder wound had soaked through his coveralls. There was a lump on his jaw that was probably black and blue. And he knew that

he must be pale from weakness and loss of blood.

“Well, sir, you see. . .”

Tommy Reynolds burst into the office. “It’s no soap, Buzz. I talked with that ensign and he doesn’t. . .” he stopped short. “Jeez, Buzz, what hit you?” He reached out and touched the spot of blood on Buzz’s coveralls. Buzz winced as a knife of pain slashed through him, and then folded like an accordion.

Tommy jumped and grabbed him as he fell. He stretched the prostrate form on the floor, and by the time that Buzz was lying flat the Skipper was back with a glass of water.

“Here,” Cales said, “make him drink some of this while I phone the dispensary for a doctor and an ambulance.”

BUZZ regained consciousness before the ambulance arrived. As he opened his eyes he saw the Skipper and Tommy talking.

“Ford,” Commander Cales said, “Reynolds here has told me as much of your story as he knows. Suppose you finish it now.”

Buzz sat up to finish the glass of water and then began. He told the whole story. When he had finished, the Skipper just stared at him with big, dumbfounded eyes.

“Well I’m damned!” he snorted. “If that isn’t the damndest! And right here on this. . . Ford, you said the marines are bringing this . . . this, murderer back with them?”

“Yes sir,” Buzz replied. “I saw them drive away from the clearing with DeWitt in the jeep.”

The Skipper went to the phone quickly. While he was giving orders to have DeWitt delivered to him, the doctor and two hospital corpsmen came in with a stretcher. They lifted Buzz gently and put him on it. The Skipper bent over Buzz before the medics carried him away.

“Ford, you’ve done a great job, and I owe you all kinds of apologies. The court martial business is off. But I’ll have to give you a few days restriction.”

Buzz was surprised. “Restriction? You mean I’m restricted to my room. What for, sir?”

“Well, you flew when you were grounded, and that’s a pretty serious offense.” Cales turned to the doctor, who had been examining Buzz’s wound. “Say doc, how long before this hot rock will be out of bed?”

“Oh three or four days. He’ll be all right. Nothing to worry about.”

“Well, then, Ford, you’re restricted to your quarters until you are allowed out of bed by the doctor.” There was a twinkle in Cales’ eyes as he said this. “And maybe we can get you ungrounded,” he added. “If you can fly well enough to do what you did this afternoon, I don’t see why you should sit around an office.”

Buzz felt himself fading again, so he just grinned and said to the two corpsmen who were carrying the stretcher, “Lead on MacDuffs, and don’t fire until you see the lace on their panties.” He passed out again, this time with a happy look on his face.

THE END