

# Morass of Mystery

Thrilling Air Yarn of Today

By JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

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*Death lurked in the misty morass of the Chaco, that dreary, desolate land where giant lizards and poisonous serpents wound their slimy way through the quicksands. And death lurked in the clear, blue sky above—for in that sky men fought more than quicksands—they faced treachery.*

**G**RAYLY mysterious and half blotted out by miasmic mists, the Gran Chaco spread out before Fred Harper as he piloted his narrow-winged Hawk in a wide circle. In the uncertain light of early morning, the feathery vapors took on a gossamer beauty that gave no hint of their deadly touch.

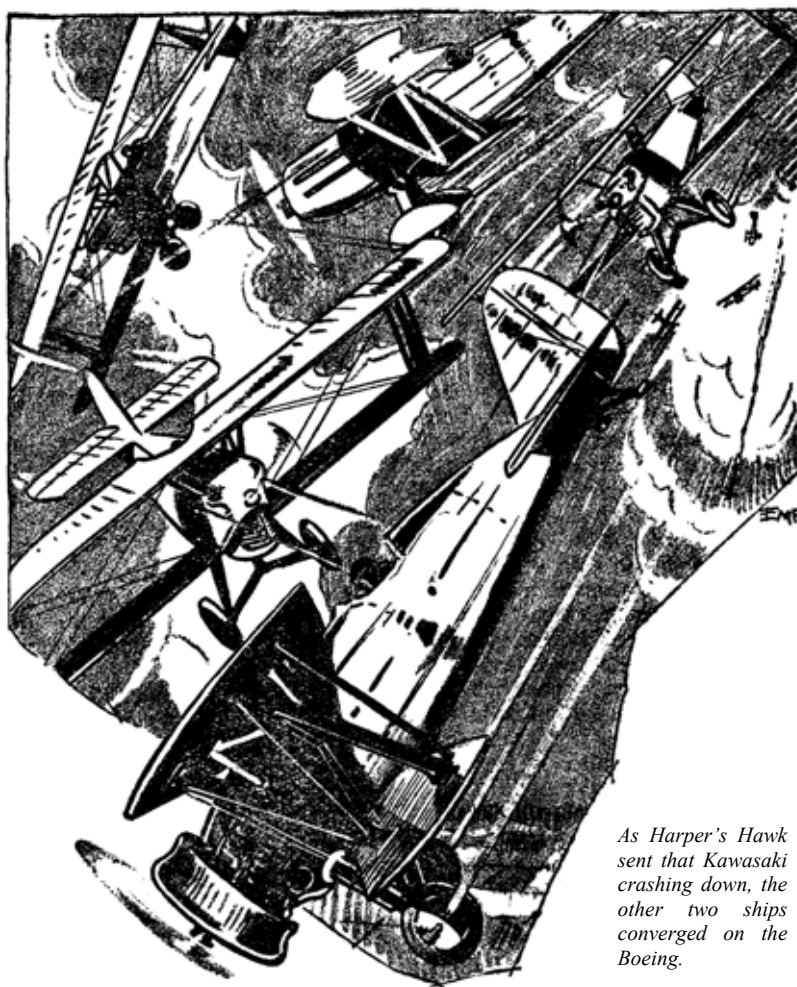
The lagoon-dotted plain stretched toward the south for unending miles, dreary and desolate. Stagnant waters caught the first rays of the sun and glowed like opalescent mirrors. Far away, Harper could see other planes, the aerial patrol of the Paraguayan army. In the air and on the ground, men were fighting, with the Chaco as the victor's prize.

But Fred Harper had small love for the Chaco. He frowned as he gazed over the unbroken stretches of marsh and dead water, filled with deadly serpents and great lizards.

"I'd hate to crack up down there," he mumbled.

His thoughts veered to the task before him. He had come to Bolivia as a demonstrating salesman. Bolivia wanted war planes, and Harper was there to prove that the Hawk was the best machine human hands

could build. His morning flight was to test the machine for coming competition with other aircraft already in the field.



*As Harper's Hawk sent that Kawasaki crashing down, the other two ships converged on the Boeing.*

Two of his rivals had been in Bolivia for weeks when he arrived. They were ready to go to almost any lengths to block him, he had discovered. He had not been there three days before he had been told that his ship would be wrecked before he had a chance to demonstrate it. At the air base, behind the lines, Colonel Enrique Santander, the commander, had warned him about cruising, lest he be ambushed in

the sky.

"Tough babies, both of them," Harper reflected.

Charley Carpenter of the Boeing Company, his more dangerous rival, was an American, and a veteran who had sold Boeings throughout the world. He had a reputation for ruthlessness, and boasted that he had never lost an order. Harper had liked the man, but this did not keep him from watching him constantly.

The only other airplane manufacturer represented in the competition was the Japanese Kawasaki.

It was to keep the Hawk's performances a secret from Charley Carpenter that Harper swept out over the Chaco. Now he had it going through a series of acrobatic stunts that would have cracked up a less sturdy craft.

"I'll try that outside loop and then call it a day," he reflected, shoving the throttle forward. "Neither of those other crates can—"

A clatter of shots rang out behind him, and he caught a glimpse of darting cones of gray tracer on either side of his head. Next came the "slap-slap" of bullets striking his wings, the high "ping" of a broken brace wire.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" he yelled, twisting in his cockpit.

At the same moment, the bellowing note of his Cyclone motor stopped suddenly. There was silence, as shocking as the detonation of a bomb.

**F**RED HARPER caught a glimpse of narrow wings as his adversary wheeled. Then a thick, silvery mist swallowed the plane completely. A smoke screen had been released.

"I didn't even see what make it was," Fred muttered.

He turned to snatch up the Hawk's nose. He gave the stick a wrench, and the right pedal a kick, throwing the machine into a spiral glide. Shorn of his power, the Hawk would not be able to reach the Bolivian airdrome, far to the north. Beneath it spread the treacherous ground of the Chaco's lagoon area. At that time of year, it was a morass over which infantry dared not travel. To an airplane, it was suicidal. A nose-on plunge into the spongy mass would see both ship and pilot swallowed in the ooze.

The Hawk spiraled down as Harper searched for a spot where his ship would not be sucked into the slime. Off to the right he saw a ridge of high

ground. A side wind made navigation difficult, but he must not miss that narrow ridge. If he did, ghastly death would follow.

He glanced toward the north. The plane which had shot him down had cut off its smoke screen. Its silhouette looked like that of the American Boeing, Charley Carpenter's ship. Harper's lips formed a hard, bitter line. Carpenter had boasted that he never failed to make a sale.

The wind rips were making landing dangerous. With the engine dead, the Hawk was not an easy craft to handle. On either side of the high ridge were stretches of morass. He would be a prisoner, even if he made a successful descent. Lower, still lower, he went. The earth was leaping up to meet him. He came back with the stick, dropping the tail until the skid caught in the grass. The wheels came down with a crashing impact. The Hawk nosed over, but stopped before the prop was crashed. Fred clambered out to inspect the damage. The right landing gear had been partially wrecked and his motor was dead. About him was the morass of the Chaco.

Hot rage boiled in him as he inspected his machine. Several bullets had lodged in the struts. Fred turned his attention to the engine, and whistled in surprise. The damage could be repaired easily. A bullet had cut the lead wire of the distributing system, killing the spark, but he could patch that in a few minutes. The injury to the landing gear was not serious, but a takeoff from that rocky ridge would be more than difficult.

He labored with the broken landing gear, splicing the struts by wrapping wire about the splintered sections. Mid-afternoon saw the repairs completed, and he examined the ground over which he would have to take off. He started to clear a runway, throwing the large rocks to one side and pulling up the long grass that would interfere with his wheels.

**H**ARPER worked with feverish haste. He must get back to the Bolivian airdrome, not only to demonstrate his Hawk, but to find the man who had shot him down. As he labored, he heard the drone of wings high in the zenith, and he stared up into the sky. The plane was at such a height that he could not distinguish its outline clearly.

"Looking for me, I guess," he mumbled.

He caught a flash of something falling, and instinctively he threw himself upon the ground.

Then came a deafening explosion. A geyser of mud and water leaped into the air as the bomb exploded. The Hawk was staggered by the rush of wind, and nearly toppled over.

Another blast came, this time on the other side of the ridge.

Fred Harper stared aloft. His enemy had come back to finish both ship and pilot. He had flown out to see if any evidence of his crime remained and now, with the Hawk's outspread wings in sight, he had turned to bombs.

Another mighty blast sounded. Instead of throwing himself upon the ground, Harper rushed to his plane. With a twist on the prop, he primed the cylinders, then climbed into the cubby. He jerked the inertia starter and the blades moved slowly. Another desperate pull, and the Cyclone motor roared.

A thrust opened the throttle to its fullest, and soon the little ship was bouncing over the uneven ground.

"Got to get into the air," Harper grated. "Got to—or he'll blow me to pieces."

He picked up the tail before the wheels had made three revolutions, and hauled back. The Hawk hesitated, threatened to stall, as it neared the long grass, then thrust its nose into the air and roared up under full power.

"That's making a takeoff from a pocket handkerchief," Harper yelled as he felt the slipstream in his face.

He hung the Hawk on its prop and climbed almost vertically. At the same time, he snapped the lead cartridges of his ammunition belts into his Brownings. He was going to fight, and keep on fighting, against the man who had shot him down.

"Charley Carpenter may be a former ace, but he'll have to show me something besides his medals," he snarled.

But when he reached the upper levels, he found no trace of his enemy. The sky was bare of any moving thing. Off toward the south Harper saw a lazy white cloud floating toward the Paraguayan lines.

**H**E turned north, and in another hour was piquing for a landing. Cheers marked his arrival. Colonel Enrique Santander, the base commander, greeted him joyfully.

"We thought the enemy—or the Chaco—had killed you," he said.

"Both came near it," Harper laughed.

He turned to take the outstretched hand of Totu Nikigami, who was representing the Japanese Kawasaki company. The little Oriental was grinning widely.

"Dead come back to live once more," he said. "For me—I give congratulations."

"So do I," boomed a voice at Harper's right.

Fred looked around to see Charley Carpenter striding toward him.

"What kept you?" Carpenter wanted to know.

"You tell me," retorted Harper.

"I tell you? Say—where do you get that stuff? I've been up to La Paz, filing a cablegram."

"Oh, yeah?"

The Boeing agent glanced around the circle of curious faces. Then he grasped Harper by the arm.

"Come here. I guess you and I have a little chin coming to us."

"I guess we have."

They walked across the field, to stop in front of Harper's hangar. The smile had left Charley Carpenter's face, and his blue eyes bored deep into Fred's.

"Tell me about it," he said.

"Okay, but it won't be news to you."

Then Harper related the attack from behind as he cruised over the Chaco, his landing upon a rocky ledge and the attempt to bomb him while he was making ready to take off.

"And you put me down for that trick?" Carpenter asked, when he had finished.

Fred Harper grinned. Then he opened his cigarette case and offered it.

"Of course not. You were up in La Paz all that time. You can prove it, too, I bet."

"Sure I can."

"I knew you could."

"Thanks, old man. I don't blame you for suspecting me. I have got a mean reputation, but—"

"That's all right. Forget it," Fred finished.

Charley Carpenter went away, but Fred Harper followed him with narrowed eyes as he watched him pause to examine the damaged Hawk. He glimpsed a smile on the man's weathered face as he met Totu Nikigami, the Japanese, and pointed to the bullet holes in the wings and cowl.

"What cast-iron nerve," Harper muttered.

**W**ITH the Hawk under canvas, Fred and his mechanics centered their attention on

making permanent repairs. News of a projected aerial offensive by the Paraguayans had been received by the Bolivian war office, and Colonel Santander was eager to complete his inspection and purchase of the planes already on the field.

Night had come when Fred left his hanger, after ordering his mechanics to stay with the ship until morning. As he went to his tent at the end of pilots' row, he saw the diminutive figure of Totu Nikigami coming toward him. The Japanese bobbed his head and smiled. Then he stopped and offered Harper a cigarette.

"Paraguayan sheep shoot you down?" he asked. "Colonel Santander say so. Seem ver' strange."

"Yes, doesn't it?" Harper evaded a direct answer.

"Misto Carpenter say he go La Paz," Nikigami continued, "but Japanese friend of mine say he not there for week."

"What of it?" Fred asked.

"Ver' strange, ver' confusing. Not so?"

"Everything is."

"Yis?" the Japanese grinned. "Then mebbe Misto Carpenter know nothing about Paraguayan attack plan. Colonel Santander say somebody fly down to Paraguay airbase, them come back. All look ver' funny. Not so?"

"Sure does," Fred agreed.

Totu Nikigami's words only added to Harper's uneasiness. He went into his tent to find that his personal effects had been searched. A copy of his code book was missing, along with some letters dealing with new types of motors and machine guns.

Harper started toward Colonel Santander's quarters, boiling with outrage, but as he neared the building he saw the back flap of the Hawk's canvas hangar open and a tall, wide-shouldered figure steal out. Only one man in the airbase had shoulders like that—Charley Carpenter. Harper rushed after him.

"Hey, you!" he called.

Carpenter turned. "Say, I was just looking for you," the man began. "Something has happened to your greaseballs. They're both out—cold."

"Cassidy and McLennan?"

"I'm telling you."

"How did you find out?" Harper's eyes narrowed.

The former war ace grinned. "Well, I tell you—I had a hunch that somebody might try to monkey with your bus tonight, so I went over there a few

minutes ago. I looked in and—you'd better get a doctor. Something has hit those babies."

"I think you'd better get the doctor." Harper's eyes were blazing. "I'll look after the ship."

"Okay."

"And afterwards you can tell me what really happened—tell me or Colonel Santander."

Charley Carpenter grinned into Fred's outraged glance. "I'd much rather tell you. You're a fellow American."

He hurried away, and Harper dodged into the hangar. Mike Cassidy was groaning feebly and rubbing the back of his head. Pete McLennan still lay upon the ground, but regained consciousness within a few minutes. Neither man could tell who had hit them, since they had been struck down from behind, but Cassidy had had a dim vision of a tall man in uniform bending over him.

"About Carpenter's size?" Harper demanded.

"Yes, sir. Just about."

Fred turned to look at the Hawk. The cowl covering the distributor had been raised, and a glance told him that the electrical timing unit had been wrenched from its base. A flash of fury went through him.

"Anything to make a sale—anything," he muttered, as he dashed down the street upon which the pilots' tents faced.

But he found no trace of Charley Carpenter. The Condor agent had disappeared. Fred Harper hesitated for a moment. Then he returned to his own hangar. He wanted no trouble that would involve the Bolivian authorities in a dispute between two Americans. He was ready to wage his own wars and make his own peace. His first task was to install fresh timing apparatus. Spare parts were found, and dawn saw the ship ready to take to the air.

**H**ARDLY had the sun edged from the Chaco's mists when Fred Harper presented himself to Colonel Santander, the Bolivian commander.

"I am ready for the tests, sir," he informed him.

"Tests?" The colonel raised sleepless eyes. "Ah, my friend, you can have your test—"

He hesitated as his desk telephone rang. After a few explosive words into the transmitter, he paused to listen. Then came a blistering oath as he replaced the instrument.

"Tests! *Que carramba!* What a test you shall have!" he shouted. "Trial by battle, I am told, is a

ver' old Anglo-Saxon tradition. You shall have that trial, *señor*."

"But, colonel—"

"You, too, shall have it—and you, too, *señor*. All of you shall have a chance to demonstrate your ships."

Fred Harper looked around to see Charley Carpenter and Totu Nikigami entering the orderly room. The American grinned at him and the Japanese bobbed his head.

"You mean enemy—coming here?" Nikigami wanted to know.

"Yes, in large numbers," Santander snapped.

"Say, that's swell," Charley Carpenter boomed. "The Boeing just naturally eats up enemies."

"And friends," Fred Harper finished.

Santander turned to the telephone again. When he had finished talking, his swart face was gray.

"Ten bombers and twenty pursuit ships coming," he managed to gasp out. "You must stop them or—"

"We stop them? We not fighting war," Nikigami barked. "We have nothing do with these sheeps."

"One of you did," Santander shot back. "All three of you have been away. Now the Paraguayans are coming. If you do not fight, then—"

"Don't worry about us, colonel," Charley Carpenter broke in. "It's all the meat and some of the drink to us. Are you game, Harper?"

"I'm game enough to do anything but ambush a friend."

"So you still think I did that?"

"I know you did."

"Yeah? Well, get this, buddy—when I'm out for bear, the bus I tackle doesn't get off with a busted landing gear."

"No? Then show me."

Harper gestured to the south. Massed planes were sweeping over the vast Chaco plain. The drome was in an uproar. Soldiers ran in every direction as frantic officers barked commands. A small formation of Bolivian ships hopped off to meet the oncomers. Fred Harper gauged their flight as they roared up into the air. Green, ill-trained pilots, flying ships that had been cast off from continental armies, they would stand no chance against the modern planes of the Paraguayans.

Fred Harper yelled to his mechanics, and the Hawk was rolled from its hangars. It was ready for any test.

THE enemy armada was approaching at dizzy speed. In the center was a V of bombers, heavy, wide-winged craft. At first Fred Harper took them for German Junkers, but a glance through his field glasses identified them as Mitsubishi's.

Harper's brow knotted as he appraised the makeup of the invading air fleet. French, British and Japanese planes were attacking the Bolivian base. Word from Colonel Santander's field had prompted the raid. Who had flown across the lines. Fred glanced in Charley Carpenter's direction. He was laughing, gesticulating, swearing good-naturedly. Next he was in his cockpit, waving his farewells. With a roar, the Boeing slipped into the air. Fred's Hawk followed, racing toward the dreary lagoons of the Chaco.

As he mounted, Harper saw that the Bolivian formation had already engaged the enemy. A backward glance showed him Nikigami taking off to follow.

Once more he looked ahead. The Paraguayan force had turned and was sweeping in a wide circle, far out over the Chaco, maneuvering over a section where stagnant lagoons and rush-covered marshes offered no landing place.

The sharp clatter of machine guns sounded through the motors' roar. A battle was raging, a combat in which the antiquated castoffs of the Bolivian air force would be riddled. The huge Mitsubishi's made no effort to enter the melee. They were awaiting their opportunity to sweep down upon the Bolivian base and blast it.

Harper watched their maneuvers. Then a fresh suspicion shot through him. Charley Carpenter was racing ahead under full gun, his fleet Boeing cleaving the air at more than two hundred miles an hour.

"Now we'll see just how good he is," Fred said inwardly.

Carpenter shot toward the nearest of the enemy, a narrow-winged Nieuport. A yell of warning came to Harper's lips, but he held it back. Carpenter had something coming to him. As the Boeing struck, the Nieuport dodged away. Then down from the sky came three small ships, tiny of wing, yet powered with huge Jupiter engines. They wore no national markings, but Harper recognized them as Kawasakis.

Sputters of fire came from their cowls as they attacked Charley Carpenter simultaneously. Cone-like streaks marked the flight of their bullets. While

one hung on the Boeing's tail, the other two threw tracer from either side.

"They're pocketing you," Harper yelled. "Can't you see that—"

One of the Kawasakis whirled to meet his Hawk. Harper leaned forward, his eyes to the telescopic sight. The nose of the little machine was in the cross of his stadia wires. He pressed the electric firing trip.

B-b-b-r-r-r-r-r-r-r! The Brownings sputtered, and a gray pencil reached out to touch the Kawasaki's blunt prow. The ship staggered, as though it had struck an obstruction in midair. Then the wings began to turn. In another moment it was tumbling.

"I ought to have let them get him, but—he's an American," Harper thought.

**W**ITH one of the Kawasakis down, the other two broke off their fight with Carpenter, and their guns turned on Fred's Hawk. Gray streaks of tracer broke around him. It was his first taste of combat, and he felt the blood race through his veins.

The Kawasakis struck, one after another, coming so close that Harper could see the pilots. They were not South Americans, but short, brown little men with slant eyes and high cheek bones.

Just then a meteor dropped from the zenith, diving with power full on. Its machine guns rattled, sending out a throbbing stream of tracer. Harper sideslipped, but in a flashing instant he caught sight of Totu Nikigami's distorted face.

Once more, three Japanese ships were attacking one American. Harper had no time to think of the events that had led up to this attack. His whole mind was centered on the battle. He saw Charley Carpenter hurl his Boeing toward him, and for a moment he wavered.

"So he's after me, too!" he muttered.

But Carpenter was not turning his guns on Harper. He attacked the nearest of the Kawasakis with a fury that caused the pilot to wheel in flight. The Boeing raced in pursuit. The Kawasaki tried to circle and rejoin its companions. The turn doomed both pilot and ship. Carpenter cut in, and his Vickers shot a short, savage drag. The Japanese crumpled as though struck by a heavy shell. A few moments later, the second Kawasaki had fallen on the Chaco's deadly surface.

Charley Carpenter waved his hand when he saw

Fred Harper looking in his direction. Then he turned to strike at the third of the Oriental trio.

Meanwhile, Totu Nikigami and Fred Harper were fighting a duel. The American gunned his motor, getting on the Japanese's tail in their first whirl of circular flight. He leaned forward, his eyes on the telescopic sight. But as his hand pressed the button, the outline of the Kawasaki was obscured by a silvery cloud. Harper straightened. It was a smoke screen.

"So you're the bird who shot me down yesterday!" he grated.

He remembered suddenly that a tank of opaque gas was part of the Kawasaki's equipment. It had been one of Nikigami's selling points in his talk with Colonel Santander.

**H**ARPER hauled back, climbing above the smoke screen. As he circled, looking for his adversary, he saw that the Paraguayan ships were retreating, racing toward their own lines. The Bolivians, too, were drawing off.

A glance showed him that both Nikigami and the other Kawasaki were attacking Carpenter. The former ace battled valiantly, but Nikigami was on his tail, lashing him to ribbons. The Boeing was reeling. And now it lurched, nose down and started to fall.

The Hawk plunged through the air at a speed nearing three hundred miles an hour. Almost before he realized it, Harper was on the Paraguayan Kawasaki. Once more his Brownings clattered, and a gray line stretched from his cowl to the enemy's fuselage. This time his bullets struck the gasoline tank. There was a silvery spray, almost like the smoke screen, then a flash of flame, and a blazing torch started its fall.

"Just you and I left, Nikigami!" Harper whirled to meet the man whose treachery had nearly killed him twenty-four hours before.

This time Harper did not try to get on the Kawasaki's tail. He attacked head-on. A haze of bullets came toward him as the Japanese-made Vickers threw their streams of lead. The American, however, held his course. Either he would crash the Kawasaki by gunfire or ram it in midair.

Nearer, still nearer! Both were firing as they charged. And it was Totu Nikigami who pulled up to avoid the crash. But as the blunt nose of the Kawasaki was raised, Harper put in a burst that went through the floor of the cockpit. With a

stagger and a twist, the Japanese ship was in the death throes.

Harper circled, watching the end of the drama. Nikigami tried desperately to maneuver his ship away from the vast stretch of morass below him, but his narrow-winged crate settled rapidly.

Fred looked around to see if he could catch sight of Charley Carpenter. He had thought the man his enemy. Now he knew he was a friend, although still a rival. He saw the Boeing come down on firm ground, but surrounded by swampland.

"I'll get him out of there," Harper reflected. "Then we'll fight it out for the contract. But this other bird—this snake—"

He glanced again toward the morass. The Kawasaki was almost down. A cloud of spray shot up as its trucks touched. When it settled, Harper could see that the plane had plowed into the swamp until only the wings were visible. Totu Nikigami climbed out upon their surface, but the hungry ooze continued to suck in the helpless ship.

By now the man was standing up to his knees in the slime. The wings of his ship were gone. A few minutes more, and the morass had reached its victim's waist. Next it would reach the shoulders and then . . .

Fred Harper wheeled away. He had seen enough.