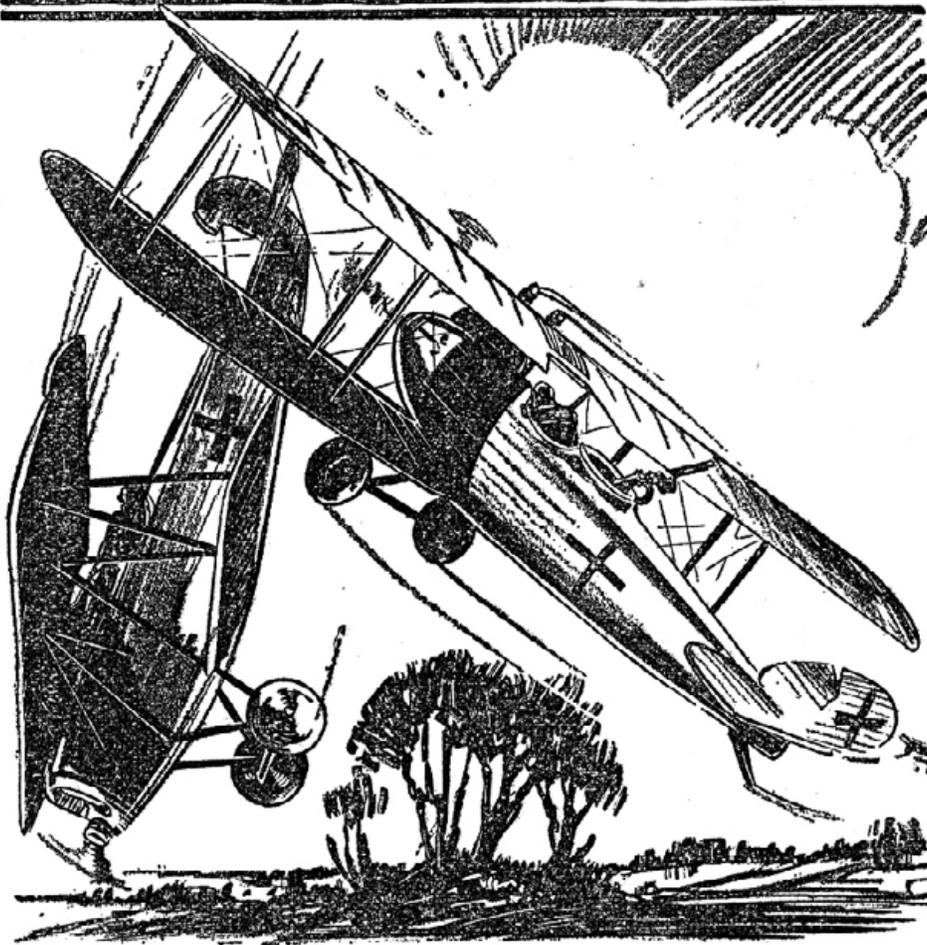


MISSING MEN



The Hun swerved, got away

Thirteen Ships Down With Motor Failure—And No Logical Explanation of It All!

By CAPT. KERRY McROBERTS

Author of "The Flying Kitchen," "Air Pirates," etc.

LEUTENANT BEN HAWLEY'S keen eyes glinted through his goggle glasses. The German L. V. G. came out of a swirling bank, showed its tail plainly beneath him. The American shoved the stick forward, sent his arrowing Spad down like a plummet with guns leveled, thumbs tense on the Bowden trips.

The six other Spads of the patrol, under

the lead of Captain Barnes, went round and round with a like number of Fokkers in the blue above him. Spandaus and Vickers chattered, sending out leaden messages of death.

The L. V. G. nosed up, went into a swirling bank. Hawley moved the stick quickly, kept on the German ship's tail, pressed his Bowdens as he centered it in

his sights.

But no go! His guns had jammed!

He swore profanely, pulled up into an overhanging cloud. Circling as he rose he remained hidden in the gray blanket of cloud until he cleared his guns.

THEN he kited out on top of the cloud, watching for the L. V. G. two-seater. His hands were ready on the Bowden trips.

But the sky was clear of planes! In all the vast area about him he saw nothing. Hawley pushed his nose wildly down, sent his Spad plummeting through the streaking mists of vapor.

Coming out below, he looked around.

There was no sight of Spad, Fokker or L. V. G. anywhere! The battling planes had vanished into nothingness, leaving no trace on the ground below or in the air.

It seemed impossible. A bare two minutes before they had been there. Hawley threw the Spad on one wing into a tight circle. Another cloud drifted beneath him. He stuck his nose down to dive through it. His motor sputtered, choked, in the very instant that the propeller parted the mists.

He goosed spark and throttle in vain. The motor conked out dead. Hawley swung his head over the cockpit coaming, looked down, spotted a field less than five hundred meters below. It looked good, smooth, but sloping. The trees at its edge suggested a possible hiding place.

Hawley concentrated upon getting down with his dead stick, managed to make it. Just as he leaped out of the still-rolling plane, a series of revolver shots smashed at him, whistled over his head. A chorus of German voices shouted stern commands.

Staring back down the hill the American saw his accosters, four Hun pilots, running toward him. Lugers sprouted menacingly in their hands. One of them called out in precise, crisp English:

“Surrender! Stand away from your plane!”

Hawley did not move. His eyes narrowed, blazed suddenly.

Behind the running figures, shrouded in the shadows of the first fringe of trees, was a patrol of Fokkers. Grouped a bit apart were a like number of Spads. Hawley counted the ships while the German pilots raced toward him. Six Fokkers. Six Spads.

His own ship made the thirteenth plane!

There had been thirteen whirling single-seaters in that short battle of death above this same location less than five minutes before. It seemed incredible. Yet there they were! Each Spad had the *cocarde* of his own squadron!

“Hands up, before I shoot!”

THE German’s command was imperative. Yet, these men seemed to be not entirely sure of themselves. Their movements, their faces bore the unmistakable marks of worry, strain, fear.

Hawley threw up his hands indolently. His own service revolver dangled from a belt slung around his flying suit. The Hun pilots surrounded him, marched him down the slope of the hill.

Voices came from the woods, American voices. Hawley smelled cigarette smoke, a familiar blend. A few steps farther and a squad of German infantrymen came out and took him over from the flyers. His new captors marched him deeper into the woods, and herded him into a group of six airmen who wore the uniform of Yankee pilots—his own squadron mates!

“Well, I’ll be—!”

“For the love o’ hell, will you look at what’s here?”

“Hello, Ben! Hey, it’s Hawley!”

HE stopped, stared at the six other members of the flight he had lost, the

men who had so mysteriously disappeared. They had been sitting on the ground under the trees, but they leaped to their feet at his approach. The Prussian guards kept the group covered with Mausers. "Come, join our merry little party!" the Americans yelled.

But there was no merriment in their tone. Hawley looked at Captain Barnes, the flight leader. The man's face portrayed a welter of emotions—lost confidence, rage, disbelief. The others, behind their attempted indifference, wore much the same expression. And the German pilots who had followed them under the trees, did not look very different.

"Motor trou—"

Something in Barnes' flickering eyes made Hawley stop the words of explanation.

These Boche were too alert. There was something queer here! Hawley wondered about it, as a prisoner he joined the others. But there was no opening, no chance to speak.

Suddenly he became aware of something he had not heard before, although the sound had been there all along. It was the not very distant report of rifle and machine-gun fire, the clash of artillery. The full force of the near-by fighting hit him with a dull shock.

Spincourt Forest! They were in the middle of a concerted attack—Hun against Yank. They were down, with strangely crippled ships, and the barrage was closing in on them. On Fokker and Spad alike. Even the Boche infantrymen guarding them were beginning to show signs of fright despite their Teutonic stoicism.

But that was not all!

Seven Spads could not all be forced down by concerted motor trouble! It was beyond any law of averages, beyond anything in motor failure ever heard of before. Within the space of a few seconds,

too! Ben Hawley edged closer to Captain Barnes.

"What was it?" he whispered, keeping an eye on the Huns.

Barnes' face darkened, took on a brooding look.

"Damn it, Hawley, I don't know! And worse, the same thing that happened to us happened to the Boche. *"Those Fokkers cut out and came down with us!"*

Hawley sat down on the ground, wordless. Thirteen ships down with motor failure! What was it? He gave a fleeting thought to the L. V. G. cruising above that high cloud through which he had dived.

SIX Boche pilots came toward them. Faces set, eyes gleaming in the shadows of the trees. One of them barked a few words at the guards, who held their guns at more menacing angles. Then the men were lined up and marched back through the trees to the short field where the landing had been made.

The procession was halted by a sharp command from the leading Boche pilot, who saluted sharply, clicking his heels smartly, as a new officer appeared. The German wore on his shoulder strap a gold and silver twist—the insignia of a major general. Hawley noticed that he wore no wings.

Beyond him, partially up the slope, an L. V. G. two-seater squatted, its exhaust snout black against the slope of the field. A head bobbed in the pilot's seat of the observation plane.

A shell screeched across the trees. It hit, exploded, sending up a spray of roots, branches, dirt. Another shell followed, burst closer to them. The sound of machine-gun and rifle fire was getting nearer. High above, shooting behind the clouds, a squadron of planes disappeared. American or Boche—there was no telling.

THE staff officer began speaking. His clipped guttural words were translated by a Hun flyer acting as interpreter.

"You are each, by order of the High Command, sentenced to be shot as spies immediately. There will be no trial."

Captain Barnes stepped forward, attempted to argue, protest. He was shoved back at the point of a Luger. Hawley shouted aloud:

"Damn you! We're pursuit pilots. There's not a spy among us. We demand, as ordinary prisoners of war, that we—"

The words were knocked from his mouth by a Hun guard. The fist that crashed against his face was followed by a second from the opposite side. Hawley staggered. Blood spurted from a gash in his cheek, from his nose. He ducked the third blow. The staff officer was still speaking.

"Your personal effects," the *oberleutnant* interpreted, "will be returned to your squadron, or sent directly to the International Red Cross, for forwarding home. You will, of course, not be reported shot as spies. Instead, the usual 'killed in action' notice will be—"

His voice was drowned in the screech and thud of a seventy-five. It hit so close that dirt spattered their clothes. The Hun brass-hat barked another command and the six German pilots ran abruptly toward their Fokkers.

Hawley, his blood tasting salty in his mouth, saw the pilots lurch their planes around, saw several Kraut infantrymen help them get the ships started, heard the sharp beat of the exhausts. And then the order to march was barked at him and his companions.

Hawley saw the dazed faces of his flying companions, their eyes veiled with disbelief.

White anger, the resentment of desperation, began to boil inside Ben Hawley. The Fokkers were crawling over

the slope, getting into position to take off. The back of the staff officer was stiffly outlined as he strode toward the L. V. G. two-seater.

HAWLEY'S hand, swinging at his side, hit against the holster and the Colt belted over his flying suit. His companions were unarmed. German supremacy, bravado, had ignored his own revolver.

Without warning his companions, he swung the weapon out. The guard on his right saw the movement, swung his rifle. Hawley's Colt roared. The guard yelled, toppled. As Ben leaped past him, another guard fired. The bullet clipped Hawley's sleeve. He ignored it, aimed at the back of the retreating staff officer, who whirled at the sound of close firing.

The major general had his gun out. Hawley saw its flash, felt the zip of air as the bullet from the Luger missed him. He saw the officer keel over on his knees, then slump as the .45 slug from the Colt tore through his chest.

BEHIND him his companions were slugging, whipped into frenzied action by Hawley's sudden, unexpected attack. A shell screeched, smacked the ground between him and the guards.

Hawley was running, dodging. The head and shoulders of the pilot in the L. V. G. sprang into sight as the Boche tried to get into the observer's cockpit.

Hawley shot at him, missed, and saw the man reach toward the twin machine-guns mounted in the rear cockpit. The guns swung toward him. He stumbled, knelt, aimed. Although his eyes were staring straight into the muzzles of the twin Parabellums, the hand and fingers on his own gun were steady. He pulled the trigger, felt the Colt kick; aimed and fired again.

The pilot leaned, toppled over the cockpit, hanging across the cowling on his

stomach.

Hawley sprang up, raced forward. Rifles cracked behind him, whining perilously close as he ran. He gained the side of the plane, got behind it, reached into the gunner's cockpit. With one mighty heave he tossed the dead pilot out.

Sweating, he scrambled across the fuselage, tumbled into the pilot's cockpit. The motor was still turning over, idling. He found the throttle, saw that the Spandaus were loaded, ready. Then he gunned the Mercedes. The plane rolled ahead, swerved as he kicked rudder and reversed his stick. He let the wind go to hell and raced forward. The tail came up. He got into the air, holding her down for speed.

At fifty feet elevation he banked almost vertically, came around, straightened, tipped the nose down and tripped the Spandau triggers.

The surge of battle, of revenge, broke free in him. Ben Hawley became, for a few hellish moments, a demon. His one desire was to knock down as many Boche riflemen as he could get inside his sights.

He pulled up, a sharp, quick wingover with full power, and came at them again, guns spitting, eyes blazing. The Germans raced, dodging for the shelter of the trees. For everyone who got into the woods, three fell, kicking, dying.

Hawley saw four of his companions run for their Spads. The others, he guessed, must have been put forever out of the way.

He kept on going. He laced the tree fringe with raining lead, dived, zoomed, banked; came down again, guns chattering. Four Spads waddled out, shoved by the Yanks of his squadron. Hawley's vicious fire protected them, held off the Boche.

IT was time to ease off. He pulled up, circling, looking over the strange cockpit in which he sat.

From above, suddenly, came the whine of machine-gun fire. Hawley stared up, saw the Fokkers returning down, guns blazing. They had seen, finally, what was coming off on the field. He began to climb, hoping to intercept them.

Below him he could see the Spads getting into the air, one at a time. He banked, climbing steeply. As he looked down again, he saw a long wire whipping under him, dangling from the fuselage of his plane.

The Fokkers were getting close. Three of them shot past him, going down at the Spads. They seemed wary of him; they made no direct attack. The other three Boche ships circled above, waiting, their Spandau fire withheld.

Hawley could not figure it out. But he didn't wait to think.

He shot the L. V. G. over on her nose, from a thousand feet, kicked her onto the tail of a Fokker and fired. The Hun swerved, got away. Hawley went after the next plane, driving viciously toward it. And still the three Fokkers above him did not come down to attack.

The third Fokker got directly in his sights. He held the Spandaus on it, loosened a long, steady burst. Suddenly the guns stopped, their ammunition belts run through. But the Fokker dove down. It hit on a wing, bounced, came down again on its nose.

It went over three times, crashing on its back and crumpled. A blazing light shot up from the crash, then rolling smoke.

Hawley pulled up, looking for more ammunition. The cockpit seemed empty. He ducked under the cowling, searching. Here, too, there was nothing. He swore, looked up at the three Fokkers circling above. Then he stood in the cockpit, turned, leaned over and groped inside the observer's pit.

HIS eyes stared, and he tried to comprehend what he saw there. A neat batch of boxes, with dials, switches, gadgets. It looked like a wireless outfit, a two-way set. There was a head phone, a speaker and also a wireless key. But it looked too complicated, too big and heavy, to be only a means of communication. That could not be the reason the Fokkers stayed away from him!

He found what he was looking for—ammunition. The L. V. G. was beginning to sway, about to fall off on a wing. Hawley grabbed the bandoliers, yanked them back into his own cockpit, jammed them in place. He tested the guns. They rattled. He righted the machine, swooped down again, got on the tail of a Fokker climbing for a Spad. His Spandaus clattered. The Fokker leveled, wobbled, then shot straight down, shattering on its nose.

The third Fokker down there was running away. And the four Spads were free, going up to get the three circling Huns. Hawley started to climb again, to join the fight. The Spads reached his elevation, formed around him, formed a flight of five.

The Boche changed their tactics. They climbed rapidly, appeared to be trying to run away. Then they banked, dove with guns blazing. Tracers ripped the sky.

THE Fokkers were out to get Hawley now. They concentrated upon that L. V. G., ignoring the other planes. One black-crossed fighter shot straight through the Americans' formation.

A second Fokker got a burst in at him. The tracers broke through the fuselage in front of him, lifted in an arch as he shoved the stick forward, and settled behind his seat.

Hawley tried to come up again, but the Hun kept on him. There was another Boche coming in from the side, a Spad on its tail.

Hawley was in a cross fire. He kept going down.

The Fokker on his right went up sharply, hung suspended, and started to spin. The ship completed three revolutions before it hit the ground.

Now there was one Fokker left.

The Boche pilot was desperate. He did not try to get out of the way of the Spads now. Instead, he kept on Hawley's tail, firing, dodging even as Hawley dodged.

The ground got close, too close. Ben Hawley had to get out of that wild dive. He began pulling up. The tracers ate through the center section over his head, and he ducked, hunching his shoulders. He had to bank to keep from crashing. As he swirled around, the Hun anticipated his movement. Lead began pouring into his motor. The Mercedes sputtered, coughed, died suddenly.

Hawley went into a quick, steep glide, hurtled some trees. He saw the dry brook slip under him, kicked rudder up the slope, and felt his wheels hit. The ship slid, pancaked, began to splinter as it stopped, tail in the air. Hawley scrambled out, afraid of fire; but habit had made him snap off the switch.

Before the ship had stopped rocking on its nose, he was climbing up into the gunner's cockpit. Above him he saw the Spads circling. He waved at them. The Fokker was streaking off north, the last of its flight. The Spads were sticking to protect him. Hawley slipped into the rear cockpit. Inside he saw what he had seen before, but more clearly now.

Hawley knew something of radio, of the new experiments. He tore at the instruments, trying to get them loose. They were fixed in solidly. He started to make a more thorough examination, fixing each detail firmly in his mind.

A RIFLE cracked, a bullet sang close to him. He stared over the rim of the cowling. A group of Germans were coming toward him, shooting as they advanced. They were the same infantrymen who had stood guard over the flight before.

Hawley ducked.

He remembered that there was one Spad left on the slope, down under those trees. Maybe he could get to it.

Hawley leaped to the ground and ran toward the bottom of the slope. The Huns were disappearing back into the woods, driven by the diving, swooping Spads.

He reached the ship under the trees. Lifting the tail, he carted it around. Then he started on the motor, praying it would click. Choke, gas, a few spins of the prop with the switch off. He ran around, snapped the switch, ran back.

The prop swung down under his weight. It poised, wobbled against compression, stopped. He swore, tried again. A rifle bullet snipped his leg, drawing blood. He swung again on the prop. It came down hard, went over the point, kicked back. It caught, began to whirl. Hawley was around at the throttle in a quick lunge.

THE artillery fire had moved north a quarter mile. Shells dropped sporadically into the field, falling short of their mark. That was a break, anyway. Overhead the Spads still circled.

The rifle fire from the woods increased as the Spad taxied out and crossed the dry bed of the brook.

The bullets began eating up his tail, swung toward his cockpit.

His motor was not warm enough to take off.

He kicked rudder, got the ship around, jerked the triggers of the guns on his nose. They chattered. His shots were too high. But they had their effect of fright. The

machine-gun fire from the woods stopped. Even the rifle fire quit.

Hawley goosed the motor, ran her up with the choke still partially out. The Hisso's tachometer needle swung over to bare flying speed. He kicked the plane across the slope, gunned full throttle, and began shoving ahead, one wing slanting down with the hillside.

The single-seater zoomed, barely clearing the tree-tops. It settled a little, skimming the upper branches. Hawley nursed it along, began to climb. A ship shot past him, the pilot waving. That was Barnes, letting him know they were still with him. There was not a Fokker in the sky as they flew home. The fighting on the ground drifted behind them. Spincourt Forest disappeared.

Lieutenant Ben Hawley relaxed physically, but his mind was a millrace, trying to figure what had happened.

MAJOR LAWRENCE greeted the returning flight with his usual gruffness. He refused to show the worry he had left. The men assembled in the major's quarters for their report.

The officer in charge of motor repair was called in.

"Seven Hisso duds!" Major Lawrence stormed. "Something's got to be done about it! Seven, mind you! I'll have you—"

Lieutenant Ben Hawley made a request. "Will you call in your radio expert, Major?"

"This is motor trouble; nothing to do with radio-telephone!"

"I know, sir, but—"

Hawley won. Captain Larson was summoned. He came into the small room smiling, but something in Hawley's eyes made him sober. Hawley was drawing on a piece of paper—lines representing hook-ups, coils, transformers. Crude pictures. Larson and the others watched, bent over,

wondering what it was all about. "Good theory!" Captain Larson exclaimed.

"More than that, Captain, as you'll see," Hawley insisted. "Remember, I flew that L. V. G., and I examined the stuff in that gunner's cockpit. Besides, that Boche staff officer was from the German experimental headquarters laboratories. I saw his insignia. Now watch."

Deftly, quickly, he traced with a pencil the lines he had drawn. His language was untechnical and several times Captain Larson, the radio expert, looked at him curiously.

"A theory," Hawley was saying, "yet it's the only answer!"

LARSON took the subject away from him, eyes suddenly bright.

"Damn! He's right! It *is* possible! See, here's what happened. The Boche laboratories were trying to work out a system of radio waves that will stop magnetoes. Our Intelligence reports them working on it for some time. So!

"They are ready to try it out in actual combat. They rig an L. V. G., send up a second observation plane for bait. The Spads and the Fokkers get in the way, get

in a fight. But it's a swell chance for the experiment. They try it. But something they haven't figured on happens. Two things, in fact:

"First, the apparatus only works in form of clouds. Second, they haven't been able to shield their own motor magnetoes against the invisible waves. In consequence both Spads and Fokkers are forced down."

Major Lawrence began to sputter. Larson smiled grimly. Ben Hawley, face twisted in thought, spoke:

"And the Fokker pilots didn't know what it was all about, either. They sent for help, so the L. V. G. came down finally with that staff officer. They didn't dare let the secret get out, so they intended to bump us all off as spies."

"But that second attempt?" Barnes demanded. "You weren't forced down with us."

Hawley shrugged, grinned wryly.

"Just the old Teutonic persistence," he answered. "They didn't get me the first whack, wanted to find out what was wrong, so picked on me for a second shot."

"I think," commented Captain Barnes, cryptically, "they'll know better next time!"