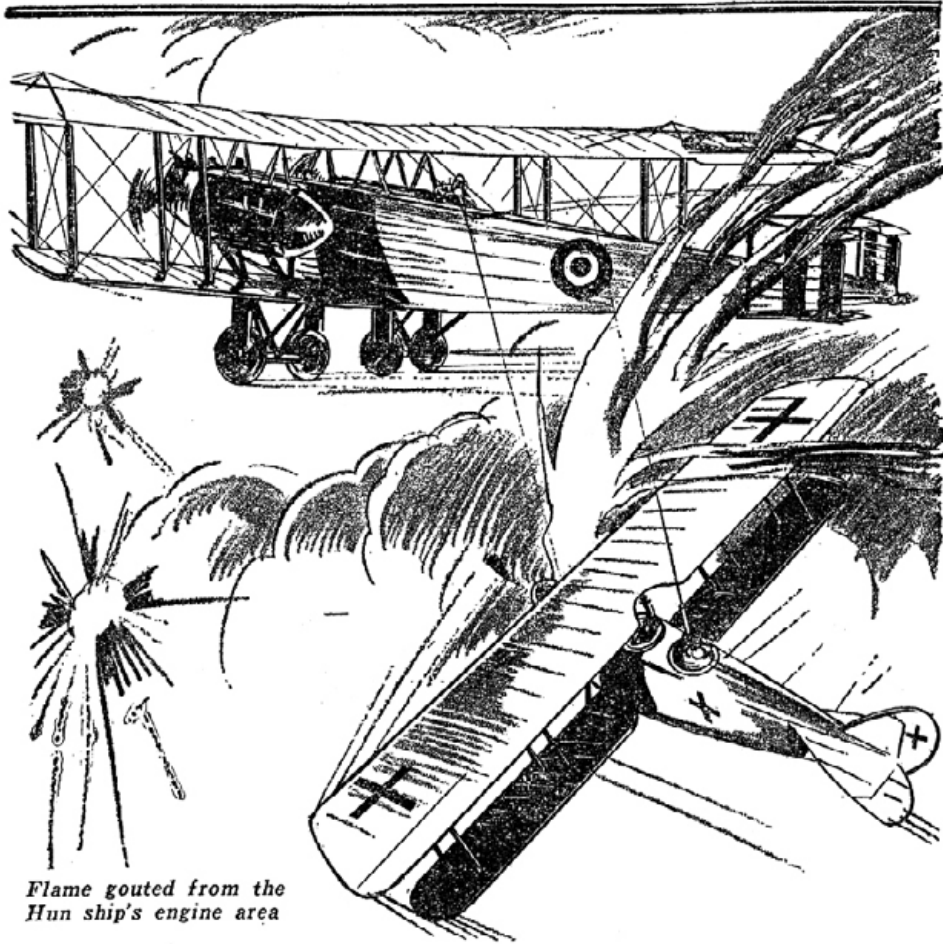


NIGHT EAGLE



Flame gouted from the Hun ship's engine area

Johnny Blair Was All Set to Smash the German Ammo Dump to Smithereens—But His Bombs Proved to be Duds!

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

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THRUM—a—thrum. Thrum—a—thrum—. Weird, chilling, like the whirring sound of monster wings throbbing out of the nothingness of a strange world, a big Handley Page bomber droned into the night.

All at once, from the black maw below, a blinding flash of light slashed the

sky main, to sweep back and forth like the fiery tail of some mythical reptile.

Topside, in the pilot's seat, Lieutenant Johnny Blair ripped out a bitter oath. The German light batteries had their number. It seemed that each time a Handley got anywhere near the lines, these devilish lights had its track all marked.

Blair shot a swift glance at his navigator, but Lieutenant Rawlin, seated at Blair's left, had the face of a sphinx—expressionless; the navigator was busy with his charts and instruments. To-night there must be no mistake! The colossal German dump must go!

Blair scribbled a note and handed it across to Rawlin.

"Of course," came a hurried reply. "Give 'em hell with your Coopers."

Johnny grinned, and his right hand slipped from the control wheel to the toggles of his Cooper bombs. Beneath him, in their "egg-crate" racks were six deadly little twenty-pound Cooper bombs.

Johnny Blair brought the nose of his monster around into wind. The Hun searchlights were now hooking up into batches of four, or six, trying to hook the British night eagle in one or more of their deadly forks. Blair eased the nose of the ship down, his eyes focused on the ground works of a battery. With a sharp hiss, he pulled, and a Cooper screamed through space.

A BLINDING flash followed, a flash which brought a grin to the Yank's set face. He swung off a point to the north and this time ripped out two bombs.

Before his sixth Cooper had been discharged, every searchlight on the immediate sector had blinked out. Now Blair came around in his seat and swung the bomber back on her course. There was serious work ahead. Twenty Squadron had been chosen to smash the most important Hun ammunition and gas dump on the western front. Up to the present, this squadron had failed. The Hun, crafty as a fox, had shifted his dump from time to time, erecting dummies here and there, which had completely fooled British Intelligence service.

To-night, of all nights, Blair and his

buddy must come through. They had a line on the real dump. Rawlin would make no error in the course. As a navigator, he was hard to beat.

But, in spite of the fact that Blair had snuffed out the Hun lights, the warning had been wired back to German rear Headquarters. Now, from a sector deeper into Hun territory, other beams struck up, to sweep the entire track of the Handley Page. Archies commenced their barrage—random fire, as yet, but dangerous.

RAWLIN was on his feet. He nodded to Blair as he strode past to the bows, to the forward gun pit. Stretched out ahead of the forward pit, like the prow of some windjammer, were the bomb sights.

Rawlin took post, peering out into the flame-shattered night. He scribbled a message and slipped it into a small container. This, in turn, he attached to an overhead wire and gave the apparatus a jerk.

Much after the manner in which store clerks hoisted their money from counter to cashier, bomber messages were hoisted back from navigator to pilot.

"Off a point to starboard," Rawlin had written. "Swing her over and stand by. We're almost on—"

"Almost on!" Johnny Blair's frame stiffened. His teeth gritted hard as he repeated the last words of the message. Could they score a win tonight! Soon, it would be too late, for if the big dump didn't go by the board, the Huns would be able to continue their effective March drive.

JOHNNY swung on the wheel. Through slitted eyes he watched the line of flight. Success tonight would mean that Twenty Squad's name would go back on the map in big caps. This shoot, if a success, would be the most spectacular in

the war's history. Thousands of tons of German ammo and gas would erupt skyward in a thunderous upheaval. The sky would be lit for miles—

The mad chatter of Spandaus suddenly brought a sharp cry from the Yank's set lips. From a crouch above the wheel, his head jerked erect. Sheets of thin flame sliced the sky. The red tracer devils were spitting venomously.

Blair jerked on a wire which connected with the two sergeant gunners in the rear gun pit.

A topside Lewis swung quickly on its Scarf mounting and commenced to sputter. Through a grid deck in the same pit, the other gunlayer tore out a warning burst. Forward, a single gunner slit the night with a burst from twin Lewis.

Bullets now smacked the woodwork and struts. Blair banked over right, so that his rear topside gunlayer might have an open field of fire.

The Yank's teeth bared in a grin as he caught the savage, staccato crackle of the little Lewis.

The Hun archie batteries had ceased fire, for the moment, while the fighter planes buzzed above the Britisher. But Blair was wise to this night work. He knew that as soon as he turned the Handley's nose into wind, to unload, hell would vomit up its devilish vitals in a mad phantasmagoria.

The Yank slipped off. A bullet had spattered against his dash. Rawlin was signaling. Standing like some Viking skipper at the prow of a windjammer, the navigator was ready to unload.

Blair got the message. He gulped back a lump which had clogged in his parched throat. His guns had turned away the Hun planes. He was swinging around, into wind. Rawlin's right hand was raised.

The atmosphere tensed. Blair felt that his mouth and throat would crack open. As

he came around, a sudden chatter of sky guns caused him to start. He half turned. A German two-seater had taken a full burst from one of Blair's rear guns. A horrible cough of flame gouted from her engine area, and she hurtled earthward in a series of sloppy flaming spirals.

The passing of the Hun ship was a signal to the archie. Shells ripped skyward, screaming demons of hell, to burst on every hand. Fanlike sprays of shrapnel deluged the track of the bomber, but Johnny Blair gunned his Eagle Eights for the last ounce of their power.

His nose was into the wind. Rawlin's right arm flashed down. The bomber was dead on her target, the target that had fooled the British so many times. The navigator jerked a release lever, and Blair zoomed his night eagle clear of a batch of flaming onions. As he banked away, the Yank pilot searched the wastes below, for the tell-tale flash which would herald the passing of the dump.

ONE—two—three— He counted the seconds, his breath coming in sharp hisses. But the seconds passed, stretching to a half minute. Rawlin was staggering back to his seat on Blair's left. He slumped into a seat.

The bombs were duds! There had been no detonation! Something had gone wrong!

Johnny Blair spat an oath from his parched lips. The full realization of their failure had suddenly dawned on him. That ammunition was a dud.

HAD they, before leaving, pulled the safety pins? Blair scribbled a note which he passed quickly to the navigator. Rawlin lifted his head languidly, without any showing of particular interest. As the big bomber throbbed for home, the world had lost all interest for the navigator. But

Rawlin came suddenly alive. He stabbed a message pad with pencil and tore off the sheet. This he handed to Blair.

"Of course I pulled the damn pins. You checked them off. You have them in your rack. Count them."

Before taking off with a bomb load, it is the duty of the navigator to remove the safety pin from the nose of each bomb. These pins are given to the pilot, who counts them. Blair had checked them. Now he remembered. His hand slipped to a small, shallow rack at his right side, and his fingers toyed with eight hard metal pins.

The Yank was quick to apologize. Next, he commenced a search for a solution. Why hadn't those bombs detonated? Was it just plain dud ammo, or—had there been some light fingered interference?

"Those bombs were cooked," he breathed. "No reason in God's world why they shouldn't have detonated. The pins were pulled. That released the relay fuses. I— Humph! And our goose is cooked. Twenty Squadron's all shot to hell. The major'll lose his job, and—" A low cry escaped him. Major Haig had been as square as commanders came, a white shooter if ever there was one. Wing had been on his tail for some time now, for the squadron hadn't come through.

Down—Gasoline flares lighted the crippled eagle to the tarmac. Like some prehistoric monster winging home from battle, or the hunt, the bomber settled down on the turf, and Blair switched off.

He and Rawlin handed over and strode to their billet. Fate had played from a cold deck. The cards had been stacked against them. They must have time to think, to talk the matter over—

“YOU failed!” Major Haig snapped, his cold gray eyes now flashing

barbs of flame.

"Those bombs were duds, sir," snapped the Yank, handing over his written report.

"What! Incredible! Do you know what you are saying?" The major had scraped back his chair and was on his feet before the pilot.

"Exactly, sir. We were dead on the target. Rawlin made a perfect shoot, but—those bombs were duds, save for the Coopers, which I was forced to let go on searchlight batteries. I'm sorry, sir, damned sorry. You know that. Both Rawl and I were so sure of ourselves. That's all, sir. One gunlayer wounded, in a fight with a Halberstadt."

Major Haig ran a hand through his already tousled hair. He had always held these two youngsters in the highest esteem.

But, hell! They had failed, and Wing already knew of the failure. Every pilot on brigade knew of it by this time. It was possible that by tomorrow the Germans would have transferred the most of their ammo from the dump to forward positions, or to a number of scattered dumps, which would be hard to find.

"This failure means the end for me, gentlemen," the squadron commander observed, a little bitterly. "It's hinted here, in the Wing stuff." He ruffled a bunch of hot message sheets from Headquarters.

"But, sir, I said our load was dud," urged Blair. "Are you responsible for that?"

The major spun around.

"Dud! Yes, you did say that, Blair. You seem to insist. I'll ring for Speers."

In a few moments the armament officer entered.

"Mr. Speers, you heard of the failure of the 14 tonight. Lieutenants Blair and Rawlin insist that their load was dud, that is—the heavies failed to detonate. Have

you any reason for this?"

Major Haig shot his armament officer a keen, piercing look. Speers was a specialist in his line, a wizard with explosives.

"Whenever anything goes wrong with a shoot," he snapped, "the first thing you think of is faulty ammunition. Your ammo was all right. I have it on good authority that you weren't on your target. Ninety-Seven stood by, but you failed to unload on the dump. You—"

"It's a lie!" Johnny Blair sprang forward, but Rawlin caught his arm. Major Haig also intervened.

"Steady, Blair," jerked the chief. "Let's not forget ourselves in ironing this matter out. Anything else, Speers?"

"IF these chaps insist that they did unload, sir, all I can think of, further, is that they omitted to remove the pins before taking—"

"The pins were pulled!" It was Rawlin who cut in this time.

Through slitted eyes, the armament officer shot the young navigator a withering glance, then turned to the major.

"I'd like proof that those pins were pulled, sir," he said, a touch of irony in his tone. "These gentlemen are trying to shift the onus on to my shoulders. I want those pins, before investigating this matter any further. Would you be good enough to have an orderly get them, sir?"

"Certainly. Orderly—" The C. O. dispatched his orderly to 14's hangar.

A TENSE silence followed. Save for the hiss of escaping air as Speers shot tobacco smoke through his set lips, there was no sound.

Inside of ten minutes the orderly was back in the room. He strode smartly up to the major's desk, shooting sidelong glances at Rawlin and Blair.

"There were no pins in Number 14, sir," he snapped.

"What!" The exclamation came simultaneously from Blair and his navigator. "The devil you say," added the Yank. "I want to tell you that the pins were in my rack shortly before landing. I—"

"One moment, Blair." The major held up a hand, and turned to the retreating orderly.

"Was a thorough search made, Price?" he called.

"Quite, sir. Flight sergeant an' me hunted all over. We even took a flash out an' hunted the landin' spot. Not a sign of a pin, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Will that be all for me, sir?" Speers asked. "You know I am due at Wing Headquarters in an hour."

"H'm—" Major Haig had slumped to a seat. For a long moment he made no reply to Speers. Then his head slowly raised, eyes staring blankly at the opposite wall.

"That will be all, Speers, thanks—all for now," he mumbled. "You two gentlemen may also go."

Rawlin and Blair saluted smartly and moved to the door, through which the armament officer had just passed. But a grunted call from the C. O. arrested them.

"One moment, Blair. You may go if you wish, Rawlin, or—stay. Just as you wish."

Rawlin returned with his buddy. There was something percolating in the chief's mind. He wanted to lend a hand to Blair, if necessary.

For another dragged-out moment the major sat and gazed into nothingness, then with a suddenness that was startling he spun around.

"That dump must go!" he half-snarled, thumping a knotted fist into the desk top so that an inkwell bounced half an inch from its base. "You heard me, Blair?"

“Yes, sir. I—well, it isn’t our fault that it hasn’t gone already. Now just a minute, Major. Our honor has been slammed by that—that—by Speers. I think Rawlin and I have a right to be heard. Once and for all, we were not only on our target but unloaded the heavies, direct hits, with no effect. Those pins were pulled and in the 14’s rack when I landed.”

“**B**UT, great heaven, man! You’re suggesting that there’s crooked work afoot in my squadron. Who would deliberately steal those pins? And for what reason? Has anyone any personal grudge against either Rawlin or yourself?”

“Nothing personal, sir, but—well, I’m forced to say it, someone removed those pins with malicious intent against—uh, I—”

“Go on, yes, Blair—go on,” prompted the major.

“A spy agent, sir!”

“What! Good God! Are you insane, Blair?”

“I insist, sir. Coming home, the thought occurred to me, but I lost it, and might never have considered it again, were it not for the fact of those missing pins. Pins don’t walk out of cockpits, Major, nor do mechanics, nor pilots remove them for souvenirs. They were deliberately stolen.”

“By whom?” snapped the chief.

“**T**HAT is for us to find out, sir. I’m not naming anyone. Now, sir, Rawlin and I are willing to back you to the limit in running this down. We refuse, however, to be charged with neglect tonight. We did our duty, and, through no fault of ours, it was a wash-out. You had something to suggest, sir, when I—”

“Ah, yes, by gad!” The major was plainly shaken, moved by the audacity of Blair’s statements. A spy! Great heaven, this seemed utterly impossible—and yet,

Haig had no reason to doubt the word of his young pilot whose record was as good as that of any pilot on brigade.

“Damn me, Blair, whether I think you’re right on the spy angle or not, I accept your flight report and believe that you and Rawlin did as you report. Now—that dump must go. In one hour, we take the sky, in the 13, you and I, Blair. No reflection on your navigating ability, Rawlin, but I want to be directly responsible. Orderly—” Haig stirred up the snoozing man, who flew to the desk.

“Message to Mr. Speers. I want 13 loaded with two two-fifty heavies and the usual six Coopers. Have the crew of 13 warm her up and ready at the deadline at one hour from now, sharp.”

“Yes, sir.” The man was off like a shot.

“You’d better have a bite, Blair, and a good stiff drink,” the C.O. advised the Yank. “Rawlin, if you don’t mind, I’d give a lot to know what happened to those pins. You came from Intelligence to us, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir. With Scotland Yard for a time previous to that. I’ll be very glad to look into this. Now I come to think of it, since Blair opened the channel of thought for me, I wonder, have often wondered, about MacDougal’s death over Lens last November; and in February, young Teddy Brine washed-out, for no apparent reason. I—well, sir, I’ll give this matter of the pins my attention.

“Sorry indeed that you must go up. You’ll barely make it by daylight. If I might suggest, sir, beware of that dummy south. It’s very natural. But—of course Blair is familiar with that. Come on, Johnny, you’ll need some food.”

THE two young officers withdrew, leaving the major alone with a maelstrom of thoughts swirling—

swirling—swirling in a mind that had known enough strain of late.

Outside, the lieutenants got their heads in close.

“Fine of you to come out flatfooted like you did, Johnny,” snapped the navigator. “I believe you’re right. No question of it. I’ll bet you could put your finger on our enemy right now, couldn’t you?”

“H’m—Geez, Rawl, let’s go get a drink. Now—for God’s sake find those missing pins, then watch me put a finger on this spy bird. Lord! To think I’ve got to run that blasted gauntlet again to night! He’ll be waiting for us this time all right, buddy. I’d lay you ten to one he knows we’re coming before we hit the deadline.”

They moved on and turned into the mess hut. But Blair immediately broke away. He strode quickly to the ammunition pits where he found Speers hard at work.

“**H**ARD at it, Speers?” the Yank commented casually, as he moved in close. Speers looked up with a start, and grunted a low oath beneath his breath.

“Hard at it, Blair. I’m due at Wing,” he snapped. “Suppose I’ll get hell from that quarter for being late. That adjutant’s a swine—”

“A what?” cut in the Yank eagerly.

“Well, you know him,” snarled the other. “Now, would you mind passing over that case of fuses there? My men are all away tonight. Let ‘em off when you pulled out.”

“Relay fuses, aren’t they, Speers?” queried the Yank, handing over the case. “Pretty dud stuff without these, huh?”

“Yes. No use at all,” was the stiff reply. “These are inserted at the tail, here—” Speers inserted a long relay to demonstrate. “Function the same as a time fuse on a shell. When you draw your

safety pin you permit these relays to get into action. That is, when the bomb is released, the shock sets these fuses off, and they burn away in flight, releasing the plunger to the main detonator which explodes on contact with the ground. There—that’s one. The other, please.”

With deft fingers the armament officer made up his load. Johnny Blair stood by, watching the operation with more than usual interest.

“Now, I’ll go and shave,” Speers grunted, getting to his feet. “There are your Coopers and heavies all set. Pull the pins before you take off an—well, you know. Coming my way?”

Together they moved off. The loader crew would see that the 13 was properly loaded. As Speers turned into his billet, Blair moved on. But—he quickened his pace. Instead of returning to the mess hut, he slipped into the lecture and recreation hut and helped himself to a piece of white chalk.

Inside of two minutes he was down on his knees beside the heavies Speers had just fused. Quickly he made a white mark of identification on the tail vane of each of the two-fifties. Slipping the chalk into his pocket, he hurried back to the mess hut and ordered a double-header of Scotch. Rawlin was nowhere to be seen.

LESS than an hour later, at the appointed time, a heavy Handley Page taxied to the deadline. Major Haig was standing by, dressed for the flight.

Lieutenant Speers had followed the plane from the bomb pits, and joined his chief. Now Blair sauntered up on the far side and climbed aboard to test his engines and instruments. The Yank’s frame shook violently when he had finished tuning up. Everything was in perfect order, the Rolls Royce twin 360’s purring as smoothly as could be expected of them.

A dark form sidled up to the bomber and Rawlin climbed aboard. He leaned forward, well forward, so that his face almost touched the pilot's.

"Got 'em, Johnny," he snapped. "The pins. Not only that, I've made another discovery. I found two spare relay fuses. Checking up with the armament sergeant, there shouldn't be any spares. What's it mean? Can't you see how we were—"

Blair clutched his buddy's sleeve. "Keep it under your hat. I have a little test to make. Have you your automatic?"

"Rather," replied the Britisher.

"Then come along and stand by. You might see something real, brother." Blair tuned down his engines until they just ticked over. He sprang overside, whistling snatches of a tune, as he turned and strode toward the major.

"Okay, sir; are you ready?" he jerked.

"Quite, Blair. I'll see to those pins. Come along, Speers. I want you to be sure that they are removed this time."

Blair permitted Speers to pass him, then followed the armament officer in under the body of the bomber.

"One—two—" called the major, as he extracted the pins from the heavies and handed them to his pilot. "Now, the Coopers." He jerked out the six pins, which Blair took, and slipped into a pocket.

"That's it, Blair. You have 'em, all eight. Now we can take off. I—"

"ONE moment, sir." Blair moved in close. He snapped a flash lamp from his pocket.

"There's just one thing more I want to check." He threw a beam of light onto the tail vane of a heavy. His teeth clicked hard. The fingers of his right hand closed over the butt of a cold automatic. To Haig's astonishment, the Yank's gun hand leaped out to cover Lieutenant Speers.

"Stick 'em up, you," he snarled.

"Blair! For heaven's sake what's this damn—" The major made a move to catch the Yank's arm, but Blair stepped to one side.

"Up, Speers, you lousy spy," he snapped. Rawlin moved in and jammed his automatic into the armament officer's back.

"Now, sir," Johnny called to the major. "I submit that these are not the bombs Speers marked for us. These, I'll bet, are not fused with relays. Duds, by God! Speers was due at Wing tonight, was he? Like hell he was. He was due to make his getaway. Rawlin found the pins, sir, together with the relays which were left out of our last load."

"Swine!" The expression came in a thick tone from Speers' lips.

"Hear that, sir? Hun, every sound of it. This man killed MacDougal and Ted Brine. He'd have got us all, sooner or later. There isn't time to examine the load of these bombs now, sir. The Coopers will be all right, but I suggest that you reload the bus with those bombs I marked. I—"

MAJOR HAIG took a quick pace toward Lieutenant Speers.

"You, Speers, is this a fact? Are you an enemy agent?" he asked, in a voice quivering with mingled rage and emotion of another kind.

"This Yankee swine wins. I am an enemy agent," snapped the bogus armament officer. "I have served as such for two years, outwitting your Intelligence Department without much bother. You see, I was educated at Oxford. Very little accent. Now—I presume that mine is the usual penalty—the stone wall and the firing squad?"

"If I had my way, no, Speers," snarled the major. "I'd, by gad, I'd get a lot of pleasure from choking you to death. But,

you will be tried. A firing squad will be the penalty, of course.”

“No, sir—not yet,” bellowed the Yank. “Perhaps never. This dog is coming over with us tonight, coming over to take some of the hell I know he’s ordered for our ship.

“Search him, Rawl.”

Rawlin went swiftly over Speers’ person, removing an automatic, a sheaf of papers and, lastly, a small phial, which Speers clutched at.

“No, Speers, you can’t pop off that way,” rapped the Yank. “You go out on board the 13, right under the major’s eye. A phony move, and you’ll get shot down. We’ll show you what it’s like to go through the barrage you’ve signaled your pals to throw on us. Better reload, sir,” Blair called over his shoulder to the major. “Time we were getting off.”

Almost completely overcome, the major strode away. He had no words with which to express his gratitude. He beckoned to a flight sergeant, who leaped aboard and taxied to the bomb pits.

Standing, his arms still up, Lieutenant Speers gazed deeply to eastward, where his eyes found the mad rippling chains of light which flitted along the tortured horizon. A cold shudder shook him. This Yankee youngster meant business. Topside in the 13, death would come forward in a thousand forms.

“Might I smoke, one of you jailers?” he suddenly snapped.

“Rawl!” Blair nodded to his buddy, his gun hand still covering the spy. Rawlin slipped a cigarette between Speers’ lips and lit it.

The plane was roaring back. Pilots were collecting from the huts now, as the story had leaked out.

MAJOR HAIG boarded first, followed by Speers. When his gunlayers were at stations, Johnny Blair swung up. Rawlin

caught at his hand, and—as he squeezed, a film of mist welled up before the Yank’s eyes. He wished that Rawl was going over on this trip.

With a deafening roar, as Blair pressed his throttle in all the way, the 13 slipped from the deadline to rise like some ugly bat-like creature into the dull murk of night.

A low cheer followed the takeoff, a cheer which Blair didn’t hear, however. His eyes were glued to the back of Speers’ head, his ears trained on the beat of his engines.

Very soon, he would be forced to the utmost of his flying skill in dodging those blinding German lights, and the savage burst of a score of archies.

CRUMPH! Cr-r-rumph! Two muffled bursts off the starboard spread threw the 13 into a skid. Blair was forced to fight her, to get her back on an even keel. Sooner than expected, the Hun archies had commenced their bombardment. It was clear that the gunners had received information of the flight.

Again the sky main was slit wide open, and through the port, a fearful inferno of flame leaped. Out of the fathomless maw of the lightning-slashed earth below, a dozen hungry searchlights struck. A blaze of light found the 13, and held. Blair shuddered. At any second he expected a dead-on burst of shrapnel which would be the end.

Crouched in his cramped quarters by the navigator, Speers ran a tongue over his cracked, parched lips. This was the hell he had ordered, but more terrible than he had ever anticipated.

Blair watched the play of emotional changes in the spy’s face. The switching of cheek muscles and changes of expression told a lot and, in a low snarled tone, Johnny cursed him.

Suddenly the big bomber dived. Blair had been forced to throw her down. It seemed that she was beyond control entirely. As she broke from the clutching light fork, a salvo of archies crashed open astern. A gunlayer yelled and fell in a heap on the grid deck.

Blair pulled her back, back until her fuselage groaned under the strain. Ahead, red devils danced against the black sky main. Major Haig wrote out a correction in the course, and Blair zipped an oath as he struggled to bring the Handley around on a starboard tack.

Major Haig prodded Speers in the back with his automatic. The chief was ready to stride forward to the bomb sights. He wanted the spy ahead of him.

Blair watched them stumble forward to the gun pit. A few more miles ahead he would turn into the wind, dead over. But, the violence of the mad strafe intensified.

A sudden burst of flame off the port side heeled the 13 over. Johnny felt a hot stab in his left shoulder. He sagged against the cockpit rim, gasping for breath. A large piece of fabric fluttered out from the upper wing. A hit!

GROGGY, almost out, the Yank struggled not only for control of himself, but for control of the ship. She was skidding badly to starboard. A million lights danced before his vision, lights that were not physical, material things, but the dancing devils of threatening unconsciousness.

Gritting his teeth hard, Blair shook his big frame. He must hang on—hang on. There must be no failure this time.

The 13 was coming out of the slip-off. Johnny was gunning her up. He was on course again, roaring now, wide open. But, as he strained his eyes forward, he gasped. What had happened to the major!

“Good God!” he jerked, miserably. “I wonder if that burst got ‘em all! I—” He broke off short as the Handley yawed. Her starboard engine missed, coughed, then sluggishly responded again. Johnny shot a glance down. His brows jerked up. My God! He was almost on—dead on the target. A low cry escaped him. Haig was out! There was no doubt about this.

Johnny shook off a wave of nausea, now heedless of the flaming night, crashing bursts of archie, and the threat of horror from flaming onions. The Yank hugged the wheel with his chest, and slipped his good hand down to the toggles of the Coopers. With a snarl, he jerked.

ROARING over the dump, he shot a glance down. A mad splash of light burst skyward—red and orange-red. Johnny’s heart thumped madly. He had saved his Coopers this time for the main shoot. He had scored a hit with the full salvo.

He cruised east at full gun for a mile before turning. As he came around he looked down, but a low hiss parted his set lips. The Coopers had just started a fire which could easily be gotten under control.

Johnny swore aloud. Fate had taken a dirty hand against him tonight.

“There’s no such thing as a decent break for Twenty Squad,” he growled. “By the pink-heeled prophet! The chief had to go out, right when the works was in our bag; right when—” He broke off short. A dark form was crawling toward him. Was it the major?

Blair started forward with a jerk. The form was rising. By God! It was Speers. The spy’s arm was coming up. Quick as a striking cobra Johnny flung his chest against the wheel and snatched up his automatic.

Speers' gun, which he had torn from Major Haig's hand in a fierce fight at the forward pit, crashed, but Johnny's was a split second quicker. Two bullets ripped through the Hun's middle and, clutching, reeling, he smashed to the decking, to spredeagle out.

A half-sob choked in the Yank's throat. He could visualize what had happened forward now. Speers had at the last mad close-in crash of archies, when the ship lurched, forced Haig down. He had likely killed the forward gunner and overpowered the major. He was coming back to get Blair when the Yank beat him to the jump.

Now, groggy, almost out from shock, strain and loss of blood, the pilot was forced with the grimmest of checkmates. The dump was scarcely touched. A few small fires were already being snuffed out, and there was no chance of Johnny reaching the forward pit to trip the heavies.

For a moment he cruised around, throwing off lights and archies. His fogging mind was functioning, though. He was forcing it, fighting it. Suddenly he hissed. His throat convulsed as he choked back a lump. There was a way out. From the rear gun pit one of the gunlayers had access to the bomb rack. God! The thought came like a flash from heaven to Blair.

PAINFULLY, under great strain, he scribbled a message, and whisked it aft. It seemed an age before he got a reply. But, the improvised overhead carrier tinkled and Blair reached up eagerly. There was at least one member of his crew alive.

"Right, sir," read the message. "I'll do what I can. Martin is killed. I'm slightly wounded, but, if I can shift Martin's body I can get through to the bombs. When you're ready, sir. We'll get 'em."

Martin killed! Good God! Blair's head sank. The mad crash of a bursting shell pulled him out of a swoon. Alert again, he peered ahead, then down. The ammo dump!

The Handley's nose commenced to come around into the wind.

Had the sergeant made way through the narrow passage to the bombs? A host of thoughts milled in the Yank's mind as he bore steady on the wheel.

Now—he was in a mild dive. Flaming onions strung out into space to meet him, but he drove on. If this was to be his last flight, then—there must be no mistake. Would that gunlayer aft never—

Johnny felt the ship give a sudden lurch forward and upward. Instinctively he knew that the five-hundred pound load had dived earthward. A sharp, hysterical chuckle escaped him, and he gunned all out, to roar across the dump area.

He turned, two merciless, terrible detonations boomed, to blot out all other sounds; and then—from all points of the dump similar or lesser detonations shook earth and sky. Flames coiled up or shot up like hungry tongues lapping at the heavens, and it seemed that earth's very vitals had boomed up through her crust.

Quivering in every limb, the Yank gunned his ship for the ceiling. Her nose was to the west, on the home tack. Crippled, she staggered along like some battered creature of a far world.

JOHNNY was dimly aware of the chatter of a Lewis gun astern. Hun fighters were up, guided by the flash of the Handley's exhaust stacks. One lone gunlayer, in the rear pit, fought them off.

All at once, above the Hun ships, a series of tiny barbs of flame stabbed the sky. A night patrol of British light bombers had struck the battle trail.

Breathing a faint prayer of thanksgiving, the sergeant gunlayer aft sank slowly to the grid deck, his body slumping alongside that of his fallen mate.

A half hour later, or less, Johnny Blair was only dimly conscious. Rushing figures of his squadron mates and the mechanics' staff were all blotted out. In fact, Blair could scarcely see his instrument board.

DOWN—down—Blair's head lolled overside. A wave of cold air slapped his face, and pulled him out of the claiming folds of unconsciousness in the nick of time. He tore at the controls, and was able to slam the 13 down flat in a pancake which crumpled up her landing gear. Blair sagged. There was a figure at his shoulder. Rawlin was yelling to him, calling, shaking.

But Johnny Blair was out, gloriously out.

From the forward gun pit a tall rangy form staggered. The shock of landing hard had pulled Major Haig out of a long period of semicoma. He reeled back, but eager hands caught him.

"Blair!" he gasped. "The dump! That rat Speers got me. What happened?"

"Everything went over big, sir," said Rawlin, steadying the chief overside. "Dump bombed. Speers dead. Blair out, but alive. Forward gunner badly wounded and Sergeant Martin killed. Sergeant Dector slightly wounded. One hell of a night, sir, but—you got 'em, got 'em cold this time. Wing wired in."

"Got 'em! I got 'em. I did, like hell, Rawlin. It was that priceless young Yank—Blair, God bless him. I hope he wakes up soon. By gad! I—there's a lot I want to say. He—" But the strain was too much for the commander. He sagged down limp in Rawlin's arms.