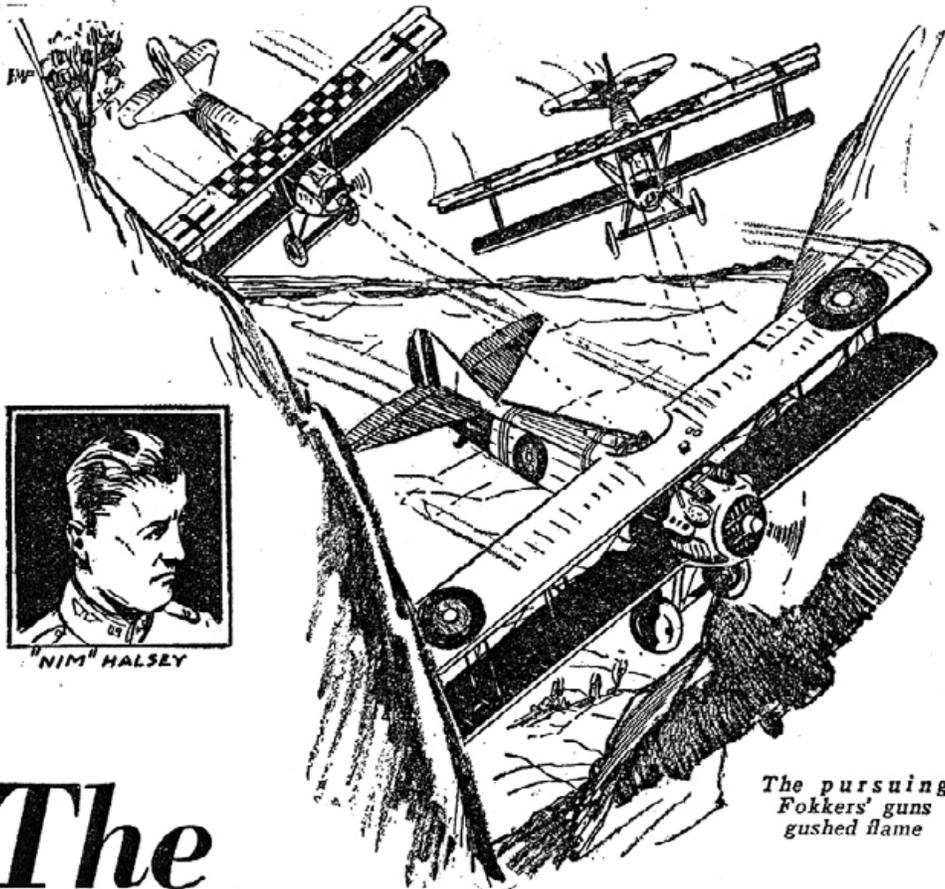


Deep In the Craggy Badlands of the Ardennes, Grim Horror Stalked—and Halsey Had to Act Quickly!



The pursuing Fokkers' guns gushed flame

The Devil's Forest

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ACTING CAPTAIN "NIM" HALSEY flew his Spad like a bullet through the sky. He was long overdue at his tarmac. As a matter of fact there was more to his absence than only a mere A. W. O. L.

This afternoon one of those lazy empty-skied afternoons, when there was positively nothing doing in his patrol sector, he had ordered his flight back, while he had struck on to the southeast, deep in over the badlands of the Ardennes.

There was a strong fascination for Halsey above those craglands and forests. He had made many trips to this sector, though secretly.

He touched in a notch of throttle as he felt the whine of lead past his head. Those two Fokkers which had picked up his trail were burning in very close, and Nim's gas supply was just about napoo. It was a nice cheerful life, this.

He had never been comfortable at Squadron 36, to which he had been

assigned since leaving hospital. The gang there didn't seem as friendly as the old boys at Squad 92. But there was promotion in the move, and Nim had been obliged to accept the position of flight leader at 36. He flew at the head of his flight, however, only when obliged to. He preferred to be alone.

This evening he would have some explaining to do. As he shot a glance back over his shoulder, a grin split his hard thin lips. He saw the limp, small body of a young doe.

Halsey's trips to that badland forest country weren't always for nothing.

The last time he had brought back three monster wild Belgian hares. Today, or at least tomorrow, the mess would feed on succulent venison.

"And why not?" he thought. "Why should some puffy-faced old Jerry general have the right to clean up the small game in those French woods?"

At Halsey's side, in the front pit, was a .303 Savage sporting rifle. But as he thought of his sporting urge, and the kills he had made in the interests of the mess larder, he smiled. The production of game bags was not all that took him to those forests—not by a long shot!

But why the devil should he tell those inquiring buzzards at 36? They might not understand in any case. Halsey had developed into a mysterious sort of chap who was riding for a fall. The C. O. there didn't understand him as had his former major at 92. Anyhow, Nim was fed up.

At that moment all extraneous thoughts were cast from his mind. The Fokkers were gaining, and Nim was forced to maneuver his ship with a recklessness that threw the attacking Germans off.

A COUPLE of Spandau slugs socked hard into the body of the small doe lashed abaft the pit. Another slug clipped

the tip from the lobe of Nim's right ear. It stung like the devil, but he swung his ship over and sent her whirling down in a mad spin, which took him almost into the maw of a gaping crater near the American front line.

Here the Yank ground guns came to his aid. He zoomed clear, but he knew that he would never be able to carry his ship along to Drome 36. His engine was already snorting and belching from lack of gas supply.

He eased her down well within his lines, and handed her over to a battery of howitzers. Then, with the young doe draped around his neck, he strode on for four miles until a truck picked him up and ran him to his squadron.

The pilots of 36 were at their evening meal when the mess hut door burst in, and Nim Halsey strode in.

"Hail, merry men!" he bellowed. "Robin's brought ye a prime doe from yon welkin. He—aw, cripes! Of all the sour-faced bunch of—"

He broke off. The C. O. was on his feet, and Halsey knew that fireworks were about to kick off. He could read it in the expression on Major Dan Durand's face.

"When you've gotten rid of that mess about your neck and washed up, Captain Halsey," Durand snorted, "I'll see you at my office."

"Very good, sir," rapped Nim.

He would have taken a keen delight in sweeping the mess table with the limp form of the small doe.

With a grunt, he moved out, handed the gutted deer to the mess cook, and strode to his quarters, where a pop-eyed orderly met him.

"They tell me you're in wrong, Cap'n," grunted the orderly, a man whom Nim had brought from Squadron 92, the only connection with the old fighting unit.

"Yeah? What's happened, Duffy? Did

all this squadron come out of some ladies' seminary, or are they just natural born sisters of grace? What's on your mind?" The skipper was peeling off, ready to wash.

"Well, sir, I thought you knew. Only two of your flights got in—Lieutenants Dalkin and Palmer are missing. The others don't seem to know what happened. I heard the flight sergeant talkin' it over with Corporal Blanchard. It seems like after you turned the boys back, somethin' happened. It—"

"Something often does happen up there in the sky lanes, Duffy," cut in the skipper. "I'm sorry, I hate to lose a man. I hate the whole of this mad butchery of warfare, Duff. I kill because I have to, because it's legalized killing, but it cuts in deep when I lose a man. They found out where the boys crashed?"

The skipper's voice broke low, and he leaned forward toward his trusted servant.

"No, sir. That's the worst of it. In the first place, they never saw no German aircraft. Maguire an' Peters were flyin' just a little higher an' ahead of Dalkin an' Palmer. It was Maguire who first knew somethin' was wrong. He shot a glance back to see if you were comin', by any chance. First thing he knew his eyes was poppin' out. He was seein' Dalkin an' Palmer wingin' down toward the German lines. They landed—seemin'ly outa control. But nothin' seemed to hit 'em."

"Good Lord!" Halsey scrubbed his face hard with a towel, then flung it from him, and cocked a leg over the edge of his table.

"You mean to say there wasn't any Archie fire, or anything like that, Duff?" he barked.

"NO—well, there was a few bursts of Archie, but though Maguire reported this, he claimed it never came

anywhere near. The squad's pretty upset, Skip. They's a rumor that you're gonna get the air. Gee, it's gonna be tough if they fold you up—with the record you've got."

But Halsey wasn't listening. Something grim was percolating in his mind.

Had the mysterious landing of Dalkin and Palmer anything to do with Halsey's visits to the forests in the badlands?

His slitted eyelids flickered. With a shrug, he reached for his coat, and strode out to join Major Durand at the office.

The news Duffy had given him was, though very sinister and ominous, most gratifying. Nim Halsey had been secretly assigned to scout out the Devil's Forest, in the badlands of the Ardennes, to scout out also a leakage of information purported to exist in the American lines.

Major Durand didn't know this. It was possible, right on the eve of Nim's glimpse of a clue, that Durand would gum up the works. Durand was a man-rider, a disciplinarian of the old military school. Halsey disliked him, and yet there was something in Durand's make-up which evoked a certain amount of the skipper's respect.

As he neared the office door, Nim tightened his lips. If it must come to a showdown, he didn't intend to take anything from Durand. There was serious espionage at work. It was Halsey's job to play his part in his own way.

At a crisp "Come in!" he thrust open the door. The major was chewing hard on a thin black cigar.

"Sit down," he barked. Then, after a long moment's silence:

"See here, Captain Halsey, if you think you're in this war for the purpose of joy-riding over to an isolated part of enemy territory to hunt jack-rabbits and deer, you're out."

"Which means?" This from Nim in a

cold tone which measured that of the C. O.

"Which means you're not to be trusted, Halsey."

It exploded like a bomb in the skipper's ears. He found it difficult to restrain himself, since this man-rider had nearly accused him of something phony. But he held himself in check. He wanted Durand to play out his hand.

"So what, Major?"

"I'll have to ground you, pending an inquiry into your actions this afternoon when you lost two men. You will be confined to this squadron area grounds—understand? Why, there are enough whisperings here to make a very serious charge against you."

"YOU mean a charge of desertion of my flight in action?"

There was no immediate reply.

"For the moment, we can call it that, Halsey. But I could go further. Figure it out for yourself. An American captain makes repeated trips to enemy territory, is allowed to wander in the woods and pick off rabbits, and the odd deer. Do you expect that we are all dumb and blind here?"

Halsey took a quick step forward. The major's insinuations were getting more positive. Nim had never gotten a real square break from any of the members of Squadron 36. It wasn't his fault that he had to keep secret his connection with American Intelligence Branch.

"So—I joy-ride over, drop in some baron's backyard, go in to lunch, then stroll out arm in arm to the woods with the Hun chief, who has a flock of Prussian guards beat the forest so I can shoot a deer! That's your idea, Major. And while I'm at lunch, I suppose I give away all the Allied secrets! Is that it? Why, you—"

He broke off. There was a sudden commotion outside. He heard the call,

"Lights!" Then the mad chatter of a pair of ground machineguns.

Overhead there was the drone of an airplane.

Halsey made a dash for the open, the major at his heels.

Out of the night sky, caught in a splash of brilliance from a searchlight beam, a man-laden parachute was swaying earthward. Nim Halsey caught his breath as he dashed across the field, mechanics and officers at his heels. The swaying body thudded in. Halsey hurled himself forward and clutched at the dragging chute. He gasped as a light flashed across the ashen features of the fallen man.

"Dalkin!"

"Wh—what's that, Halsey?" Major Durand came puffing up.

"It's Dalkin, Major. One of Jerry's damnable little jokes. Now, why the devil don't you ask me where Palmer is, or something like that?"

"Well, where is he? Where—"

He broke off. Dalkin was stirring. Halsey lifted the lolling head, and planted it on one of his legs, bending in close.

"Yes—what is it, son?" he breathed. "Speak, Dalk, old boy. What happened, kid? What happened to Palmer?"

The name, Palmer, seemed to work like a charm. The young pilot stiffened. He attempted to rise, but Nim held him down.

"He – Palmer – he – Palmer's phoney—a Ger—"

His voice trailed off, and his limp shape sagged back.

"Dead!" snapped the skipper.

"Dead? Good Lord!" This from the major, whose face was livid under the pressure of an emotional storm. His eyes were shooting flame through their slitted lids—flame at Captain Halsey.

"What was that he said about Palmer?"

"Just what I've suspected for some time, Major Durand. It's the reason I've

been making my little joy-riding hunting trips over to the Devil's Forest. Palmer was the cause of the leakage from the American lines. It was he who must have brought about the capture of Dalkin. I shouldn't have told you all this yet—I'll probably need support from you soon. Keep what I've told you under your helmet. Meanwhile I'm—"

"What? Where are you going?"

"Back to the Devil's Forest, to hunt for some bigger game than a measly little doe."

Nim Halsey got to his feet and was moving away, when the major's voice arrested him.

"Here, Halsey, take a look at this."

The major was bending low, a flashlight in his hand playing on the pilot's dead body. He passed Halsey a card which he had plucked from Dalkin's clothing.

I give you back Dalkin. He was beginning to suspect. Thanks for your hospitality at Squadron 36. Halsey is next, and then our Air Service is ready to strike.

Franz von Reichter,
alias Lieutenant Palmer.

"What do you make of it all, Halsey?" The major had turned the body of Dalkin over to the M. O.

"I don't know. Didn't you ever have any reason to suspect Palmer?"

The major's face drew into a hard frown for a long moment, then he suddenly caught at Halsey's sleeve.

"By George! I never suspected him of anything phony. But a month ago I had a letter from a Mrs. Palmer in Kansas City asking if I could bring my influence to bear on her son, who was not writing home. I—Halsey, are you getting it? Young Palmer never reached us from Issoudun! This clever devil von Reichter impersonated him. Palmer must have been

snuffed out. I don't wonder I've lost so many men and ships in the past three months."

"DON'T let this get you, Major," rapped Halsey, drawing the C. O. to one side. "Listen. G-2 has suspected that there was a leakage from one of our brigade's squadrons. Nobody's being blamed particularly. I figured the leak came from our squadron. Twice I've watched a plane, which I figured carried our numerals, land close to the Devil's Forest. Once, I could have sworn that plane was Palmer's. Now I know it was.

"Major, the Devil's Forest is the stew pot for all the frightfulness on this front. It is there that Baron von Reichter, our "Palmer's" uncle, has his secret drome and gas plant. You've known of planes being dropped without any sign of shrapnel burst or machine-gun fire."

Halsey paused to light a cigarette.

"I've been trying to get a line on the tunnels through which von Reichter's gas will be shot to our Allied lines. We have an idea that this gas is something deadly, one that was once used in experimentation on the French. The most fiendish lethal essence known. Planes will be charged with this damnable stuff. Thousands of Allied soldiers will be snuffed out without any warning, for the gas will fume up out of the ground. Cities and towns will be drenched from the skies. Unless—"

"Yes, yes. Good Lord, man! Go on. Unless what?"

"Unless I get a line on those secret storage tanks up in the forest zone. Now, let's go. Get in touch with G-2 at once. Then the infantry. Troops must be withdrawn, for the most part, from front line areas. Artillery must fill the gaps. Have a composite squadron of bombers ready to rush forward at my call. You can escort them with our ships. I'm gassing up

and going across the lines, Major, at once.”

“Not alone!”

“Sure. I know a little spot at which I can land. It’s at the foot of a canyon where, I’ll bet a month’s pay, no Hun on wings dare follow me. I—”

HALSEY turned away. There was no more time for talk. Nim Halsey’s blood was on fire for action, and ahead—there lay plenty of it. Before long he would be down in the very depths of those wretched, partly isolated wastes of the Ardennes, and then—

Only the faintest lights of the palest dawn offered Halsey visibility as he swept down on the canyons. He had slept little throughout the night. Dalkin’s tragic passing had haunted him. As he neared the canyon walls down which he must thrust his ship, his every sense became alert.

He realized that a single slip now would tear off his wings. Three times had he made this hazardous trip, but only once before in this light. His heart beat madly as he put his ship into a skid. The roar of an avalanche seemed to be pounding in his eardrums.

Suddenly he was conscious of the stutter of hard lead striking on his Spad’s body. He dared not glance back. He was plummeting down a terrible elevator shaft, and the manipulation of controls demanded every atom of skill he possessed.

Deeper and deeper he descended into the abyss—fighting his ship, fighting a threatening weakness in himself. Above, two Fokkers dipped their noses and gushed flame. A low, half-hysterical laugh broke from Nim’s throat as he glimpsed the sparks from bullets striking against rock.

But the laugh was suddenly smothered in a gasp. The death trap through which he

rode was robbed of its oxygen. He slipped a hand to his throat. His eyes stared from their sockets as the realization of his situation flashed to his mind.

Gas!

Those two devils above, afraid to make the plunge between those cliff walls, had unleashed their lethal time bombs, which contained the deadly gas of the Baron von Reichter’s manufacture.

Halsey sought desperately to avert the danger. Wheezing, gasping, he tried to hold his breath. He crouched above his stick and tipped the Spad into a steeper dive. But his lungs were nearly bursting as he flattened out to make a landing. His tires slammed in hard, jolting him against the belt-webbing, and then a cataract seemed to roar down on him. With a gurgled groan, he slumped down.

When he awakened, Halsey’s first impulse was to tear at his throat. It was sore and full, but he soon found that he was breathing in, though painfully, pure oxygen. In a small pocket in the cockpit there were a half dozen small glass tubes of ammonia, the same as those used by the infantry as a neutralizer.

His trembling fingers fished out one of these. He cracked the glass within its lint binding and slipped the capsule between his teeth. He sucked in the fuming ammonia until its strength was consumed. Then he applied another, and a third.

He climbed out, stumbled, recovered. He was forced to clutch at the side of his ship for support, as a wave of dizziness almost overwhelmed him. But the fighting spirit of Nim Halsey asserted itself. That, and the sound of voices.

He shot a glance about him. Close by was a fringe of scrub willow swaying in the early dawn breeze. He had cached his ship beneath these willows more than once.

His strength quickly returning, Nim

began to rock his plane back to cover. Her wings were barely concealed before he heard the guttural snarl of a German. Gripping his automatic tightly, the skipper stole into the mantle of cover, there to hang in waiting.

He caught the crunch of footsteps on the gravel.

The Hun searchers were moving by, off left. Nim suddenly crept out, inching toward the edge of his cover to the north. Breathing almost cut off, he threaded his way to a point near which a lone German figure must pass in order to avert a fall over a small promontory.

Halsey's gun suddenly leaped out and down. The barrel of the Colt socked hard against skull bone, and the towering Prussian crumpled almost at the Yank's feet. Quickly Halsey pulled the unconscious shape to cover, where he trussed up the German's wrists and ankles. Now to watch the man come to, and then to pump him.

The German's face seemed frozen with horror as he looked up into Halsey's scowling face.

"Listen, *du Kerl*," barked the Yank. "Answer me quickly. I'll tear your heart out of your body if you don't tell me what I want. Where is the *Staffel* of von Reichter? *Schnell!* And talk low." Halsey's German seemed to be understandable enough for the man on the ground cringed.

"*Ach, Herr Hauptmann*," he breathed. "I am a veteran who has been wounded many times. I have a wife and four children. Von Reichter would kill me if I gave out any information. I—"

"What matters it who kills you? I shall if you don't talk," thundered the skipper, who suddenly lowered his voice. "Speak, at once, or I begin to slit you apart."

THE German wilted. He nodded, speechless for the moment.

"Follow the dry river bed for one half kilo, *Herr Hauptmann*. Then turn sharp right into the forest. But—*ach, Gott!* You will not get far, for the mantraps of von Reichter are many. You will come upon the secret wireless station. From this point it is but a short step to the tunnel, to the—*lieber Gott!* Must I go on? That is von Reichter's most prized secret. Better you would shoot me now, *Herr Hauptmann*—"

Something in Halsey's mind relented. He would ask for no more from this man. He had learned enough, however.

He had jammed his automatic into his holster. Gagging the man, he slipped through the willows. Availing himself of every chance of cover he moved cautiously, though briskly along the old bed, until he came to the turn. In less than ten minutes he again caught the sound of voices, booming through the Devil's Forest. He gasped as he glimpsed through a port in the trees, a couple of lounging officers, who smoked and laughed.

Then Halsey saw the aerial of von Reichter's wireless station. He took a sharp step forward. His foot caught a hidden trip wire, and he plunged to his face. A bell had clanged. The alarm was given, and Halsey cursed himself soundly.

Scraping himself to his feet, he backed away, and stalked to cover. Men were shouting excitedly, and footsteps began to thresh the undergrowth. A shot was fired from some one whose imagination was playing tricks.

Halsey forced a grin, and slipped back on a northeasterly tack. He moved on through the timber, scarcely cracking a twig. A small red buck snorted nearby, and went bounding deeper into a thicket. Halsey smiled.

Suddenly he brought himself to a sharp halt. He was at the edge of the forest. He

caught a rumble beneath his feet. The ground vibrated, and then he was conscious of his presence above the very heart of von Reichter's tunnel plant. Quickly he oriented his position and photographed it clearly in his mind.

It was the sudden raucous roar of a couple of Mercedes engines which snapped him out of a fog of deep thought. He parted a clump of alders and peered out. Almost directly beneath him, running into the gaping maw of an underground hangar, he glimpsed two pursuit Fokkers.

HE waited a moment, then spotted a tall bent form in the uniform of a high German staff officer. Instinctively he knew that he was looking at the Baron von Reichter, the master killer to be. He crowded in closer, for the baron was joined by two swaggering pilots.

Then Halsey's grip tightened on his automatic. One of those pilots was the bogus Palmer—the suave nephew of von Reichter who had so cleverly fooled Durand and Intelligence officers.

Halsey cocked up his head. Foul, forceful language was pouring from the mouth of the baron. He stamped up and down, flinging out his arms in the face of his nephew.

“But you blundered, right on the eve of success. You had your suspicions of this *Hauptmann* Halsey. Why didn't you put him out before you landed with the *Leutnant*—or Dalkin?”

“For the simple reason that Halsey was down here in the Devil's Forest at the time, Uncle. He is down here now, somewhere. I expect that the whole area is being searched. I—”

Franz von Reichter broke off as a slender officer dashed up. Halsey recognized the man as one of the wireless operators. In a flash the Yank skipper's mind formulated a plan.

That wireless depot would be empty now. He had location on this hell plant of von Reichter's. In this precious psychological moment he must get that information back to Durand, or Intelligence. He slipped away, practising the woods craft he had learned when a boy—and since—in the Maine woods where he had satisfied a passionate urge to hunt.

As he expected, the wireless station was vacant. He heard sounds from nearby, but this was his one big chance!

Easing his automatic in its holster, he crept in, and after a swift glance about him, he shoved in a switch. A drone filled the station. He had established power, at least. Seated at a small sending table, earphones adjusted, he began to hunt for Durand.

It seemed an age before he got any contact, and then he snarled a savage oath, as he made contact with some British searchlight men who persisted in wanting to hold him. The minutes were driving by. It seemed that his daring effort was to be in vain.

Beads of cold sweat stood out on his body. Every now and then, above the drone in the earphones he seemed to hear the clump of footsteps just outside. Once he turned, his automatic leaping out to the ready, but there was no need to shoot.

Suddenly he caught a buzzed call. His brows jerked up. He was in contact with Intelligence Headquarters of his brigade. With trembling fingers he tapped out his valuable information.

“Have heaviest bombers mass in attack at—”

He broke off. His eyes were staring at a sheaf of operation orders. Here were the stand-by orders for von Reichter's big attack plans. Here they were, deciphered, ready for use by the Hun operators.

Quickly Halsey sorted them, and again

he was transferring priceless information on location, nature of attack, and strength to American Intelligence Headquarters.

"May experience trouble getting out myself," he buzzed. "Do you get me clearly? Good. I may have trouble. My Spad located at approximately D 9—H 7—N—dry river bed—willows. I—"

"So. It's you, Captain Halsey!"

Halsey spun to face Franz von Reichter, whose face was livid with burning hatred. He could see that the young spy agent had him covered, and was in a mood to kill. The game seemed up, but Nim thrust from him any suggestion of despair. Instead, he forced a grin.

"Yeah—reckon you've got the drop on me, you two-timing swine," he snapped. "But you'll get only me, Palmer von Reichter. I've fixed things so that—" Halsey broke off. "Well, get it over quickly, but be sure your aim is good. Your hand is trembling now, von Reichter.

Your nerve is leaving you. You'll miss as sure as sin. I can see it in your—"

Halsey leaped to one side as a Luger crashed. He reeled at the shock of a bullet in his left upper arm. He dived, coming up with his automatic flaming. Franz von Reichter staggered back, but recovered. He ducked for cover behind a sending plate.

Halsey hurled himself forward, shooting as he plunged for the open. Again a slug from the spy's pistol staggered him, but he made the open doorway.

Voices sounded. Men were hurrying toward the station.

HALSEY'S blood was oozing from his frame. He thought of his ship, and made a move in that direction. But a better plan occurred to him. He parted a patch of willow scrub and sank down, figuring that the closer he was to this plant, the better chance he had of escape.

As he flattened on the leaf mould, his senses reeled. He jerked open a pocket in his leather, and fished out a small flask of cognac. He drained this at a gulp, then took out a jack-knife and some field dressing.

As the iodine phial broke over his bleeding arm wound, he winced and clutched at a small sapling. Then he bound up his wound tightly.

A second wound in his side he ignored. While it bled, it was of a minor nature, he was sure.

His head throbbed. Only in semiconsciousness did he hear the thresh of footsteps as a searching party combed the woods nearby. He slumped out cold, while the Baron von Reichter stormed and fumed at his henchmen in a blind fury, at the wireless station nearby.

It might have been the distant thunder of guns at twilight that awakened Nim Halsey, or it might have been some sixth instinctive sense. He blinked owlishly about him. A burning thirst assailed him, and his tongue seemed swollen. He felt his left arm which hung swollen and limp.

As he raised himself to a sitting posture, he was forced to reach out and clutch for support. But his consciousness was quickly returning. He realized his position, and staggered to his feet. He reached his good hand down to his holster, and gasped as his fingers came away empty. His automatic must have fallen from his grasp.

Groaning in pain, he moved on, but he hadn't taken many paces before the immediate sector was shattered by the crash of anti-aircraft guns. In a flash the skies and earth seemed to thunder in a deafening inferno of sound. The crash of guns, the sweep of fiendish searchlights—and then Halsey caught the roar of planes topside.

HE started. Out of the fog in his brain there came clarity. Those monster droning motors he heard were the Eagle eights of Handley Pages, thundering over the badlands. A low chuckle escaped Nim. He had been responsible for this night of terror.

Halsey moved on—on toward the dry river bed. It was still light enough to get his bearings. Now and then he halted to clutch at some small sapling for support. Now and then he saved himself from a bad fall down some precipice by sheer instinct. But he kept on, until he glimpsed that monster Armada coming out of the northwest. His heart bounded.

Could those Allied ships make it? It didn't matter so much to Halsey now, whether he made his ship or not; he had lived to complete his assignment. The tunnel of death would soon be plugged, and von Reichter's gas mains burst, to flood and drown the fiendish baron in his own lethal essence.

As he neared his ship, Halsey was conscious of movement nearby. A search party still hunting for him. He tacked off, and slid down a green bank for eighty feet. He quickened his pace, then suddenly dropped to a knee as a Mauser rifle crashed from a point up the dry river bed.

Halsey felt the whine of a bullet as it sped by. He struggled to his feet and lunged on, cursing himself for having lost track of his automatic.

Crack! Crack!

Two more German slugs zipped past his head. And then he went down to his knees. A slug had clipped his right leg just above the kneecap. Swamped with pain and nausea, he dragged himself to the ship where for a moment he hung in a daze; and then his mind suddenly cleared. A gasp of exultation escaped him. He lunged for the cockpit and his good hand came back clutching his .303 sport rifle.

Using the tip of the lower wing for a rest, he sighted up the river bed.

There was an answering snarl from his Savage at the touch on trigger. A German guard pitched to his face. Halsey found difficulty in pumping in a new cartridge, but he made it. Lead was flying his way, but he faced the fire and again pulled. He made a hit, and, glimpsed a second German groveling for cover.

He was in the act of sighting on a third enemy, when the whole earth seemed to revolt above the thunderous explosion of a salvo of Allied bombs. Flame and debris spurted skyward. Another and another fearful explosion resounded like the crack of doom.

Nim drew back his smoking rifle and replaced it in the pit. He suddenly thought of the German he had trussed up. He required that man's services now. He would force him to start his motor. It was a happy thought. It was his one means of a getaway.

Later, in the cockpit, prop whirring, Nim swung out his Savage rifle and swept the Hun back. A grin split the Yank's features as the guard went scuttling for cover. Then the Spad took the "bit between her teeth," and rocketed up the river bed.

Head upside, to catch the reviving thresh of the prop wash, Nim pulled his ship up into the sky—a sky blasted by a merciless bombardment of shrapnel and machinegun fire. For a brief moment he watched the plunder of the Allied ships, and then, with a deep-chested sigh, he kicked around and painfully sent his ship into the west.

It was dawn before Halsey was allowed to see anyone back at Squadron 36. He lay pale and weary in a cot at the medical hut. His awakening this time, however, had been out of a sleep, and not out of a semi-coma. They had found him

on the fringes of the tarmac, piled up in his wrecked ship, but he was conscious, swearing harshly at himself for having crashed.

NOW he looked up into the face of the squadron surgeon.

“Okay, Nim?” breathed the M. O.

“Yeah—I guess so—Doc. Sort of bleary, but I guess I’m all right.” And then he started forward, his eyes staring. “Durand and the boys, Doc—how did they make out? Can I see the major now? I—what’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Nim, but the major won’t be seen any more on this earth; nor will five of our lads. They did a wonderful job over there at the Devil’s Forest. Nim, everyone’s talking about you. I’ve no doubt you’ll be heavily decorated for your work on this job. Von Reichter’s whole works were blown to atoms. Son—you’re in for a carload of praise. But there’s an ambulance waiting to rush you to Boulogne now. I—when you come back to us you’ll be—”

“Doc—I’m not coming back to you. I’m going back to Squadron 92. Somehow I never fitted in here. I—”

“You’re coming back to us, Nim! The whole squadron, those left to us, have

signed an application. We want you back here as C. O. As a matter of fact, it’s all ready fixed—Major Halsey. Now pipe down, while I jab a needle into you. Shake, buddy, and luck to you.”

“Doc—before I go, couldn’t I just see the gang? I’ve called ‘em sisters of grace, sissies, and what not. I’d like to apologize. After tonight’s show—gosh! Never mind the gang. They’ll be upset over our losses. But tell ‘em—tell ‘em we’re going to get along swell together; an’—Doc, some time, when this is all over, I’d like you to come up to my hideout in the Maine woods. There’s deer there as big as mules; not measly little red rabbits like those roaming the Devil’s Forest. We’ll—What’s that roar, Doc? Is it—”

Captain Daniels, the surgeon, smiled faintly as he reached for Halsey’s pulse. The skipper had slipped out into a claiming vale of unconsciousness.

The surgeon nodded to a stretcher party.

“Right, boys, take him away, and if you give him one jolt on the way to the coast, I’ll—”

He broke off, to turn. His eyes were misted. He hadn’t known Nim Halsey long, but long enough to know that they were pals for life.