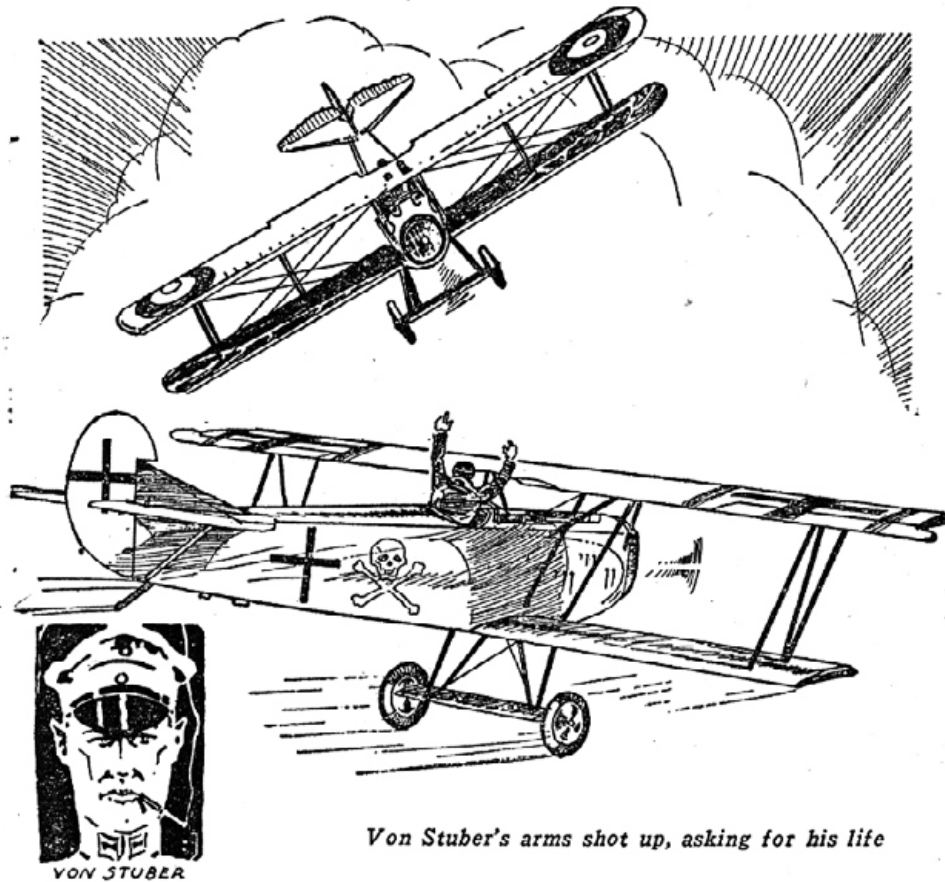


WINGS *and* STARS



Von Stuber's arms shot up, asking for his life

***Lieutenant Johnny Mansel, Horoscope Fan, Gets a
Chance to Do His Stuff Against One of the
Fiercest Fighters on the Western Front
By DICK MORELAND***

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LIEUT. JOHNNY MANSEL sat in his tin cubby casting the horoscope of his enemy, the great Heinz von Stuber. Mansel's eyes bulged as his pencil slid over the chart, for von Stuber, so the stars said, was a worthy foe indeed.

Mansel read again the characteristics of the natives of Scorpio, the sign under which von Stuber had been born. "Scorpio's ruler is Mars, God of War. The native is squat, thick-set, his skull is broad, face square, cheekbones high, eyes deep with a steadfast

and intolerable look."

Johnny Mansel shivered. Well he remembered his one glimpse of von Stuber's deep-set, glaring, bloodshot eyes. He read on:

"He is ruthless, cruel, and considers himself an avenging angel. He is possessed of superhuman tenacity, bull-dog courage and a savage skill in attacking his enemies."

Johnny Mansel reached for a cigarette with an unsteady hand. He lit up, dragged smoke into his lungs, exhaled gustily. What

a man, this von Stuber! And he had challenged a pilot of the 37th Pursuit to a duel in the skies. And Mansel was to be the 37th's representative.

In order to cast a horoscope it is necessary to know the date of birth. Von Stuber had announced his in no uncertain manner. In fact, his entire *Staffel* had come over and helped him celebrate the occasion. At noon that day the swift Fokker flight had come thundering down out of the east and wheeled like striking hawks over the 37th's drome. Bombs had showered down to blast great ragged holes in the tarmac. Number Four hangar had been blown to splinters and two greaseballs, heroically trying to get an anti-aircraft machinegun into action, had been riddled with cupro-nickel steel slugs. Von Stuber had flown low over the drome and dropped a note, a message typical of that bloody butcher.

The *Freiherr* Heinz von Stuber invites the American swine to his twenty-sixth birthday party to be held at twilight at five thousand feet over Landry. Your best pilot to meet me in a fight to the death.

(Signed) Von Stuber.

Major Carrol, C. O. of the 37th had called in the pilots and grimly bade them draw lots. A deck of cards had been placed on the desk.

"The man who gets the ace of spades goes. Step up, gentlemen."

"No use for you fellows to draw," Johnny Mansel had pushed his way forward. "Today's my lucky day. The vibrations of Gemini are merging into Cancer. The sign of Mercury is rising. I can't lose."

"Yeah," Gib Stearns had scoffed. "You and your lucky star! Gonna trip over the moon someday, Johnny, and bust yourself wide open."

One by one the pilots had drawn cards. Johnny Mansel had stepped forward and cut the ace of spades with one deft motion. He held it up so that the rest could see, grinned,

flipped the card across the room, where it wedged into a corner of the window and stayed there.

"Didn't I tell you?" he had crowed. "When a man's lucky day comes along, nothing can stop him."

"Hope so," Major Carrol had said. "You're going to need plenty of luck this afternoon."

Johnny Mansel hadn't proved himself to be such a hot pilot to date. Well, the boy was going to have a chance to do his stuff—against one of the fiercest fighters on the Western Front.

WITH an hour to go before the fight, Johnny amused himself by casting von Stuber's horoscope. He wanted to know all about the natives of Scorpio, especially any weakness they might have. He went on with his reading:

"To be happy, the native must be occupied with action. He is subject to headaches, dizzy spells, fevers of all kinds. The left side of his brain is more highly developed than the right which effects the left side of his body. In action, he tends to favor his right hand and all movements in that direction, avoiding always the left."

Johnny Mansel chuckled to himself. This was what he had been looking for. So von Stuber favored his right side and avoided action to the left. Good, Mansel would feint him into one of those tail-chasing maneuvers—then pounce on him from the left.

Gib Stearns came in, flung himself down on Johnny's cot.

"Listen, guy," he growled. "You better be out practisin' with a Vickers. T'hell with them star-gazin' books. What you need is a straight-shootin' eye and plenty of fiddle strings below the belt."

"I can't lose." Cigarette smoke gushed from Mansel's nose. "All I got to do is to get von Stuber over on his left wing and then

pour it into him.”

“Sure. He’ll wait right there for you to pot him. Well, kid, you ain’t exactly a novice at this game. Got two flamers to your credit, I know that. But this von Stuber is a tough baby. He’s knocked down five pilots out of this squadron and you are slated to be his sixth. Better let me take your place, I’ve tangled wings with him before and kinda know his style.”

“Nix.” Johnny Mansel closed his books and put them carefully into his foot locker. “This is my smoke today. C’mon, let’s go check over the ship. I want to be sure I got all the breaks coming to me. Don’t want to run out of ammo or drop off a wing on this flight.”

EVERY man of the 37th, including the skipper, took the air behind Johnny Mansel’s Spad. They were going along—just in case. The Boche had been known to pull fast ones during an air duel such as this one.

Mansel eased his ship up to five thousand, leveled off and headed for Landry. As he thundered nearer he could see a lone Fokker circling slowly over the shell-wrecked little town. Five thousand feet above the waiting Boche a dozen Fokkers flew lazily back and forth. Evidently von Stuber had brought his flight along to witness his little birthday celebration. Major Carrol led his Spads up to twelve thousand, threw them into open formation, began a slow patrol up and down the Yank side of the lines. Now let the Germans try anything treacherous!

Johnny Mansel warmed his guns, toed right rudder and charged the circling von Stuber. Just before he came within machine-gun range he flipped the Spad over on its wing, threw it into a power dive and then skidded down the skies, only to pull up sharply, both guns blazing.

VON STUBER was an old hand at this game. He put his ship down, fell into a wide circle, came thundering around on Mansel’s tail.

The two ships swung into a steep merry-go-round, each striving to shorten the distance to the other’s tail. Johnny gave his Spad full gun, saw the wings of von Stuber’s plane tip over as he increased the vertical bank in the hope of cutting in. Instantly Mansel fainted to the left.

Von Stuber followed sluggishly and Mansel could have screamed aloud with joy. Just as the horoscope had said, von Stuber was weak on left-hand tactics. Mansel fainted again, this time to the right, and nearly lost his tail assembly as a result.

Von Stuber had pounced on him with Spandaus yammering. Gusts of slugs had whipped through the fairing of Johnny’s Spad, had clawed along the green-painted flipper. It was only by hurling his ship into a savage zoom that he escaped that withering burst.

Now he came slashing around into the circle again, this time with left wing low, forcing von Stuber to throw his Fokker into a savage vertical to avoid a collision. The Fokker darted away, turning always to the left. Mansel leaped after him, both guns raving. He watched tracer whip around the cockpit where the Boche ace crouched, saw splinters fly as slugs ripped into the instrument panel.

Von Stuber looked back and Johnny Mansel saw the square of his face, the deep-set cruel eyes, the lips curled back from his teeth. The Boche went up and over and came roaring down. Mansel saw him reach for his trigger trips, saw his face twist and strain, watched him beat his fists at the breeches of his jammed guns.

Then von Stuber was below him and to the right. Mansel eased the Spad around, took careful aim.

Von Stuber's arms shot up. A signal unmistakable. Guns jammed, helpless, he was asking for his life. Mansel hesitated, his finger curled into the Bowden trigger. He felt his Spad slide off, saw the Boche turn for home.

He felt a queer pounding in his chest. His nerves tingled. He had let von Stuber go—made him a present of life. Why, he didn't know. Something inside of him had clicked and his fingers had relaxed on the triggers.

Back on the tarmac of the 37th, Gib Stearns had been the first to greet Mansel when he crawled stiffly out of his ship.

“YOU idiotic, half-witted, sentimental lily! What in God's name did you mean by lettin' that bloody killer go?”

“It was murder,” stammered Mansel. “I couldn't do it in cold blood.”

Even Major Carrol was disgusted.

“Suppose your guns had jammed?” he sneered. “D'you suppose von Stuber would have let you off? Didn't he follow Jenkins down and blast him after his Spad caught fire?”

“I'll get him,” Mansel promised. “I know his soft spot now.”

“That guy's made of steel,” Stearns cut in. “You've missed your chance. And I hope he cuts your ship to ribbons under you the next time you meet.”

Johnny Mansel didn't have to wait long for his next meeting with von Stuber. Two days later, flying an early morning patrol with Stearns, the two Spads were cruising along under the clouds at six thousand when five Fokkers dropped on them from above. Four Fokkers cut Stearns out of the fight, hustled him away, while the remaining Fokker came roaring for Mansel.

And then Mansel knew what it was to fight for his life, felt the dark shadow of death as the seconds ticked slowly past and a madman in a red-and-black Fokker lashed the skies about him with tracer and crackling

lead.

Von Stuber was wild, Johnny could see that; von Stuber hated the man who had spared his life—and spoiled his birthday party. He had decreed that Johnny Mansel should die by no other guns than his.

Mansel put on the battle of his life.

He side-slipped and ducked and dodged, but hard on his tail came the vengeful Boche. Time after time, Mansel tried to feint him into the deadly circle so that he could force him off on his left wing. But von Stuber seemed to dive out of Johnny's line of fire at the last split second.

Then a stream of hot lead came lashing up from the Fokker's guns. Mansel heard bullets rattling off his engine cowling, felt his plane lurch and slip, knew that he had been hit in a vital spot.

His Hiss coughed. Mansel swung the nose around for one more try at the Boche killer. The big Hiss spluttered again, picked up, coughed and stopped. Johnny Mansel threw up both arms as a signal that he was defenseless, eased the stick forward and started a long glide for home.

He had drifted down the skies for perhaps three thousand feet when he heard the roar of a wide-open motor behind him, turned his head and found himself looking into the muzzles of von Stuber's Spandaus. Between the guns he could see the Boche's face, teeth flashing in a gleeful smile, eyes smoky with hatred. With a shock, Mansel realized that von Stuber was going to kill him, that the man hadn't the slightest intention of returning the favor of a few days before.

Johnny whipped the stick to right and left and kicked the rudder viciously. The Spad skidded and bucked, lurched over on one wing, tilted back again, balanced for an instant before it fell off on one wing.

Von Stuber followed, nursing his fire and gloating over the helplessness of his enemy.

The 37th's drome was not far away now,

and Mansel headed for it, knowing what was going to happen. Von Stuber was going to let him get directly over the home tarmac, then tumble him at the feet of his wingmates.

Fighting for his life to the very last, Mansel tried to pancake down to a landing. The stutter of twin guns came clearly from behind. A swathe of slugs chewed at his ship, tossing him over on the left wing. Another blast of fire and bullets ripped through the fuselage.

A strut parted with a snap, the loose wire beat at the wing, slashing out great chunks of fabric. Another burst came boring in. Mansel felt the white heat of it, expected to feel the searing stab of pain in his back.

The sky was suddenly full of planes. Green Spads which zoomed and dived with guns roaring. He looked back over his shoulder and saw von Stuber racing across the tree tops for Germany. Cheated of his easy kill, Mansel could well imagine what the Boche ace was saying as he hedge-hopped home with five Spads on his tail.

He put the wreck of his Spad down, rolled it across to the hangars and climbed down. He was dripping with sweat; his ship was riddled and he had a long scratch along his left cheek where a Spandau slug had raked him.

Again it was Gib Stearns who was the first to greet him.

“WHAT do you think of your Heinie pal now?” Stearns taunted. “Sorta ganged up on you, didn’t he? I told you he’d shoot the pants off you the next chance he got.”

Mansel was white with rage and humiliation.

“I’ll get the dirty swine,” he spluttered. “What happened to you, Gib?”

“I fell in a shell hole over by the 168th Infantry sector. The doughboys pulled me out and shipped me home in a motorcycle sidecar.”

Major Carrol summoned Johnny Mansel to the orderly room that morning and gave him a brief but pointed lecture.

“This nonsense has gone quite far enough,” he growled. “You and von Stuber chasing each other around the skies, I mean. War going on, and we’ve got a tough job on our hands. Need every man from now on until the big drive starts.”

“That nonsense,” Mansel said slowly, “between me and the Boche ace is going on until one of us is dead. The dirty son tricked me. I’ll get even.”

“I’m putting you and Gib Stearns on special patrol,” snapped the C. O. “This squadron has been assigned the mission of protecting the ammunition dump at Fismes. By constant day and night air patrol. And until you learn how to obey orders, you’re going to sit on the ground and watch us.”

“But suppose the drome is attacked?”

“You’ll have to go up and defend it, of course. But until that happens, you’re grounded.”

Gib Stearns blamed Johnny for what had happened. “You and your damn stars did this,” he moaned. “Now the squadron’s got a chance to do somethin’ excitin’ and we have to sit on our pants and watch—like a couple of kiwis.”

Johnny Mansel was busy with his astrology books and horoscope charts.

“Just as well,” he announced. “Neptune is in the ascendant. The day is not auspicious for trips by land, water or air.”

Stearns made a growling noise deep in his throat. “All you need,” he fumed, “is one of them turbans and a crystal ball and you could start tellin’ fortunes.”

“Well, I was right about von Stuber being weak on his left-hand banks, wasn’t I?” challenged Mansel. “And the next auspicious day, when the planets are all favorable, I’m going up and shoot him down.”

“Yeah, and suppose he comes bucketin’

over here before you get the right numbers up, then what?"

Mansel shrugged. "*Finis* for me, I guess. You can't beat the stars."

"Nerts!" said Stearns.

THE drome was deserted. All the pilots and Major Carrol were off on the air patrol over the munitions dump. That dump had to be protected. The ammunition there was of vital importance to the Yanks who were going to take part in the big drive.

Stearns could see, far in the distance, the tiny specks which were the Spads of the 37th wheeling back and forth over the little town of Fismes. He wished fervently that he was up there with his wingmates.

A faint drumming sound came to him out of the twilight. The rise and fall of a Mercedes motor. He strained his eyes toward the east. Sure enough, three little blackbirds in V formation were boring down on the drome from Bocheland.

He turned and ran for Number One hangar, shouting to the greaseballs to wheel out his and Johnny Mansel's ships. He grabbed the handle of the siren and sent an eerie wail shrieking through the quiet of the late afternoon.

Mansel came on the run.

"What is it?" he yelled, leaping for the stirrup.

Stearns jerked a thumb aloft. Johnny looked up and spotted the oncoming flight. The leading plane had a familiar look about it. Von Stuber!

A cold chill shot down Johnny's spine. His face went white, his stomach turned over, then twisted itself into a tight, suffocating knot.

Von Stuber.

And this was a bad day for Johnny Mansel. What had the horoscope said? No trips by land, water or air. Well, he was going to a trip anyway. A long trip—to hell, probably.

Gib Stearns got his ship around, went charging down the tarmac, pulled her steeply into the air. Johnny felt his own plane stir under him. He was rolling forward, the gun full on. Tree tops swept under his wheels. He was in the air, rushing up after Gib, his Hisso howling.

Blood like ice-water pounded through his veins. His hands were frozen on the stick. He believed implicitly in astrology. And the stars said that today was unlucky for him. He gritted his teeth, felt the muscles of his jaws stand out in ridges. If he had to die, he'd go down fighting. Try and take von Stuber with him.

The three Fokkers had swerved, were lancing away toward Fismes. Johnny saw other three-ship formations coming in from north and south and west. The Boche had divided his squadron, was launching an attack on the dump from all quarters. Far off in the distance a machine gun went into action. It sounded like popping corn on a hot stove.

Johnny looked at the nearest Fokker, saw the deadly grinning skull which was the insignia of von Stuber. He sucked in a long breath, gripped the stick hard, hurled his ship at the enemy for one last glorious battle.

Von Stuber was quick to accept the challenge. He came charging around in a screaming turn, cut in both guns and dived on Johnny Mansel. Lacy cobwebs of tracers lashed the air about Johnny's head. He split-aired and threw his Spad up on its side, gorged the Hisso with gas and spun around on the flippers. There was von Stuber directly in front of him.

Johnny's Vickers chattered. He watched the tracer stream reach out hungrily for the Boche ship.

Then von Stuber was up and over and sliding away behind him. Bullets ripped into the Spad's fairing, came crawling along the fuselage toward the cockpit. Johnny snapped the stick over and slid out of the line of fire

as von Stuber shot under his landing gear. Looking down, Johnny could see the big head turned, could make out two glaring red-rimmed eyes behind huge goggles. Hatred was written on that scowling face, and a grim determination to kill.

The sky was dotted with swirling, skimming ships now. The flights had met, balled up, were spinning around and around in a mad circus of death. Gib Stearns and a red-and-black Fokker were doing loops about each other, firing as they came out at the bottom of the spin.

Johnny saw a curl of smoke under the Fokker's hood. Flame blossomed there and then a great gush of burning oil flowed back over the threshing pilot, blotting him out in a smear of greasy orange flame. His ship stood on its tail, fell off, went spinning down, turning faster and faster as it fell.

Stearns flashed away and engaged another Boche which had dropped out of the clouds to join in the fight.

The smack of slugs into his instrument panel brought Johnny Mansel back to the present with a jerk. Von Stuber was behind and above him. How he had got there, Johnny had no idea. Fire gouted from Spandau muzzles, bullets raked the Spad in long splintering bursts. Johnny felt something tug at his sleeve and, looking down, saw blood dripping over his wrist and hand.

HE kicked his ship into a vertical bank, came around with every wire screaming. Von Stuber fell into place behind him. Around they went, each plane in a steep vertical bank, each pilot grimly urging his motor to the last ounce of energy.

A black fan-tail crept into view. Johnny fired desperately and saw his tracer stitch a pattern along the rudder. Again he pressed his triggers. Bullets ran rippling along the narrow camelback of the Fokker.

Then von Stuber twisted his ship out of

the circle, threw it up and over on its back, came thundering down with guns raving. Now! Johnny went off to the left, forcing von Stuber to follow. Then he doubled back, a turn so short that wing pinions screeched a warning, flying wires hummed, high pitched and shrill.

And von Stuber made the turn behind him without so much as faltering. Johnny gasped. Von Stuber had spun to the left as easily as to the right. No weakness there now. Johnny Mansel didn't know that the Boche had spent hour after hour in the air over his own drome correcting that very fault, that he had kept his pilots diving on him time after time until they were all exhausted, in order to iron out that weak spot in his tactics.

The duckboards bounced under Johnny's feet. A red hot poker was rammed into his instep. He looked down and saw ragged holes in the boards beneath him. He leaned out over the side. Another Fokker was below him, pouring a steady blast of fire into his belly.

He zoomed up and hung on the prop, let the Spad slide off to the left. Von Stuber flashed over the other Fokker, wings wagging savagely. The newcomer got the idea, went roaring away toward Fismes, leaving the Boche ace to bring down his own meat.

With a vicious swoop, von Stuber came thundering around to finish the job. Von Stuber was in a hurry now, wanted to end the thing with a rush and join his squadron in the attack on the Fismes dump.

MANSEL fought the dizziness which sought to drown him, shook his head to free it from the fog which crawled over his brain. His leg was numb, his arm hung on the stick, blood dripping through his fingers. Around he came again in what seemed to him an endless circle.

He looked through his sights and saw

something just ahead. Stiffening in his seat, he looked again. Part of a wing was visible and a grinning skull. With nerveless fingers he tripped his Vickers and held his ship steady while the tracer stream harpooned out and pinned that grinning head in a circle of bullet holes. In a flash the Boche was gone.

Again bullets hammered into the Spad. One wing sagged with a crackling sound. He tilted her over, closing the circle still smaller.

Again the grinning skull slid into his sights. A few feet ahead of that was another skull, broad, square-faced with deep-set blazing eyes. A living skull. Johnny Mansel trimmed the Spad, jockeyed it into position, tripped his guns. The tracer stream lashed out. Von Stuber swerved suddenly to the left. Then Johnny let him have it again.

Twin cones of fire swirled about the leather-padded head in the Fokker. Johnny got one look at a white staring face, a face peppered with little red dots. Then the great head fell forward. The Fokker nosed over and went down.

Johnny Mansel couldn't believe it had actually happened. That he was still alive, that he had shot down the great von Stuber. He turned his ship and looked toward Fismes. Two Fokkers were falling, and a Spad. Five other Fokkers were roaring away to the east with a flight of Spads barking at their tails. For the moment, the dump at Fismes was safe.

Johnny breathed a long sigh, put his head back against the crash pad—

Consciousness returned, in time, and he felt his thigh straps jerk. His leg hurt him. He opened his eyes and found himself staring straight down, into a plowed field. The field was rushing up to meet him at an alarming rate—a rough, irregular, shell-pitted field which didn't look at all soft or inviting.

His feet worked the rudder bar; his hands, still frozen to the stick, twitched. The Spad turned over lazily, creaking in every joint. A row of trees appeared and Johnny headed for them.

There was a great crashing of leaves and the rip and splinter of fabric and wood. Something smote Johnny Mansel a mighty blow in the pit of the stomach and again he slid into the dark and lay still.

When he awakened the next time he was on his own cot in the tin cubby at the 37th's drome. The room smelled strongly of antiseptics. His arm and foot were fat with bandage and a voice was speaking irritably somewhere in the distance.

"I tell you it was a damn fool idea bringing him here. The ambulance is coming. He's got to go to a hospital."

"Hey, look out, he's comin' around," another voice said.

Gib Stearns was bending over him, a broad grin on his face.

"The star gazin' fool," said Gib. "Reads their fortunes and then dings 'em to hell to prove he's right."

"No more," Johnny's voice was a whisper. "I'm through. The book was all wrong—about von Stuber. He didn't have any weak spots. I ought to know. I damn near got killed finding out."

STEARNS chuckled gleefully.

"That sounds natural." He seemed pleased. "I guess you'll be out of the hospital in time. Listen, Johnny, I want you to be best man for me. Gonna marry that gal in Paris in a month. How about it, kid?"

"Married?" Johnny Mansel sat up hurriedly. "What date? Hand me that chart and tell me the date and I'll let you know whether it'll be a lucky wedding or not."