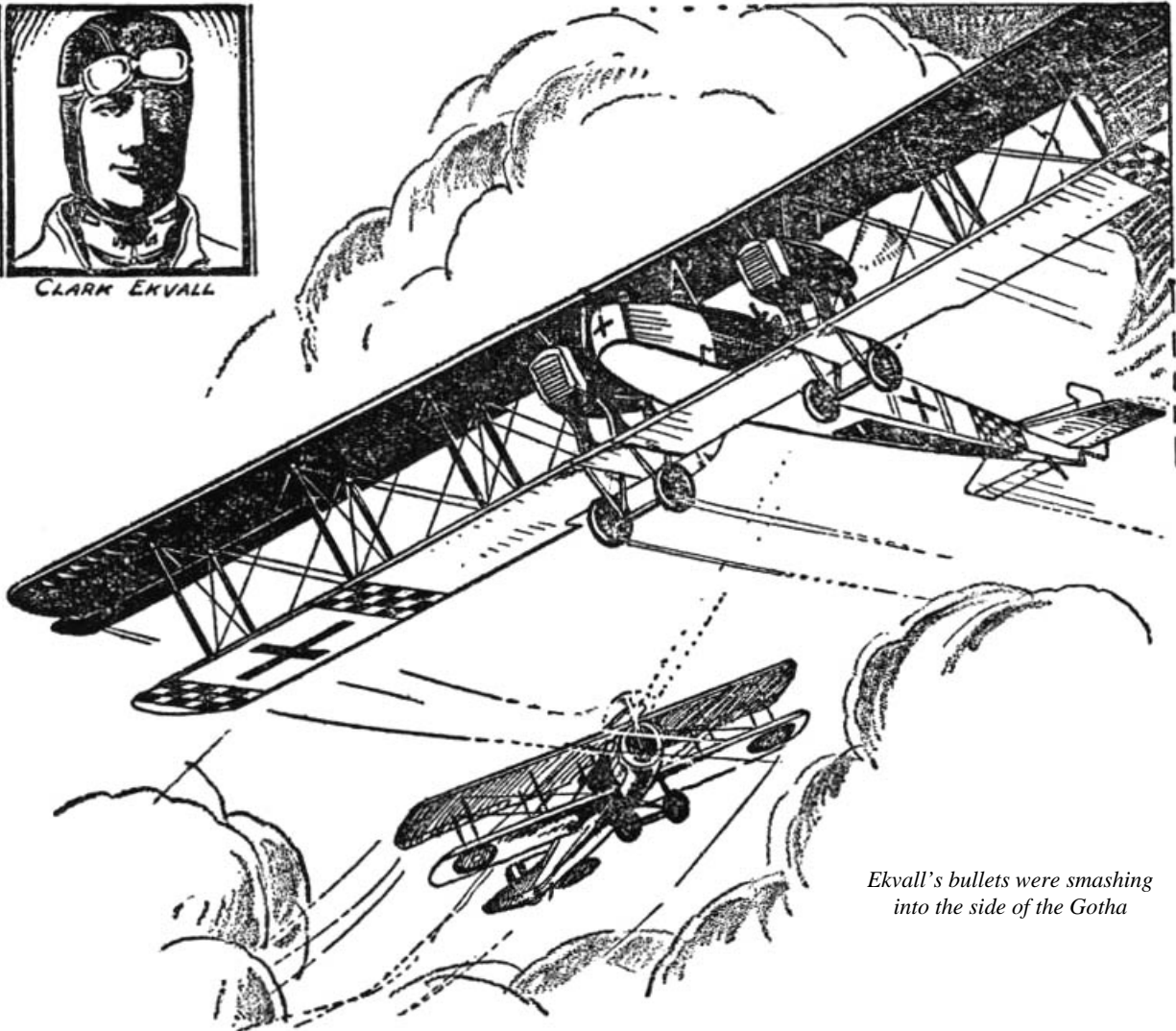


CLOUD RIDER



CLARK EKVALL



Ekvall's bullets were smashing into the side of the Gotha

Fog Held More Terrors for Clark Ekvall than All the Planes in Germany—and Straight into the Fog He Headed for the Battle of His Life!

By **ARTHUR J. BURKS**

Author of "Hair-Trigger Seconds," "Hi, Soldier," etc.

CLARK EKVALL, striding across the tarmac to Headquarters building, pulled his tunic up higher about his ears. Tentacles of the fog, creeping grey mist, skittered across the field.

A cold, biting wind came out of the north, like the breath from a mausoleum. Ekvall shivered in all his six feet. There were too many analogies to the tomb. The fog was too much like the shrouds of the

dead.

"If I believed in signs," muttered Ekvall to himself, "I would think I was slated to go West for sure. I wonder what the Old Man wants."

Major Fauberg did not long leave Ekvall in suspense.

"Look here, Clark," he said. "This soup is so thick you could cut it with a knife. As long as it

lasts there won't be any crates off any field. I know it and you know it, but Wing believes that the Germans deliberately started the fog in order to put something over on us. So we've got to keep patrols up. Jackson, Hobart and yourself are going out on solitary patrols. You leave at once. You won't mind the fog?"

Ekvall grinned.

"I was born under a lucky star," he said. "I'll never die by fire or water. Fire in the Spad or this fog—which is thick enough to be water—won't ever bother me!"

EKVALL saluted. His face was red from the walk across the field. Now he turned back into the tarmac, yelling for his Spad to be run out. The other two crates were already at the apron, their props ticking over, smearing the trailing tendrils of the fog which fled fearlessly into the spinning propellers.

Ekvall adjusted helmet, goggles and gauntlets, then bent to examine his crate.

This would be just a monotonous ride, nothing more, he reflected as he seated himself in the cockpit.

He signaled for his chocks to be kicked free.

His Spad started rolling. The fog swirled about him, now and again almost blotting the tips of his wings from view.

"Any fights aloft today," he told himself, "would have to be so close that we'd sure lock wings."

The Spad lifted into the fog. Instantly the field was blanketed as though it had never been.

"They think I can see through a shroud," he thought.

He flew in what he sensed to be the general direction of Hunland skies. His altimeter read five thousand feet. He was just one soul, lost in a white immensity, the drone of his motor his only companion. He couldn't distinguish the tips of his wings and there were times when he couldn't even see the place where his prop was supposed to be. Fog dribbled over his trailing edges like the flapping ends of white pennants. It lashed his cheeks as though it had been rain. He shivered, slid further down into his pit.

He guessed he was over the lines. His altimeter now said eight thousand feet. He cut his motor to listen. It was a horrible sensation, like riding on a feather pillow through white space.

The world below was nowhere. One had to decide whether one was right side up or upside down by the pull of the safety belt. He listened. The fog whispered against his superstructure.

Dully, as from a far distance, he heard a booming sound, as of waves against a beach.

The Archies were firing at the sound of his motor drone, and coming about as close as usual. His Spad rocked with the concussions. He couldn't even see the bursts of the high-flying projectiles. He grinned coldly to himself. The gunners down there couldn't see him.

He wondered how they would feel if he suddenly dived down, appearing to them like a ghost, wreathed in fog, his guns spitting tracers of death. But that was out.

He would see the ground only when he hit it.

He stepped on it again, cutting in his motor. On and on he drove in the white wilderness. He looked at his watch. He had been up fifteen minutes. Two hours and forty-five minutes to go. He tested his Vickers for lack of something else to do. The chattering of his guns was somehow comforting.

Again he cut his motor to listen. His scalp prickled at the sound which came through to him. It was the broken beating of a Gotha's motor. He grinned tightly.

"Maybe Wing knew its stuff, after all. I don't know how they'll land, but it's sure a good time for Gothas to do their stuff, at that. But how to find the buzzard in a mess like this!"

There was no telling whence the sound came. It seemed to come from everywhere, to be in both Clark's ears at once. It might be above or below, directly ahead or behind. Ekvall allowed his Spad to whisper on through the whiteness. How eerie and ghostly the whole thing seemed!

The intermittent droning was louder now. Ekvall searched the skies for the wings of the deaths-head destroyer. One might as well search for a speck in a white ocean.

He cut in his motor once more, pulled his stick back into his stomach. He stared straight ahead, hand on the stick, feet delicate and sure on the rudder bar, while he tooled his crate up and up, hoping to break through the fog into clear sky above, and perhaps to contact the destroyer.

A thousand feet further up he cut his motor again to listen. Louder now, surely close enough to have hit had there been any visibility at all, he heard the intermittent beating of the Gotha's motor.

This time he had some idea whence it came. He banked swiftly, without using his motor, slanted down toward the sound and let his crate drift down the white stairways of the sky.

His eyes did not blink as he studied the whiteness ahead for the black outlines of wings. The death-head ship was loaded with a cargo of destruction. Today of all days, if it had some way to tell where to send its cargo down through the clouds at the right objective, it could wreak destruction over a vast area and escape easily into the fog.

Ekvall licked his lips. The crate didn't have an escort today, because it wouldn't want the droning of many motors to give away its location, and would depend on the fog to protect it. He stared harder, as though by sheer will power commanding the mighty crate into view.

And then, he saw it. It was a hundred feet below him, its outline unmistakable even through the intervening smother of white. He could make out the shape of its crew, resembling hooded falcons after some prey.

He allowed his crate to slide on. Let the noise of his motor and the clattering of his guns be the first thing—and the last—that crew would ever hear.

He cut in his motor with a thunderous roar. His guns began their chattering instantly. The crew whirled to look back. He saw a white face wreathed in tendrils of the fog whipped back by the Gotha's props. Then he saw the white face turn red. The crew didn't even have time to unlimber its formidable armament.

ONE of the Germans slid easily over the side, vanishing into the white stuff. It was as though he had fallen asleep in some strange nightmare. Ekvall looked at his altimeter. The man was falling down through nine thousand feet of white space.

Two others started for their guns, and Ekvall let them have it. He watched them drape over the useless mounts which never had a chance to sing their songs of avid destruction. Now Ekvall's bullets were smashing into the body of the Gotha, probing for her cargo of bombs.

He was an avenging demon, avenging in advance the destruction this mighty crate had been out to spread.

The pilot got his through the head just as the Gotha burst into livid flames from stem to prop.

Ekvall dared not slant away, knowing he would lose the crate within fifty feet.

He swooped low over it, directing his bullets straight into the heart of the monster.

And then—with a terrific explosion, the bombs let go. The Spad was hurled skyward, spinning, barrel-rolling. The blazing Gotha vanished as though it had never been, obliterated by the intervening wall of fog. Ekvall fought for control of his crate.

A flying wire swung free, snapping back in the bitter wind of his mad passage, but he did not see it. He heard only the wind wailing through his superstructure.

His altimeter had gone crazy. One thing he knew—that he had been hurled upward. And now he was falling. His wings had almost been shaken loose from their moorings by the savage, tremendous explosion. But he fought on, grimly struggling for control.

WHEN he was flying level again and his altimeter had settled down to normal functioning at five thousand feet, he was heading toward German skies.

In fancy he heard, faint and far away, the crashing of the Gotha. The Gotha's men had never even seen the destroyer which had taken their lives—certainly not to know whether it was Nieuport, Spad or Salmson.

"I am," he told himself, "beginning to like this. And I didn't dare tell Fauberg how I dreaded the soup. If I had told him that ever since I learned to fly I have been afraid of losing the ground in a fog, and finding it only with the nose of my crate, he'd have thought me a blithering coward, and he would have been right!"

Only up here, in the midst of the white mountains of the fog, did he confess his fear. He had seen men crash from clouds and fog. He had dreamed of dying like that when, flushed with victory perhaps, he might try to find a home field. That fear rode with him now, making the whiteness a real nightmare.

He looked at his watch again. Two hours and twenty minutes to go. By this time Germans had found the smashed Gotha for a certainty, and crates, flown by crazy men, would be after him, seeking vengeance for their fallen comrades.

He laughed. Fat chance they had of finding him. His motor roared sweetly on. The tendrils of the

fog seemed to be thicker. There was a blackness in the sullen skies, as though the heavens frowned at puny mortals who dared to defy them.

Clark Ekvall took a deep breath. He pulled his stick back into his stomach and climbed to the very ceiling of the Spad. But he couldn't break through the high fog.

Again he cut his motor to listen. All through the smother now he heard the droning of Benz and Mercedes motors. Somewhere in here would be the other two men from his squadron, on their solitary patrols.

It would be just as probable for him to contact them—and accidentally smash them down with his flashing wings—as for the Germans to find him. He would have to be on the lookout for his comrades as well as for the enemy.

What was that?

The shadow of wings against the fog! Instantly he banked toward it. His knees gripped his stick. His hands went to his trips. He was about to let his Vickers rip their death chattering when he noted two things; that the crate which sped down the sky was a Spad, and that it was wreathed in flames.

Now he stood on his tail, searching the whiteness above the falling plane. Lolling on the cockpit coaming he saw the bloody dead face of Lieutenant Hobart. He held his fire just in time.

Behind the Spad, darting down like a silent ghost, came a flashing Fokker. Her pilot was intent on seeing that Hobart, whom he probably blamed for the fall of the Gotha, did not come back tomorrow to wreak further destruction.

He flashed past Ekvall without seeing him. Clark slipped in close, saw the broad back, mantled by lacy wisps of the fog, through his ring-sight. He pressed the trips.

A long burst smashed into the German's back. Ekvall shuddered as he, in fancy, felt the hammering of those slugs into himself.

The German flung up his arms. The wind of his own dive forced them to go back along the fuselage as though it had broken them. Then the German had vanished into the fog, hurtling down after the slain Hobart.

"Now," thought Ekvall, "I've got to get at least two more Germans to make up for Hobart!"

The German had been coming from directly aloft. Up there might be yet other Germans. He climbed until his motor was close to stalling.

Then he leveled off and almost screamed. It was

like being a squirrel in a ghastly cage. No matter which way he turned, dived or spun, there was always the fog, and nothing else.

It was like being in a padded cell, bashing out his brains against the softness. The white fog was the cell and it reached everywhere to the rim of the world and the heavens which circumscribed it.

He bit his lips hard for his helplessness. He tasted his own blood, salty on his tongue. He looked at his watch.

"What a place to be in," he thought. "Here I am, doomed to die when my gasoline runs out, on a job of killing which will end only when I am ended myself. I'm to knock down as many as I can. That's all. And then in the end I vanish into the fog the same as the Gotha did, and the Fokker which got Hobart. If Fauberg could see me now—"

He nosed down from twelve thousand and fed the juice to his crate. The fog was a blanket, cold and clammy against his face as he spun. He stared ahead.

"Out of my way, whoever or whatever you are!" he gritted. "I'm coming through."

The screaming of the wind through his superstructure sounded more ghostly and frightened than it ever had during his entire time at the Front—during which he had seen twelve of the enemy go smashing down the skyways to death before his guns.

"Fair weather flyer," he told himself with contempt. "That's me—I can always fly like blazes when the sun is shining. But in this fog I'm just like a frightened child in the dark."

DOWN and down. His wings bowed back with the strain.

And then—

Directly ahead he saw it, an Albatross, whose pilot was searching the milk with straining eyes, just as Ekvall searched for friend and enemy alike. The German saw him at the same time. Ekvall dared not pull quickly out of such a ghastly dive through two thousand feet of the white terror.

But even as he saw the German he let his Vickers burst with a chattering spurt. The German, knowing that Ekvall dared not pull out at that terrific speed, and that a collision was inevitable if he did not, was rolling out of line when Ekvall's tracer caught him in the upturned face.

Ekvall slid past the doomed Albatross with two inches to spare. His eyes were glued to the enemy

as he slid past. The mouth of the German was open.

Ekvall knew that his eyes were staring at him in the sightless gaze of death. That sight would go with him forever, to his very grave.

He opened his mouth to scream, then clamped it shut, biting his lips again.

His body, cold as it was, was bathed in perspiration, and again he was alone in the white immensity, in that cage of fog which changed him into a madman in a padded cell.

There still was no way out for him. His future was definitely ordained. Slightly less than two hours to go. Then, oblivion. The end.

He had killed a Gotha's crew. That would be five men, he counted. Those he hadn't killed outright would have died when the bombs let go. Then he had nailed the Hun who had downed Hobart. Then the man in the Albatross.

BUT there was no succor for Ekvall himself. "It's as though I'd been dreaming this forever," he thought. "Why didn't I tell Fauberg what the soup does to me?"

But it was too late now for any of that. Up and up he went, barrel-rolling. Then he leveled off, and banked, standing on his left wing. His motor roared savagely as he held his crate steady trying to control the trembling of his body.

"If only a dozen Huns would attack me," he thought. "Anything would be better than this silence!"

His Hiss blasted the silence away, but the blanket of the fog caught up the hammering of the motor, transmuted it into sullen throbbing, cast it away into its own heart, destroyed it.

Deliberately, still with his left wing down, Ekvall cut his motor. The silence seemed to jump at him as the whining of the wind in his wires died out with slackening speed.

Now he was spinning. Without the motor his crate wouldn't stay in the spinning circle. Down it smashed, while the wall of whiteness held him pinned against the back of his cockpit.

He looked up into the fog, and closed his eyes.

"It would be so easy," he told himself, "to hold her like this, and let her dive into the ground. I'd never know when I struck it. It would be over in a split second, and all this horror would end."

But it was not to be so. The whispering of the fog had become a wailing, as though the white ceremonies of the tomb, which was the fog, had

become inhabited by ghostly figures which bewailed their fate.

Angrily Ekvall kept his motor silent, his prop barely spinning, while he fought at his fear. It wasn't a fancied fear, but a very real one. Anyone knew the danger of fog in the high heavens, especially fog which blotted out everything.

His motor cut in. The prop seemed to lash the fog into a fury, to trail it rearward like wet rags, like ghostly wet rags which slapped at his sweaty face. His perspiration itself was cold.

"If ever I get down," he told himself aloud, his words swallowed by the Hiss's roaring, "I'll tell Fauberg the truth. He is an understanding chap. He won't send me up again. Other men will come up gladly, because they'll think the Germans won't be able to find them in this mess."

Bullet holes suddenly appeared in his dash. He whirled and looked back.

"Thank the saints!" he shouted.

Instantly he rolled away. For fifteen minutes he had flashed, a grey ghost, all about the skies, seeking *anything* which seemed human, or made by humans. And this German who settled calmly down to slay him was a gift from the gods themselves.

And yet, he couldn't allow the German to live, he had to destroy the very thing which gave him reason.

"But I can toy with him as long as possible," he told himself, as the German sped over him, and he speeded up to keep the fellow in sight.

And then he knew, when the Fokker came up with a wing-buckling turn, that if he dallied with the enemy he would die. This German was the best he had ever faced. He knew that the very first instant of contact.

The German wasn't bothered by the fog. He took terrific chances in it, in order to get his man, knowing that if he lost Ekvall he would never find him again.

The Hun's Spandaus chattered. Bullet holes appeared in wings and fuselage. Ekvall couldn't see them, but he knew they were there. He could tell it by some change in the manner of the Spad's flying.

"I've got to get him or take it myself," thought Ekvall.

He hated this task of killing, which must be carried out. When the Hun went down through the clouds he would be alone again, alone in a little cell, like a squirrel in a cage seeking safety and finding it nowhere.

But he must rub these thoughts out of his mind. He went into a whirl of mad aerobatics. His guns never ceased their flaming when once he saw the German in his line of sights.

Now Ekvall stood on his tail. Now he was diving. Now he slanted in from one side or the other. But always the German, executing turns as tightly as did Ekvall himself, and for the same reason, fired back.

His bullets, too, went close to their mark. If one ever got the gas tank, spilled the precious fuel which was all that stood between Ekvall and destruction—

“I can’t let him do that,” thought Ekvall. “Now, *this* time I’ll get the buzzard!”

But he didn’t. Down below sound detectors were trying to figure out just what was happening aloft, where two motors raged in the white smother, and messages were being sent back frantically into Germany, informing other German flyers where the fight was taking place. But save by accident, neither friend or enemy could find these two who were trying so bitterly to destroy each other.

As long as the fight lasted Ekvall had no fear. He could have patted the wings of that Fokker with affection, because man had made it, and it was somehow a contact with the earth he never expected to see again.

But it wouldn’t do. And yet—

HE hesitated a second when he caught the German fairly in his sight. His burst would erase the companionship of the enemy, leave him alone again.

“Here I go!” he shrieked into the white slipstream as his Vickers began their chattering diapason.

The German’s hand went to his helmet in the dying man’s salute as the bullets buffeted his body like sledgehammer blows. The Fokker slanted its left wing down, started the long fall down the sky. And then—

Once more Ekvall, again frightened by the white immensity of space, was alone in the sky. He hadn’t the slightest idea where he was. His altimeter could tell him nothing. It was as dead as he would be when the ground came up and crashed into his propeller. It was nothing. It had been erased.

But he could always climb—climb until his crate would go no higher. That was the answer. At

least he would escape from the ground.

“But I always have to look forward to coming down,” he told himself. “And one lands harder from twelve thousand feet than from twelve feet.”

And yet, it was something to know that the potential safety of the white abyss stretched away endlessly under his wings. He tried to forget all that for ten more minutes, as he looked to right, left, before and behind, seeking some friend or enemy again who would be his companion for some of the time yet left him.

“If I had been smart,” he told himself, “I’d have crashed that last buzzard and gone down with him. Then I wouldn’t have felt anything.”

But it was too late to worry about that now. The Fokker had gone. The fog had opened its white mouth and swallowed the German, had closed behind him. He had gone down into the fog-monster’s stomach, the earth, there to crash into bits against the black soil he had never seen again, had probably never expected to see after he had taken off this morning and watched the monster eat up his tarmac.

Ekvall looked at his watch.

“Half an hour to go,” he told himself. “Well, it will take that long to find the field.”

But in what direction was it? His flying sense answered; something deep down inside him said: “*This* is the way.”

He sighed with relief. No more Germans today. He had his own safety to consider. He had knocked down plenty, not one crate of which would ever be confirmed. But that didn’t matter. What were confirmations to a dead man? He felt, as he headed for home, that he was going in the right direction.

He was going back with petrol in his tanks, with bullets still eager for the chattering of his guns. His eyes were glued to the fog ahead, to the right and left

Now and again he looked back, so as not to be surprised again. On and on, endlessly.

Then, through the whiteness ahead, he saw a glimmer of orange or lemonish light.

“The sun!” he yelled. “It can’t be, and yet it *has* to be!”

He fed full power to his crate. The glow continued, became more and more. Against its vast screen which seemed to bar the world in that direction, he could make out the queer shapes of the fog.

There were columns of it, canyons of it, valleys,

cities, even streams of it. But more than that were the tentacles, which seemed to be twining across the way ahead as though to bar his passage into the light of the sun.

HIS motor roared. His wires screamed with speed.

The light grew stronger and stronger. Now the fog was a forest, obstructing his skyway. He forgot the enemy. Perhaps he would shoot out into the sunlight far beyond his field. No matter, he would land on the nearest field or in the closest clearing, and come back when the fog had vanished from Fauberg's field.

He broke through. The sun was brilliant in his eyes. It was as though he had wakened from a nightmare of horrors, to find himself in the arms of a loved one who crooned to him, to quiet his fears.

But the crooning he heard wasn't the crooning of a loved one—but the chattering and ranting of Spandaus; the Spandaus of Germans who, knowing that hunting an enemy in the fog was like hunting the proverbial needle, had circled outside its mountain of white to await the coming of that enemy.

There were wings against the sun. There were wings against the fog through which he had shot so quickly. But for the grace of whatever gods protect flyers he might have flown straight into the cockpit of any one of the half dozen ships which awaited him.

As it was, they converged on him like jackals attacking the remnants of a lion's kill. Their Spandaus were raving at once.

He rubbed his smarting eyes, trying to accustom them to the sudden sunlight. His knees gripped his stick. His hands went automatically to his trips. But, flying into the sun, he could see no target at which to shoot, though from that direction came the bullets of enemies hidden in the eye of the sun.

He began to dive and spin. He swore savagely. Out of the white smother, out here where he felt so much at home, or always had, he was a blind man fighting off invisible attackers—a man long accustomed to darkness trying to adapt his whitened eyes to the sunlight. A row of bullet holes appeared on the right side of his cockpit coaming. His fuselage creaked with strain as he nosed up, then kicked his rudder hard over to get out of line of sights.

HIS left wing went down. Then he was spinning, and through the gleaming arc of his propeller he could see a familiar field. Down there a dozen Spads were taking off, his own wingmates. But they would never be in time. His field, which he had never expected to see again—yet which he had seen, just before he must surely die.

It was a ghastly travesty of justice. He had feared the fog which had kept him whole. Now he must die in the sunlight because his eyes could not see.

"I won't die yet!" he told himself. All over the sky he sped, attacking first this one and that. Always he kept out of the drifting fog, which was trying once more to close down on the field below—for always, if he went into it, he would have to come out again, and into the midst of the Germans who waited.

"At least," he decided, "I can see what kills me."

His Vickers ranted a shrill burst. Then his guns jammed.

The silence after their chattering was as bad as the silence of the fog when his motor wasn't running. It made him want to shriek. Well, it was the end.

Ekvall considered.

There was nothing else to do but take a chance—take it before the fog and the enemy could stop him. He nosed straight down and leaned forward to make his Spad travel faster and ever faster. Behind him, winging down, flashed the Germans, their guns blazing. A flying wire snapped before a burst. His fuselage shuddered with the impact of bullets which came in from the side and did not kill him because they didn't come from ahead or from the rear.

Faster, ever faster. He would, he decided numbly, never fear the fog again. Bullets—

The chattering, endlessly, of Spandaus, as the Germans tried their level best to get him before he could reach safety, or before his wingmates could come to his assistance.

No guns—except those of the enemy. They were around him, under him. It seemed that their Spandaus simply must, inevitably, send their hot lead into his body. And yet the tarmac of Fauberg crawled up and up to meet him, and he still lived on.

Tendrils of fog were creeping over the field as he prepared to shoot the fastest landing he had ever

made. He saw greaseballs running onto the field to grab his wings before he could crash into hangars—saw two Fokkers dive down and spray the ground men with showers of lead. But he didn't swerve. It was a three-sided race, between himself on the one side, and the fog and the Germans on the other two.

A sledgehammer seemed to crash down on his skull just as his wheels touched. He was conscious that his wingmates had tangled with the Germans, and fought them off; but not until his wheels had touched and the last burst of a German had bashed him into unconsciousness. One bullet along the

ridge of his skull, not too deeply plowing—

And when Clark Ekvall returned to consciousness it was to look into the concerned face of Major Fauberg. Ekvall grinned. Now was the time to tell the major of his fears. He opened his mouth to let the words out—strange words for a man who, all his flying life, had feared the white sightlessness of the fog.

"Sorry, Major," he said, "that I let the Heinies gang me. You see, sir, I'm only at my best when flying is washed out for ordinary flyers, and I can hunt my enemies in fog so thick you can slice it with a knife!"