



ACE KILLER

Rex Regan Zooms to Pay a Bullet Debt—and Finds in the Flame-Swept Skies an Unexpected Ally!

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SULLEN gloom hung so heavy in the mess of the 98th Yank Pursuits you could have cut it with a knife. The reason was death; the death of the squadron's C.O., Major Walters, who had been shot down the day before by one Baron von Schultz, Germany's leading ace on that section of the Front.

To each of the veteran sky eagles of the 98th it was a personal loss. Major Walters had not only been a perfect C.O., he had been a close friend and confidant to every officer, non-com, and mechanic under his command.

Slumped down in the depths of a binge-battered easy chair, Rex Regan, senior pilot of the outfit, stared flint-eyed at the half-finished cognac in his huge paw. Presently he stirred himself and glanced at Buck Dutton, "A" Flight leader, seated a few feet from him.

"When did the colonel say our new C.O. would arrive, Buck?" he grunted.

The other shook his head.

"He didn't!" he growled. "For the ten millionth time, that phone call I took was from the colonel saying that some damn fledgling was on his way up from pilots' pool. Forget what he said the kid's name was."

Regan grunted again, took a sip of his drink.

"That's right, you did tell me," he murmured. "A fledgling, huh? Hell of a fine time to send a fledgling to this outfit! Me, I can't be bothered breaking in greenhorns. Soon as it's light, I'm going out looking for that bum, von Schultz. And I'm going to keep looking until I find the rat. God—when I think of yesterday! The major trying to clear his jammed guns, and that louse drilling him all the way to the ground!"

"Yeah!" echoed Buck Dutton savagely. "And us too far away to give him any help! I wish to hell it had been me

that had gone down on that balloon, instead of him!”

SILENCE settled over the room. As a matter of fact it was not broken for almost three-quarters of an hour. It was the rattle of the door latch that did it. Every eye turned that way, saw a thin, slightly squint-eyed second lieutenant in ill-fitting uniform step inside and gaze rather bewilderedly about.

“Shut the door!” Regan barked at him. “Want to freeze us out? Who the devil are you?”

The thin officer swallowed hard, and seemed to squint all the more as he fixed his eyes on Rex.

“Sorry, sir,” he said, and pushed the door shut. “I’m Second Lieutenant Becker. This is Eighty-nine Squadron?”

“Becker!” Buck Dutton suddenly exclaimed. “That’s the name, Rex! He’s the fledgling the colonel spoke about.”

Regan took time out to survey the newcomer from head to toe. He wasn’t particularly pleased with what he saw. But then, he wasn’t pleased with anything at the moment. He half waved his hand toward the zinc bar.

“Welcome to Eighty-nine, Becker,” he grunted. “Pour yourself a drink. I suppose you know you’re joining this outfit at a pretty lousy time? We lost our C.O. yesterday.”

The fledgling didn’t answer immediately. He looked from pilot to pilot as though mentally sizing up his new war comrades. Eventually he nodded.

“Yes, sir, I heard about it. I’d like to say, I’m sorry. I only hope I’ll be able to play a small part in avenging the loss. Major Walters was a fine man. I’d met him.”

“The best!” Regan snapped. “But just forget that helping to avenge stuff, Becker. We don’t need your help. Besides, you’re

going to cool your heels here at the field until the rest of us have taken care of that job.”

A stubborn glint crept into the squinting eyes.

“That may take time, Captain,” the newcomer said. “And— Well, after all, I was assigned here to do my share. The sooner I start doing it the sooner I’ll be repaying what the Government spent for my flight training. If you understand what I mean, sir?”

“I do!” Regan said gruffly. “But you’re still grounded until I say different. Ordinarily, Becker, I’d break you in on patrol work right off the bat, but— Well, you’ll have to wait. We’ll have enough trouble doing our immediate job without a greenhorn getting in our way. Now just take it easy and go have that drink I offered you.”

The fledgling made as though he was going to speak, but changed his mind. Instead, he glanced out the mess window toward where the coming day was just a faint grey line low down on the eastern horizon, and then went over to the bar and poured cognac into a glass right up to the brim. He downed it all in two gulps.

Rex, watching him, grunted. That was the telltale sign of a fledgling desperately trying to adjust himself to the realization that he was now in the front row of the war, and not safe and secure in flight training school.

“Here’s hoping he doesn’t pay back the Government with our cognac,” Rex heard Buck Dutton murmur under his breath. “It takes practise to down a slug that size, and keep it on your stomach. If he does, maybe I’ll begin to like the guy.”

Any comment on the subject by Rex Regan was stopped short as the faint throbbing drone of a Mercedes engine suddenly came to every ear. As one man the entire squadron were on their feet and

pounding out through the mess door onto the tarmac. High up and toward the east a faint blur was streaking down. Even as Regan's eyes picked it out against the shadowy dawn clouds, the blur dropped another five hundred feet.

A few of the pilots raced toward their planes, bawling for mechanics to swing the props. The ground pit gunners were already at their stations swinging their defense weapons around to train them on the diving blur.

Regan, however, did not move a step once he reached the tarmac. One good look told him that the diving plane was not coming down to strafe the field. A moment later he saw the outline of the Fokker. And a moment after that he saw the white skull and crossbones painted on both sides of the jet black fuselage.

"Van Schultz!" he growled. "Coming over to rub it in. God, if I was only in the air now!"

He remained right where he was, though. The Fokker's speed could take it to Paris before Regan could warm up his Camel and get off. And then the reason for the visit was made plain. A Very flare arced out from the diving plane. In the whitish glow every man on the field saw the colored message streamer whipping earthward. At practically the same instant the Fokker hauled out of its dive and went zooming high into the heavens.

Rex won the race to the message dropper by a good ten yards. Feverishly he tore open the pocket flap and pulled out the folded sheet inside. With a start he saw that it was addressed to him. In a single motion he smoothed out the paper and read the message:

To Captain Regan:
I shall be glad to meet you at eight thousand feet over Issy at six-thirty sharp.
von Schultz.

"What the hell?" Dutton exclaimed over Regan's shoulder. "Did you send him a challenge, Rex?"

"No," Regan shook his head. "I guess the louse wanted to beat me to it. He got the major, and now he thinks he'll get the next in command. The hell he will! Sergeant Paxton! Get my ship set. I'm taking off in half an hour!"

LESS than twenty minutes later Regan waved the chocks away and taxied his plane out onto the dawn-lighted field. Swinging into the wind he gave his Camel full gun and took off. Holding the nose up he went clear to eight thousand feet, leveled off and glanced at the watch on the instrument dial. The hands showed exactly fifteen minutes past six. Throttling slightly, he banked around and flew dead-on toward the shell-shattered village of Issy some few miles behind the German lines.

The sun was now well up over the eastern horizon, but a thick ground mist, and cloud scud, made it appear little more than a huge ball tinted a dull crimson. As a result, however, its dull glow cast millions of ever-changing shadows about the heavens. Hunched forward over the stick, Regan stared hard at the shadows to make sure that one of them wasn't the sudden flash of Fokker wings.

Von Schultz had stated the location of the meeting place, but that was no assurance that the German ace would be there. A tricky, ruthless foe he would, if he could, sneak up on his victim and make the kill without showing himself. Knowing the man's air fighting tactics, Regan kept his eyes peeled for a surprise attack every inch of the way to Issy.

SUDDENLY, when he was a good two miles or so from the town he whirled in the seat and stared hard off his left wings.

Sun-tinted cloud scud greeted him, but he automatically reached up his free hand toward the loading handles of his guns.

"Saw the disc of a spinning prop, or I'm a liar!" he grated.

A moment later and his eyes confirmed his words. A full half mile off his wings the blurred outline of a plane streaked out of one strip of cloud scud and went darting from view into another. What really brought the frown to Rex's brows was the fact that the plane was heading due east, toward the northern tip of Issy. Only a flash glance had been his, and during that time he had been unable to make out the type of plane.

Deepening his scowl he unconsciously bunched his free fist.

"If that's you homing in, Buck Dutton!" he growled, "you can just split-arc about and get to hell home! I was closest to the major, so I rate first crack. Besides, the louse sent that challenge to me!"

And at that very moment it happened!

The yammer of Spandau guns chattered through the dawn air. Even as Rex whirled in the seat to the right, unseen steel fingers poked a row of holes in his lower right wing tip. Not even taking time to glance up he slammed the stick over, jumped down on right rudder hard, and thundered into a tight power spin. At the end of three turns he pulled the ship out in a wing-screaming zoom.

Then, and then only, he stared upward. A jet black comet was racing down on top of him. A jet black comet with a white skull and crossbones on each side of the fuselage. And the snout of the comet was spitting, twin streams of jetting flame.

Flattening out of the zoom he skidded into the clear, cursed savagely that he'd wasted precious seconds trying to spot the strange ship off his left wings, when all the time von Schultz was sneaking up on him

from the right and above.

Fighting the controls he cut back in a dime turn, got the jet black Fokker in his sights for a moment, and jabbed both trigger trips forward. The two Vickers cowed into the nose answered his touch instantly. But by that time von Schultz had wheeled to the right and Rex's bullets tore harmlessly past the German's tail.

Belting stick and rudder Regan followed the Fokker around, and had the grim satisfaction of seeing his tracers bounce off the Mercedes' cowling. But only for a second. A flashing half roll brought the German down and under the Yank ship. Up came the nose, and as Rex went skidding wildly out into the clear, a white-hot spear of flame sliced up his left thigh.

"One for you, louse!" he gritted through clenched teeth. "Now, it's my turn!"

As the words left his lips he flung the ship into a wild chandelle that made every wire and strut tremble from the excess strain. However, the wings stayed on, and he went thundering straight down at the German plane. Von Schultz tried desperately to kick his Fokker out from under. Rex laughed harshly and jabbed both trigger trips.

That's all he did, however. The laughter died on his lips. Rather it changed to a snarl of rage as he banged his free fist on the cocked loading handles of his guns. It was useless. It was as though twice in a row the gods of fortune were riding a killer's wings. Both of Regan's guns remained silent, hopelessly jammed. And von Schultz, sensing the truth in a flash, came sweeping up and around for the kill.

"You damn well won't!"

Regan howled the words at the top of his voice, and threw his Camel into a vicious power spin. If he could only hold off the German long enough he might be

able to whip out of the spin at low altitude and go hedge-hopping hell for leather back to his own field. The war would still be going on tomorrow. And for a pilot with jammed guns—tomorrow was another day.

If the spin could spoil von Schultz' aim! The thought raced through Regan's brain as he whipped downward. His heart stood still, and the back of his neck tingled. Any second and hot lead might bite into him.

"Twice in a row!" he grated. "Just the way the major—"

A SNARL of guns choked off the rest. He stiffened, and hauled the ship out of the spin in a frantic effort to ruin the German's aim. But as he went zooming up he suddenly realized that the German wasn't aiming at him. In fact, von Schultz wasn't aiming his guns at anybody. The man was concentrating every ounce of his ability on a desperate, frantic effort to get out from under a Yank Camel that was covering him with hissing Vickers bursts like a tent. Pop-eyed, Regan stared at the Camel and saw that it bore no markings at all. There wasn't even a squadron marking on the fuselage. But without question the pilot at the stick was an air scrapper of long experience. Von Schultz tried every trick in the bag, and some that he must have thought up on the spur of the moment. But the mysterious Camel pilot was his complete master in everything.

Finally, as a last resort, the German flung his ship into a furious power dive toward the ground. Instantly the Camel pilot seemed to go to work in earnest. He tore down after the German, fired a long burst, cut his fire for a moment, and then fired again. Across the air space Regan could see the tracers tear through the German's left wings, then through the right wings, and then into the turtleback of

the fuselage. "Bracketing him!" he muttered aloud. "Giving the louse a taste of slow death. He'll— That's *it!*"

It was. A long burst plowed into the cockpit of the diving Fokker. As though an invisible giant had smashed down his steel fist, the Fokker somersaulted through the air, suddenly exploded, and went slithering down the last five hundred feet in a shower of smoking embers.

"God, what a kill!"

Regan choked out the words, and went slanting down toward the other Camel that was, now hauling out of its dive. Before he could get down to its level the other plane cut away from him and went racing southwest across the Yank lines. He swung in behind, grimly determined eventually to learn the identity of the ace killer. Seconds later a gasp of surprise burst from his lips. The other plane was heading straight for 89's field. Twenty minutes later it landed, he right after it. Taxiing up to the line he legged out and tore over to the other plane. The thin, squint-eyed Second Lieutenant Becker climbed from the pit, turned and regarded him gravely.

"You need a damn sight better gunnery officer in this squadron, Captain," the man said. "Your ammo seems to be pretty rotten."

Regan gulped, advanced on the man. "Say, what the—"

The other's smile cut him off.

"It was the best way to work it, Captain," Becker said. "You were Major Walters' closest friend, so you rated first chance at von Schultz. I wanted to be around for the second crack—that *I* rated. So when I flew down here this morning I dropped a challenge from you on his field. Then I came on and landed about half a mile from here. I walked the rest of the way. You see, as the new C.O., I knew that you lads would resent my horning in

on the von Schultz mess. But as a fledgling, you wouldn't pay any attention to me. So I arranged with the colonel to hold off Becker's arrival for a day or so. It worked out as I had hoped. You had your chance, I had mine—and von Schultz is dead."

Regan stared at him.

"Then you aren't—" he began.

"Becker?" the other echoed. "No. I'm Frank Walters. Your C.O. was my older brother. Now do you understand?"

Regan nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. "And thanks for doing it your way. I— Well, I think that's the way the major would have wanted it, too. His brother? Hell, no wonder you didn't blink when you downed that straight cognac!"