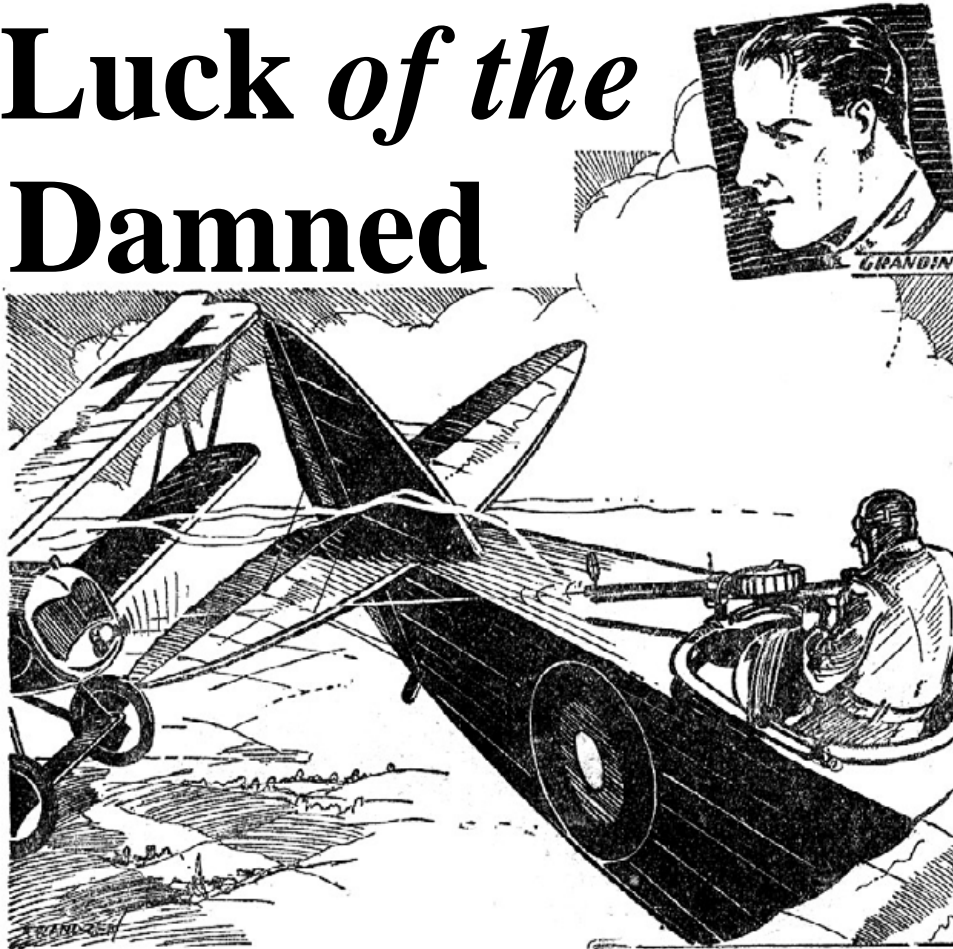


# Luck of the Damned



The spy's mounted gun clattered in the rear cockpit

*Jerry Randolph Defies the Grim "13" in a Slashing Winged Attack on an Enemy Squadron!*

**By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS**

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“IT’S this way, Randolph,” said the C.O., in that dry, rasping voice which had earned him the nickname of “Bucksaw” Stodell. “Grandin requests that you accompany him tonight on a very dangerous mission.”

Jerry Randolph’s boyish face flushed with pride. Grandin was his particular hero; he smiled his gratitude. Grandin’s craggy face returned the smile, and then it grew stony again as his cool blue eyes returned to the man behind the desk.

Corse Grandin looked as stiff and unfriendly as he had when Randolph had entered the office. There had been almost an air of mystery, then. Bickett, the C.O.’s ponderous orderly, had closed the door of the tiny office. Grandin’s hostility was not directed toward Randolph, but the lean-faced youngster looked uncomfortable just the same. No love was lost between the squadron’s greatest flyer and the “kiwi” officer who, by one of those accidents of war, commanded it.

"I'll be very glad," began Randolph, only to catch his breath as his eyes fell on a wall calendar. "*June thirteenth!*" he gasped. He shuddered slightly, and turned swimming eyes on Grandin. "Would you understand, Corse, if—if—"

"Sure!" Grandin smiled. "That accident yesterday shake your nerve a bit?"

"Oh, no!" Randolph drew a sharp breath. "But—but June thirteenth is my birthday—and unlucky day. Every June thirteenth as long as I can remember, something disastrous has happened. I've been in a car that's overturned, on a bridge that's given away—always something! When I enlisted, I was on a train on my birthday. I gave my berth to an old man who didn't like to sleep at the end of the car. The train ran off the track, and that old man was killed—*sleeping in my berth!* I know it's superstition, but it's never failed, and I—I feel I'd never return if—"

"Sure," said Grandin. "I understand."

"You don't think I've lost my nerve?" Randolph asked anxiously.

Grandin laughed at the idea. "After the way you landed that crate yesterday? Don't be silly! I'll be counting on you next time I need someone."

"Just a minute," Major Stodell said dryly. "Do I understand that you refuse to fly because of a childish superstition, Randolph?"

"It may be superstition, sir," Randolph flushed, "but—I've never failed to come close to being killed on my birthday."

"Superstition!" Stodell rasped, his eyes narrowed. "You flyers are like a bunch of savages. Sure you'll be killed if your photograph's taken, and—"

"Flying's voluntary," Grandin cut in, his eyes flashing. "You can't order a man to fly."

"No!" Stodell exploded. "But I can ground him permanently if he refuses to fly!"

GRANDIN'S fists knotted. His record gave him privileges another man wouldn't have dared take. Stodell knew that, too. However much he would have liked to take disciplinary measures with Grandin, he had to forego the pleasure. To a large extent, the record of the squadron was dependent upon Grandin's brilliance.

"Before you do that," Grandin growled, "I withdraw my request for Lieutenant Randolph. On second thought, I need a more experienced man—"

"I hope I've made myself clear," the C.O. said sarcastically. "Either Lieutenant Randolph accompanies you, or he doesn't fly again! There are plenty of men who want to fly! And I'm fed up with your crazy superstitions. If I have to make an example of Randolph—"

"I'll fly." Randolph's face was white, strained and twitching as he gripped Grandin's arm. "Don't say any more, please, Corse!"

"Better leave now, Randolph." Grandin shook off the arm; Randolph hesitated several seconds, and then left the room.

"If you won't understand how a flyer feels about these things, Major," Grandin said curtly as his eyes warred with Stodell's, "try to apply a little reason to what's happened. Randolph ripped his landing gear off yesterday when he cut down into the path of a Boche. It tore the wing off the Boche's plane, and left Jerry stranded. But he didn't know it until he returned to the field and saw the greaseballs waving a wheel above a canvas to warn him.

"If you were a flyer yourself, sir, you'd understand what a sinking feeling that gives a fellow. You're in the air, but likely to be mangled when you come down. Most youngsters would have lost their heads under the circumstances. Not Jerry! He's as game as they come. He flew around until he'd figured out what to do, and fishtailed

over the woods half a mile away to land on the trees with only a few scratches.”

“I know all that!” Stodell snapped.

“Yes, but you don’t know how that shakes a pilot’s confidence. And then to go out on a day when a long series of coincidences, if you want to call ‘em that, have proved damaging to your confidence. Can’t you see he wouldn’t be worth much in a pinch?”

“Flying,” said Stodell grimly, “is the best way to regain confidence after an accident!”

“Flying, yes! But not flying into enemy territory to pick up a spy! I need flyers who have every faculty available! Not a youngster who feels he has a jinx on his tail when he goes out!”

“Randolph is going to fly,” snapped Stodell, “or he’ll never fly again. I’m going to teach you superstitious fools that there’s nothing in your superstitions at all.”

“So Randolph,” Grandin blazed, “is to be a pawn in your game to make me eat humble pie? All right, I’ll do it, you damned—”

“Grandin!” Stodell said curtly. “Remember yourself! And remember one other thing. I’m your superior, and you’ve just about reached the end of your rope here.”

Corse Grandin stood eyeing the thin man behind the desk with savage contempt.

“Yes, sir,” he cried, in a voice husky with suppressed rage.

The moon was just beginning to light the edge of the world as Corse Grandin strode out onto the field, still fastening his helmet. But the field itself was a well of blackness, broken only by the bluish-white flame of sputtering exhaust stacks.

Randolph stood beside his plane. In the bluish light, his face was like the face of a ghost. Grandin knew in that moment how an innocent man looks before he goes up the thirteen steps to the electric chair.

Randolph’s chin was up, but there wasn’t a trace of color in his strained countenance. His lips were a straight, white line.

“We’ll see you through, Jerry my boy!” Grandin struck Randolph roughly. “Let the rest of us take the chances this trip, understand?”

“Corse, I—” Randolph nodded, and gulped; he swallowed hard. “If—if anything should happen, you’ll see that my mother gets my stuff?”

“Nothing will happen. Listen, we put down that spy two weeks ago, and didn’t see another plane. You’ll see.” Grandin was touched.

ANY landing in enemy territory was a dangerous one, and Grandin wished his mind could have been free of Randolph’s jinx. He cursed Stodell savagely as he revved up his Spad. He had given special instructions that Randolph’s crate be given particular care. It seemed mechanically okay.

When the five Spads on the line had jazzed up for some minutes, Grandin gave the signal. The portable beacons gave them their light.

Grandin led the way down the field. He kept his stick slightly forward to bring up the tail, then back, as he neared the end of the field. Brown earth dropped away beneath him. He glanced back. The spitting exhaust stacks showed him the two planes on either side. At least Randolph had not cracked up in taking off!

The lights went out. Blackness below, and a moon-lighted sky above, flecked with clouds. Grandin climbed steadily toward those clouds. Ahead he could see the spidery tentacles of exploding shells lighting the war-gashed battlefields. Flares threw the world into macabre relief. The rumbling mutter of war rose even above the subdued bellow of his engine and the droning of his prop.

At last Grandin leveled off, just below the clouds. Deliberately, he shut out thoughts of Randolph, concentrating on the work ahead. Two weeks before he had dropped a Yank spy in German territory. Tonight, if the spy still lived, he was to pick him up. Word had leaked through of a preparation behind the lines. It looked like the preparations for a big push. The spy he had dropped would know. If he had the information he had gone after, the Allies could be prepared to repulse the offensive.

As he buzzed along, Grandin glanced back from time to time to see if the other Spads were having trouble adjusting their speeds to his two-seater. Apparently not. Mechanically, he studied the map pinned to his dash; it was difficult to read under the faint glare of the dash light. He watched the ground, noting rivers, blackened skeletons of trees, and all the familiar landmarks.

**H**E had crossed the lines. His attention quickened. He swept the skies anxiously. No other planes visible. At last he spotted the thin line of a stream and, just beyond it, a woods. His destination!

The woods were a dark blotch toward which he dived. Momentarily, clouds had hidden the moon.

Tense as a bowstring, Grandin watched the clearing where he had previously dropped the spy. No sign of life near it. Presently, however, a sliver of light cut through the trees. The light from the spy's taped flashlight! It went out, came on again. Three times—his signal!

"It's a cinch!" Grandin thought, his spirits rising.

And then for a moment the moon shone through a rift in the clouds. On the other side of the clearing through the trees there was a glimmer of light. Not the flash of a searchlight or a match—a steely, shimmering light such as moonlight might make when reflected from steel.

A trap!

Grandin drew out of his dive, climbing again. His eyes strained at the blackness of the woods, but the moon had dropped behind the clouds again. He could not see the glint. He tried to puzzle out the answer. Had someone seen the wheel tracks he had made when he had dropped the spy? Had they guessed how those tracks had been made and set a trap to catch the spy when he attempted to leave again?

Grandin circled the clearing, torn with indecision. If he failed to pick up the spy, the American's life would be forfeited. The Germans had seen that flashlight! But if he dived, it was likely both of them would be taken prisoners! And the spy would be shot!

That information the spy possessed must reach headquarters! It was a life and death matter to hundreds of Americans to know whether an attack would take place, and to be prepared.

But falling into that trap would help no one!

Grandin turned possibilities over rapidly in his mind. He could see no escape for it. That spy must be picked up if it were humanly possible!

With the feeling of a man about to face a firing squad, Grandin drew a long breath, headed into the wind, and then pushed forward on his stick. Down! He gunned his Hisso from time to time to prevent overflowing. He must be ready to take off the instant the spy could reach his plane.

He was skimming across the ground when he heard bickering guns overhead—a chilling sound at this moment! He didn't dare raise his eyes. Instinctively he sensed that German planes dived on his four comrades. The trap had bigger jaws than he had anticipated! Planes had remained in hiding above the clearing, in addition to men in the woods! Clouds had hidden the planes.

Grandin knew that the best thing he could do was to take off again instantly, going to the assistance of the other four planes. But even that choice was taken away from him. A man came running across the clearing ahead of him, waving frantically. The spy! Now that he'd revealed himself, he couldn't be deserted.

Reluctantly, Grandin landed. Scarcely had he started to roll along the ground when a machine-gun started spitting in the woods. That scythelike fire would cut the legs out from under the running American! Cold sweat broke out all over Grandin's body. He couldn't desert the Yank—yet it was suicide to remain!

Overhead, guns rattled. Then there came the rising wail of sharply diving planes. Stuttering guns—close!

Grandin tore his eyes away from the running American for a moment. A Spad dived recklessly toward the woods, its Vickers raging. Riding its tail was a Fokker, shooting furious bursts. Grandin recognized the plane, even if he couldn't see the flyer. Jerry Randolph!

With a Boche on his tail, trying to shoot him down, Randolph had dived for that machine-gun nest to give Grandin his chance! Nerve? It certainly took nerve!

And, suddenly, the machine-gun in the woods went silent, just before the streaking tracers could reach the running man.

"Jerry, you young devil!" Grandin cried hoarsely. "You did it!"

With the knowledge that on this day something disastrous always happened to him, young Randolph had taken this chance! Grandin never doubted that Randolph's jinx would overtake him this time. But before it did, he was certainly riding his luck on the brink of eternity!

The spy reached the crate, and climbed up. Again that machine-gun clattered. Men had replaced the machine-gun crew Randolph's bullets had killed.

RANDOLPH'S gun licked tracers at the woods. He didn't silence the gun a second time, he was having to pull up to avoid a nose-dive, but his blazing attack wasn't helping the machine-gunners' accuracy!

Grandin roared across the clearing, while the spy settled down into his seat. His craggy face grim, Grandin bounced the crate into the air in an incredibly short space. Climbing! The trees were ahead. If he cleared them, that's all he'd do!

And then hell broke loose behind. Steel-jacketed lead flicked off chunks of fabric. Grandin risked losing precious altitude by trying to sideslip out of range of that devastating fire. He heard a shout behind, then the clatter of the mounted gun in the rear cockpit. Unexpected assistance from his passenger!

The Spad jarred slightly as it brushed the top of a tree. Then it was in the clear once more, climbing. In the clear, but with a Boche raking them mercilessly! Holes were sewed across a tilted wing tip. Grandin tried to twist out of those streams of fire as he climbed.

Suddenly the spy shouted, and the bullets ceased thudding through their wings.

Grandin turned. Pulling out of a dive was Jerry Randolph, just above a Fokker which was crackling hideously. And behind Randolph was that other Fokker, still peppering him. Not yet had it delivered a fatal shot.

"He did it!" the spy shouted, and Grandin nodded, his throat tight.

Randolph was going up again, and the Boche was still riding his tail like a Nemesis. Up—up—up went the Spad. The spy tried to put a burst into the passing Fokker, but he couldn't swivel his gun fast enough.

RANDOLPH Immelmanned. It was the German's big chance to rake him broadside before he had achieved reversal of direction. Tracers swept under Randolph's landing gear—too low.

And then Randolph roared down, twin Vickers blazing. It seemed to Grandin that they must surely crash head-on.

Jerry Randolph pulled up a moment before it could happen—pulled up above a Fokker which was beginning to crackle.

Second blood!

Above, the three Yanks were having a tough time with three Fokkers which had all the advantage of position. Randolph climbed toward one Fokker which seemed just about to deliver the *coup de grace*.

"The young fool!" Grandin exploded. "He's already stretched his luck thin!" The veteran climbed to assist the beleaguered Americans. But even as he climbed, Randolph was ahead of him. He was nosing straight for the belly of that Fokker. His guns beat out bullets in a long, stuttering burst. It seemed, from where Grandin was, that Randolph was about to plow into the belly of that Fokker.

It was flying to stir the blood of a pilot, and Grandin was stirred, even while he was angry that Randolph should take such chances when he had ordered him to stay out of things. The youngster was asking for it, and he'd get it soon!

At that moment, the Spad began backslipping. And at the same instant, flames curled over the floorboards of the doomed Fokker.

Grandin's eyes stung. With certainty in his heart that he was going to die, Randolph was flying as Grandin had never seen him fly before. The older flyer knew that he was no longer the squadron's

greatest flyer. He had seen a greater, Jerry Randolph!

Even while Randolph's Spad went into a tail-spin, it never seemed to be out of control. He righted it before it had fallen two thousand feet. It was beautiful to see it glinting in the moonlight as he climbed. The boy seemed to be part of his ship as a cowboy is part of his horse. He was in his element. And in his heart, Grandin felt that the boy was going to die before many minutes had passed. He was too reckless!

But Randolph did not die. In a whirlwind attack, he battered in the floorboards of another Fokker to save a comrade, and it went down, out of control. Grandin accounted for the fifth and last Fokker. And as he buzzed back to the squadron, he wondered how it had happened. Randolph had beaten his superstition to a frazzle!

After they had landed, the ponderous orderly, Bickett, joined them.

"Look," he said, holding up a calendar.

"Yes, I know it's June thirteenth," Randolph exulted. "It's the first time it's ever passed me by without something ghastly happening."

"But it isn't June thirteenth!" said Bickett. "That landing gear was ripped off your plane on June thirteenth! I just got a call asking why I'd misdated all my reports. I guess I forgot to tear a page off the calendar on Sunday. Today's the fourteenth! You're safe another year."

Randolph's knees caved in, and he sat down heavily on the ground, the color draining from his face.

"Gosh!" he said, huskily. "I wouldn't have dared take the chances I did tonight if I hadn't thought my number was up, anyway!"