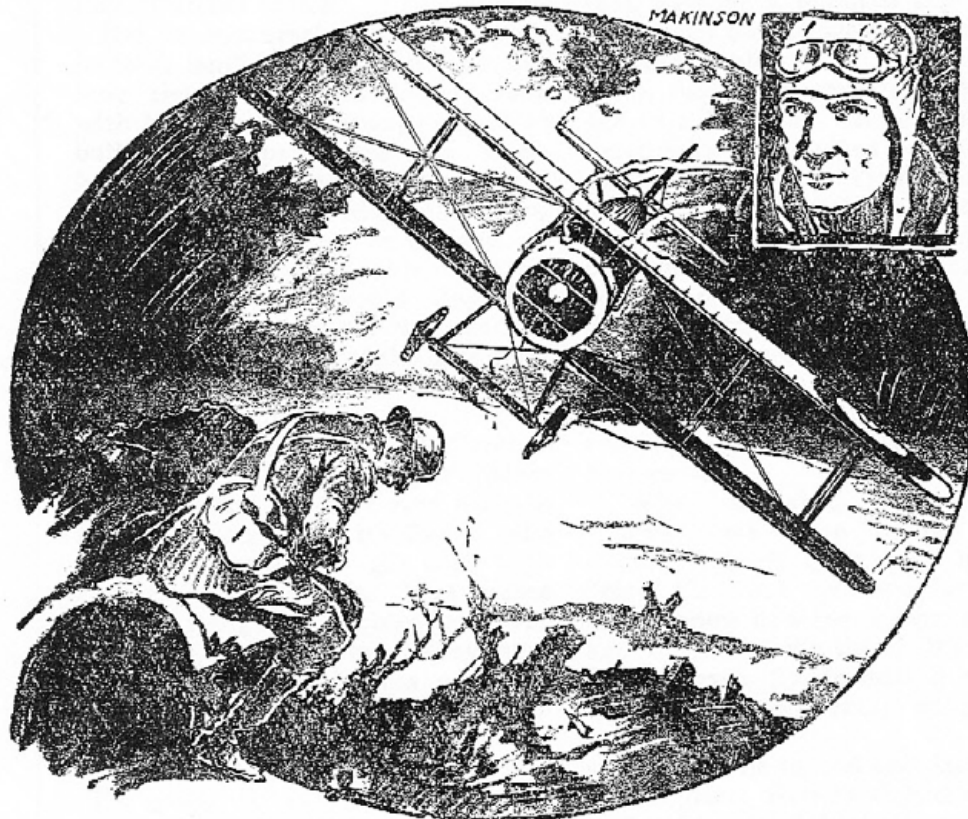


It Wasn't in the Cards for Makinson to Be an Ace, for Every Time He Landed It Was a Case of Crash on Delivery!



A man came out of the pill box, staggering, hands over his belly

Archy Flowers

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

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“FOR four consecutive mornings,” said Major Bassett grimly, “our flights have been registered on by enemy antiaircraft whenever we cross the lines. We’ve been in the habit of disregarding the Archies. When Bleasdell was shot down on Monday we set it down as the first lucky hit of the whole war in this sector for the Huns. Then, Lankershim took a piece of shrapnel in his motor and had his controls jammed. He landed in German territory, to

stay there a prisoner for the rest of the war—”

The major paused, apparently to catch his breath, and the silence was pregnant with menace. His eyes played over his squadron. If they rested longer and more thoughtfully on Lieutenant Makinson, nobody knew it but Bassett himself, and young Makinson, whose face was covered with a fine dew of perspiration. Makinson had plenty of reason to feel disturbed. He was the original hard-luck Henry. He’d

managed, over a period of seven weeks, to get three German crates.

But he had cracked up five Spads in freak landings, had returned home four times with something wrong with his crate—and always scores of bullet holes perforated his ships, holes which had missed him by the proverbial eyelash. Makinson knew that he would never be an ace. It simply wasn't in the cards.

His hard luck would dog him through the rest of the war, and he could see it coming right this minute, as surely as though Bassett had singled him out.

"Then," went on Bassett, "yesterday morning a direct hit registers on Logan, and we can't even find the pieces. This morning it's Carter, who manages somehow to get back with almost no wings left. That means just one thing: the Archies have been perfected in our sector. They have new range-finding devices or something. In any case, they are a menace to our supremacy in the air."

"I've an idea," the major went on. "I'm going to ask for a volunteer whose only job will be to strafe the Archy strong points. There won't be any fun in it, and he'll be too close to the guns for comfort. I want one of you—"

MAKINSON sighed with relief, and realized that Bassett wasn't, after all, going to call attention to his flight record by insisting that he take the assignment, as he well could have done. On the other hand—

Makinson heard himself saying, as he took a step forward:

"I'll take a crack at it, sir."

There were little murmurs among the others. Why was Makinson doing this? They'd all questioned his courage, though never audibly, and never in his presence. A man might be scared in the skies, yet pack a wallop with his fist like the kick of

a mule. Makinson did exactly that. He was less than an inch under six feet, weighed a hundred and eighty-three. His blond hair defied combing and the brush.

No, they didn't question his courage in a fist fight, but they all wondered why it happened so often that someone else had to take Heinies off his tail, and shoot down enemies he should have got. Makinson called it bad luck. His wingmates called it something else. And now, was he ducking out of a tough assignment for something that didn't look so tough?"

Nobody said anything. Bassett was sucking in his breath, staring at Makinson.

"Why?" he asked.

"I've cracked up enough crates without intending to, sir," he said. "Now I'll crack up some for a reason. I know how my wingmates feel, and I don't blame them. It's got so I can't even fly formation without being afraid of locking wings with someone. I—"

And then he turned and dashed out of the place. Bassett sighed again.

"Let him smash himself up, Major," said Captain Daley grimly. "But it won't happen. Who'll be over the lines to see how he behaves himself?"

Bassett was a fair man.

"I don't believe for a minute that there's anything wrong with Makinson."

The other flyers trooped out. They were due for a patrol, deep in German-held skies, in an hour. When they trooped onto the tarmac, Makinson already had his Spad out, was checking gas, oil, and ammo. He didn't look toward any of them. His face was grim. It had been tough, flying through Archies which had become, so suddenly, dangerously efficient, at five thousand feet and over.

But what would it be like to dive straight into the muzzles of the Archies? Makinson thought he knew what it would mean, and was preparing himself. At the

same time a song was singing inside him. He'd never had occasion to take chances with his life when the ground was right under his wheels. Maybe there'd be excitement when he had no other wings to interfere with his.

He knew very well how his wingmates felt, and that, likely as not, much of his danger to "B" Flight was caused by his wingmates' fear of Makinson, instead of the reverse. Wings had almost locked with his when he had been as relaxed as though he'd had four drinks in him.

Now was the time to show them, if he got any sort of a chance. He was making his own chances at this moment.

DALEY came to him when seven crates were lined up at the deadline.

"You'll fly point, Makinson," he said, "until I signal you. Then you dive down and keep the Archies busy until we've got over. Major's orders."

"Yes, sir," said Makinson.

The eight crates roared into throbbing life. Makinson wondered, as always, how many would come back of those that went over, and whether, ever, he would get those two crates he needed to give him his place in the war's acedom.

Daley signaled. Makinson got away slightly ahead of his wingmates, and swore. Not one of them would miss that. They'd say he was nervous, scared perhaps. Instead he was merely eager to do his stuff, unbothered by the necessity of looking out for anyone else. The Spads rose like flushed birds, to four thousand feet, where they formed the inevitable V, with its point toward Germany. Then they were away.

Makinson kept his eyes peeled on the ground, watching for the snake-traces of the trenches to swing under his eyes. Then he looked at Daley, flying to his right rear. Daley would drop into point as soon as

Makinson dived away. Makinson licked his lips, wishing he might go this instant. He looked at the faces of his wingmates. It did his heart good that three of them grinned at him, that one even raised a friendly hand in wishes for his good luck.

The Archies would start spearing the sky with bursting blossoms in a matter of seconds now. They operated from concrete pillboxes, just behind the German lines. German lines!

There was something Makinson had forgotten! He'd have to go down so closely that the Germans could pot-shoot at him with rifles! But it didn't frighten him. He merely stared at Daley.

Daley, gazing at the trenches, lifted his head, looked at Makinson, nodded.

A song of delight in his heart, Makinson started down. Fifteen hundred feet below his formation, which, throttled down, proceeded toward the lines, the Archies began firing. It came to him that he must keep them so well occupied that they didn't have a chance to spray "B" Flight with shrapnel.

He tested out his Vickers. Bullets whined through his prop. They must have gone into the German trenches, for he saw men running to right and left. Then he saw other men appear, out of line with his darting nose, their rifles at their shoulders. Then Makinson laughed. Hell, this would be a lot better than hunting Heinie flyers.

His crate was right. His guns were right. Makinson couldn't miss. So he told himself, as he peered through his windshield, hunting the pillboxes of the German gunners. They had to be a certain place, or within a short radius of certain places whence, yesterday, and days before that, he had seen tendrils of smoke from the muzzles of guns that had suddenly become dangerous, deadly.

HE spotted one such gun emplacement, directly under the skylane through which "B" Flight must travel, was even now traveling. Makinson grasped his stick with his knee. The enemy would see him soon enough, probably had him spotted this instant. The trick of it was to keep the aperture through which the Archie fired so filled with lead from his Vickers that the gun not only could not fire at the flight so far above, but could not down Makinson himself. A dead hero was no good to the squadron.

He got the pillbox lined up. The ground was slanting up to meet him at terrific speed. The wind shrieked through his bow-bent flying wires. His fabric slanted viciously with the speed of his dive. Smoke from near his spinner-cap eddied back into his face, crept up into his nostrils.

His Vickers was chattering, coughing, spewing death at that pillbox. Makinson laughed in high glee. His eye was now glued to his ringsight, bringing the crossed wires and the aperture of that emplacement into juxtaposition. Bullets were kicking up dirt all about the place, showing him how well he shot.

Then he couldn't see where the bullets were hitting, and knew that they were going into the pillbox and striking it dead center. He kept his crate in its mad dive. A man came out of the pillbox, staggering, hands over his belly. Makinson corrected slightly, and saw the fellow fold up, a grey bag of nothing, and sprawl out limply on the ground.

Maybe this didn't count for anything when it came to making aces, but there was one gunner who'd never take another crack at American flyers. The ground, now, was dangerously close. But Makinson held to his dive, never giving a thought as to whether his wings would hold when he pulled out, until sure he had

silenced that particular nest.

Then he ceased, firing, began the task of fighting his propeller out of German soil. Bullet holes appeared in his wings, making them resemble nothing so much as sieves, and he knew that German riflemen were having a field day. There was a gone feeling in the pit of his stomach for a moment. It would be a disgrace to be brought down by rifle fire. Yet he dared not take time out to make the riflemen keep their heads down. In the seconds that would take, another Archie crew might knock somebody out of "B" Flight.

So, even while his Spad protested savagely as he lifted her nose so swiftly it looked as though his wings would surely go, he was already looking about for the next Archie nest.

He spotted it. He was traveling at almost top speed when he did so. But he dropped his left wing, slewing around, and his Vickers were going again. Dimly, through a kind of blur, he saw that the German riflemen were manning their own paradoss, firing at him. There were literally hundreds of them, trying to bag the foolhardy American.

But he couldn't bother with them just yet, though he was a perfect target they could scarcely miss. One bullet in his Hisso, and he would go down in flames, crash in like an express train falling down the side of a mountain.

No, the pillboxes came first. His Vickers chattered furiously. Bullets raised a whirlwind of dirt all about that second nest he spotted. Then he saw two hands come out of the aperture, as though their owner had tried to dive out through the hole to safety—and he knew that he was doing his job. He could hear rifle bullets snap past his ears, even over the roaring of his motor. He fancied he could hear the roaring of the rifles themselves.

Two pillboxes gone. There'd be more

tomorrow, and the next day. Great Lord, if he did a good job of this, maybe he'd have to face this fight every day as long as he lived. Then what would happen to his chances to become an ace? Not that it mattered so much, but this was so unspectacular, so little like skyfighting. It was like shooting fish in a barrel, except that here the fish were shooting back.

THAT made him laugh, though his fabric was beginning to go, and one of his flying wires stood straight out behind his Spad like the blade of a knife. As he sliced away, never over two hundred feet from the ground, he stole a glance at "B" Flight. They were well behind German lines now, and there still were seven of them aloft. Whether because of Makinson or not, he did not know, but the Archies had not connected today.

Knowledge that this was so, was balm to his spirit. Now, with nobody watching, he'd show these Heinies what a man could do with a Spad, when he had the sky to himself, and the time, and wasn't afraid of rubbing his elbows in the dirt.

That two Archie nests were firing straight at him he knew very well. There was something in the way the air changed, as though a monster were sucking it dry around him, that told him this. If they registered a direct hit there would not be enough of him, or his Spad, left to fill a small wastebasket. But the devil with it. The crate would never fly again anyhow, and he didn't care for himself.

He pointed his nose directly at the German riflemen, catching them flatfooted, unprepared. He sprayed his nose back and forth along their ranks as though it had been the nozzle of a garden hose, and the Germans went down dead or wounded—the latter making frantic efforts to reach the trench at their backs.

Over the trenches Makinson stood on

one wing, losing altitude, all but digging his right wing into parapet or parados, while he sprayed the trench with everything the Vickers would throw. He saw men go down. He laughed, even though he realized that if he went in like this, and at this speed, he'd never know what hit him, nor when. But he didn't care. This was living—dangerous living, but glorious.

Then he swung back to the east. Men were running there, and he had an idea that Archie gunners were racing to dugouts that were safer than the pillboxes. Only once in a blue moon did enemy airmen bother to attack the Archies, because, up to the first of the week, the Archies hadn't meant a thing. They'd never hit anything, had scarcely even caused the enemy any concern—except for rookies going over their first time, who were always sure they were going to stop—or at least slightly impede—a direct hit.

Makinson covered fully a mile in either direction from the spot where he had silenced his first pillbox. His Vickers didn't stop, except when he changed pans. Bassett hadn't counted on this much ammunition, but Makinson had. The Archies were firing at him as he did his stuff. There were more of them, he thought gleefully, trying to bag him and his almost useless Spad than usually honored the biggest flights of enemy aircraft.

And he gave them all he had. When he was certain that he had cautioned them all that they must keep their heads down, it was time for him to get back, get another Spad, and return to the lines in time to cover "B" Flight when it came back out of Germany. He would level at five hundred feet and scud for home.

AT THAT moment, apparently out of an empty sky, two Fokkers smashed at him with their Spandaus raging.

Telephones had got busy, begging for help. The Archies needed friendly crates to drive off this wild American! That was a joy to Makinson, but the two Fokkers were not. Just the same he would not have been human, and very much alive, if it hadn't come to him, even as he discovered the two Fokkers, that he'd be an ace if he downed them both.

It wasn't possible, of course, but if he *could*. His crate couldn't begin to maneuver as the Fokkers could, for he had little airfoils left with which to hold the Spad in the air. His controls were a mess, and might go entirely, any split second.

So, what did he have to lose?

Nothing, he thought, so he turned his nose straight into the muzzles of the nearest Spandaus, and set his Vickers to raging as he raced to meet the enemy head-on. And he almost met that enemy head-on, at that. It was the first time he had ever seen a German fail to dive, zoom or bank when faced with the necessity of colliding with an enemy head-on, or living a bit longer. Makinson himself shot aside, a suspicion growing in him.

The suspicion was shown to be well founded when the Fokker darted past him, aimed at the ground at an acute angle, and Makinson saw the dead flyer's head lolling on the cockpit coaming, blood playing back from his mouth in thin crimson streamers. But the second Fokker was still to be heard from. No German riflemen were firing at Makinson now, for to do so would have endangered their own flyer.

That was relief, anyhow. Now, if he could only get that other Fokker! He headed for it. He didn't have any too much ammunition left. What he had must serve. The German, equipped with a much faster crate in normal circumstances, twice as fast now because of the condition of Makinson's Spad, zoomed away.

Makinson lifted his nose, got the crossed wires of his ringsight on the German's back, essayed a short burst. There wasn't much chance, but one never could tell. Maybe luck would hold.

But riflemen were busy again, as soon as the Fokker was out of danger, and Makinson missed because he had to look out for himself. He leveled off at four hundred feet, and started for the home tarmac. His crate wobbled all over the sky.

He looked back as he went, to see whether the second Fokker would give chase—and saw the first Fokker's remains scattered over half of No Man's Land. It had crashed at top speed. In a way he was glad the German had been dead when he went in—not that he would ever have known when he struck.

Yes, the second Fokker was after him now. It was dropping down the sky like a meteor with wings. Makinson began to behave as nearly like a flyer whose only hope is escape, as he could. The German might be fooled, might not be. At the same time, Makinson apostrophized his Spad.

"I want just one more wing-buckling turn out of you," he said, and it was like a prayer. The Hisso seemed to roar assurance.

Now the German was spearing at him with Spandau lead. Makinson dropped lower, lower, enticing the German down. He hadn't a chance, unless—

He spotted a clearing, started for it. The German would understand that all right, and. it wasn't so far behind the Allied lines that the German wouldn't risk continuing the attack.

Down below the tree-tops—and then the German zoomed over him, leaving a trail of bullet holes in Makinson's fuselage and wings.

He nosed down, then nosed up with a rush, as the German went over him. For a fleeting instant he caught the German's

belly in his sights.

His Vickers ranted and raved. He saw the front part of the motor section in the sight as the bullets started. He saw the tail-surfaces of the Fokker against the crossed wires when he ceased firing. If he hadn't stitched a string of holes in that crate's bottom, from prop to tailskid, then he hoped he would never fire another Vickers.

The Fokker nosed straight up, hung in the sky for what seemed an age, while Makinson leveled off. He banked to the right because the Fokker was turning to the left, and watched, waiting to see how the German came out of it.

The German didn't. He went into the clearing on his left wing, his motor full out. He cartwheeled, then fell apart, scattering debris, all of it suddenly exploding into flame because the German hadn't had time to cut his switch—and Makinson headed for his home tarmac.

He wondered what sort of messages had been sent to Bassett, when he saw the major on the field, watching him slide down for a sloppy landing—a landing that sucked all the guts out of Makinson because he didn't think he'd walk away from the crate when it stopped rolling.

He'd probably catch hell for getting his crate shot to pieces. Maybe he'd be sent back to the Flight—maybe—

He crawled stiffly from his crate, strode to face the major. Bassett looked him over without speaking for several moments.

"Are you hurt too badly to take another crate out, when Daley is about due back

over the lines?"

"No, sir, I'm all right. I'm sorry the Spad got so badly shot up, sir."

"Fighting so close to the ground, Makinson," said Bassett, "there wasn't a chance in the world of getting that crate back—nor the pilot either—particularly a blasted fool like you!"

"**W**HY, sir, how's that?"

"Trying to take out *all* the Archies, fight *all* the German riflemen, and get yourself two Fokkers besides. By the way, that makes four of 'em for you, doesn't it?"

Then Makinson exploded. It made *five*, and he didn't intend to let any desk soldier, anybody who stayed on the ground merely because majors had to protect their skins, anybody who did nothing but order other men out to get shot to hell and gone, anybody who—

Then he noticed that Bassett was grinning, his eyes sparkling, and that Bassett didn't seem to mind the words he was using.

"Sorry, sir," said Makinson. "I'll stick to this job, if you like, sir. I think it's important. I know it's fast and exciting—"

"Okay," said Bassett, "and when you've got enough of ground-flying, let me know. I'll give you a bit of leave—"

"Leave, sir? You mean in Paris?"

"No, with "B" Flight! Give you a week like today and sky-fighting will be just a yawn for you—though of course, later, you can go to Paris to get your medals."

It sounded like sarcasm, but Bassett meant every word.