



*They were all in awe of Bersbee, because the man was more than just a genius – he was a veritable sorcerer in the clouds. And no one dared to ask him how he did it, until one day...*

“THAT makes twenty-seven for Bersbee.”

“Tops for this outfit.”

“Tops for almost any outfit. He’s due for a promotion soon. They can’t decorate him any more, unless it’s to give him a V. C.”

And then they stopped talking, because Bersbee was entering the lounge of the Officers’ Mess. His hair was new-combed, wet, and his face glowed red from a rough towel. He wore a clean uniform and his shoes were well polished. There was something fresh and assured and bright about him. Whenever the other men in Squadron 19 looked at Bersbee, their own feelings were upped. Their own confidence was heightened.

Flying Officer Bersbee was the best man in the outfit. He had been in the thickest part of the business since the Battle of France. Only this morning, over the Channel, near Portsmouth, he had knocked down his twenty-seventh Nazi. And he had done it with the customary Bersbee finesse.

No madman stuff. No acrobatics. No suicide dives, hundred-to-one lunges, turns, swirls, roll-outs, loops. None of the wild flying that distinguished the work of other high-ranking men in the R. A. F.

With Bersbee it was cold and clean and very mathematical. Although he was just as fast as any of the others when it came to running from the Dispersal Hut, taking off, climbing, moving into combat stance, he always seemed to be taking his time. He always seemed to be moving with calculated deliberateness, as if he had drawn up blueprints for every move.

He rather looked the part. For his medium height he was overweight by about twenty pounds. But it was packed in hard, and he was built firmly, stocky in a square way. He had very black hair, severely tonicked, combed and brushed. He had eyes that were almost black. His features were well balanced, well lined, and his complexion was outdoors-and-flying red. But he was not handsome.

There was something cold and rigid and somewhat artificial in his appearance, and it kept him from being handsome.

Bersbee was twenty-seven years old. Before the war he had been a statistician, working in the actuary division of a large London insurance firm.

Now he walked toward his chair. He always sat in the same soft-backed leather chair. No other chair would do. If someone was already sitting in his chair, he would stand, even though there were other chairs. But things were at a point where nobody, not even the squadron leader, would take Bersbee's chair. He didn't demand anything like this. He didn't ask for special privileges. But the others seemed to know what he wanted, and they rushed to cater to him. He was best man in the outfit. He had downed 27 enemy planes. A few days ago he had saved Luckerson. Last week he had pulled Flight Lieutenant Limm-Gawes from a tough spot. A short time before that he had saved Hackedorn. He had saved Bensing, and Illvers, and Litchington. He had pulled them out of it at a time when it seemed as though nothing could snatch them from Nazi bullets and a cold, deep Channel.

They adored Bersbee.

HE WALKED toward his chair and before he sat down he creased his trousers. Then, when he was settled comfortably in his chair, he looked up. And it was a signal for the white-coated waiter to come over with the silver tankard that held "half a can" of beer. Bersbee took it, raised it slowly to his lips. The waiter stood by. Sometime the beer was not cold enough. Sometime it was too cold.

"Cold enough, sir?"

"It'll do."

Bersbee slowly sipped his beer. The lounge of the Officers' Mess was filling rapidly now, as those who had taken part in the full-day combat were concluding the hot-and-cold shower, the nap, and coming to the lounge for the remainder of their evening relaxation. There had been a buzz of casual conversation before Bersbee's entrance, and then a lull during his walk toward the chair, and his receiving of the beer, and the ceremony of the first few sips. And then the conversation heightened again as more men entered the room.

Nobody spoke to Bersbee. They wanted to. They wanted to, very much. But it was gathered that he preferred to be let alone while he sipped his beer. Generally, he wanted to be let alone.

They all knew this, even the new men. It was immediately impressed upon the new men. Leave Bersbee alone. Don't ask him a lot of foolish questions. Don't try to engage him in conversation. Leave him alone. He has enough to do when he gets in the air. When he's on the ground he must relax. He must fully relax. Leave Bersbee alone. There aren't many like Bersbee. Indeed, there aren't many like him. The 19th must take good care of Bersbee. Leave him alone. Stay out of his chair. Don't talk to him when he enters the lounge. Let him relax. Leave him alone.

It had been duly impressed upon Meader, who was one of the new men. Rut Meader was forgetting about it now, as he entered the lounge. He was a tall, blond fellow, twenty-five, and this morning he had been saved by Bersbee. He had been attacking two Messerschmitts and had come out of a vertical right turn to find a third Nazi on his tail. As he manipulated out of the turn, he was brought into the bullet-line of the other Messerschmitts, and they were closing in, feeding upon him, when Bersbee entered the party. Bersbee entered cleanly from the side, like a surgeon's blade. And cleanly he had flipped a three-second burst at the plane on Meader's tail. The plane faded away from Meader's tail and broke out in flames. Then Bersbee had edged up, feinted a loop, cleanly lunged at one of the other Messerschmitts. His Brownings found the enemy cockpit. Meader saw the Nazi die. He saw the other Nazi running away. He waved his thanks to Bersbee. But Bersbee was already hunting for more Nazis.

Meader was more than glowingly grateful. He was very excited. He was fascinated. He had never seen flying like that. He had never believed that it could be done like that. It was so precise, and so thorough, and it was timed magnificently. During the come-home, landing at a small emergency field, waiting at a Dispersal Hut for another call to action, all during the second phase of the big air battle, all during the short nap and the third phase and the nap and then the hot-and-cold shower, Meader had been thinking of Bersbee, and what the man had done, how he had gone about it. Meader was a very sincere student of air combat. He kept telling himself that he was going to approach Bersbee. At first he remembered what the other flying officers had told him. Then he was purposely forgetting it.

And now, as he entered the lounge of the Officers' Mess, he walked directly to Bersbee's chair. He stood in front of the chair. His mouth was open, and the first words were almost out. But not quite. Meader was much too awed.

Bersbee was taking a long swallow. Then he was looking up. He was looking at Meader's face. He was blinking, slightly puzzled, and he couldn't exactly be blamed. The tall blond fellow was standing there, bent forward, mouth open, no words coming out, dull doltish film in the eyes.

"I say – can I help you?" Bersbee murmured.

A FEW fliers, standing nearby, heard that, and turned, and saw the new man trying to talk to Bersbee. They gestured frantically to Meader. They tried hard to attract his attention, draw him away from Bersbee. They nudged others, and others nudged others, and the chain of chatting thinned out as the room looked at Bersbee, and the moron of a new man who was bothering him.

Meader blurted, "Thanks awfully!"

"What?"

"I said – thanks. I mean, for what you did this morning. You see, I was the one who –"

Bersbee shook his head. He did not smile. He said, "I'm afraid I wouldn't remember."

"Well, you see, I was the one who –"

Bersbee closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. When he opened his eyes again he smiled tiredly and said, "I still wouldn't remember."

"But I –"

Bersbee stood up quickly. He brought the silver tankard against the arm of the leather chair. A ribbon of foam sloshed up and glided over the dark green leather. Meader was groping for words to make a suitable apology. Bersbee was turning rigidly, walking from the room. Meader stood there, by the chair, head low, still groping for words, mumbling nothing.

The lounge was quiet for several seconds. Then a mob moved toward Meader. They tried at first to keep their voices kind and correcting.

"Rather thoughtless, Meader."

"Poor stuff, old chap. We told you –"

"You should have known better, Meader. It was so tactless. Bersbee must be let alone. Can't you understand that in a way he's somewhat of a genius? Yea, he's really that, old man, and he mustn't be annoyed."

Meader looked at a purple dragon woven into a dark orange background of carpet. He said, "I only wanted to – thank him."

Flight Lieutenant Limm-Gawes said, "Blazes, man! What is this, a rugby match? We haven't time for that sort of embroidery. If he pulled you out of a tough spot, it's taken for granted that you're thankful. You were told specifically to leave Bersbee alone."

"But I didn't think it would hurt to –"

Litchington said, "Look here, Meader. You're new, very new, and you've got an awful lot to learn. Be good enough to –"

Hackedorn broke in with, "We can't let Bersbee be annoyed. We simply can't let that happen!"

"Can't you understand?" Limm-Gawes said.

Meader frowned slightly, and looked at the faces that circled him. He was being censured, of course, but in a greater sense he was being begged to refrain from pestering, even talking to a certain fellow flyer. His frown was deepening and he was telling himself that it was absurd. Bersbee was a good man, indeed. He was better than that. He was really a marvelous warrior. The 19th was lucky to have him. But this idolatry, this downright fanatical attitude, placing the golden statue on an ivory pedestal and crawling before it on bellies – preserving the worshipful silence – was almost comical.

Reaching that conclusion, he forgot about what had happened earlier in the day, at 12,000 feet over Portsmouth. He was straightening his shoulders, and raising his head, and looking at the faces and saying, "I'm really awfully sorry, but I fail to understand."

THEN he walked away from them, across the lounge, and toward the door. Behind him there was hollow quiet. Then it was sliced as an oath hissed from someone's lips. Footsteps came toward Meader, and just as he reached the door, a hand tapped his shoulder.

When he turned, he saw Illvers, who was one of Bersbee's most fervent worshippers. Illvers had been saved twice. Once, over Newhaven, he had started an argument with five Heinkels. Their guns found his glycol tank and the Spitfire was falling and flaming. It was necessary for Illvers to "jump out the window." And so he jumped at 8000 feet, and a few seconds after his parachute opened, the

Heinkels came down after him, trying to put bullets through the chute. Just about that time, Bersbee made an entrance. On his first dive he caught the nearest Heinkel. When he came up for his underside attack, he crippled another. Then the Germans ran away. Illvers still talked about that.

Now he looked steadily at Meader and said, "It's unimportant whether or not you understand."

"I don't follow."

"You will. You're going to leave Bersbee alone."

"That sounds as if I was a bill collector."

"We'll dispense with wit, if you don't mind," Illvers clipped. He was as tall as Meader, and much heavier. He had small eyes and a thick neck.

Meador was annoyed, partly because he didn't like Illvers' face, partly because he was really puzzled about the Bersbee matter, and partly because he was an individualist. This last trait had hitherto failed to assert itself in Meador's military career. Perhaps this was because the trait was not grained deeply. But it was there, and it had been waiting for the occasion, just as it had waited on other occasions. Once at Harrow, having to do with a cricket match. Meador had been jumped on by the rest of the team and had fought them all. Once at Cambridge, having to do with a resolution drawn up by his philosophical society, Meador had punched someone in the eye. Once at the engineering school, Meador had his own ideas on a certain project. He had ended up by calling his instructor an idiot. He had been asked to leave the school. He had enrolled at another school. He had been in his final term at the other school when the call came. He was in infantry at first, and he was wounded in the fighting at Amiens. Released from hospital, he went into the engineer corps. He looked up and saw the Spitfires cutting into the massed formations of German planes. He enlisted in the R. A. F. At first he had believed that combat flying was a matter of science, of timing and mathematics. That appealed to him. It fascinated him. Later he found out that it was mostly a blend of reckless speed and laughing fatalism. It was lounging in a Dispersal Hut and playing dominoes, and getting a call from Fighter Command Headquarters to go out and argue with thirty-odd Messerschmitts moving toward the Channel coast. Running out, jumping in the Hurricane, listening to the frenzied screech of a variable-pitch propeller, lifting the ship to 10,000 feet within four minutes. And lunging madly at great numbers of Nazi

planes. Punching the gun button that controlled eight Brownings. Watching the eight lines of orange tracers ripping into the rear turret of a big Junkers. Breaking through the Nazi formation. Running home to a small emergency field to re-load, re-fuel, get up there again and argue with 'em some more. It was fast, reckless. It was frantic. He found out that there was little or no mathematics involved.

Until he had been sent to the 19th Fighter. Until this morning, when he had seen Bersbee.

Now he smiled slightly at Illvers, and he said, "Are you giving me orders?"

"I'm giving you advice. It's good advice. You'd better take it."

Meador stopped smiling. He said, "Sorry, but I disagree with your line of thinking." He turned again and he was through the doorway and already down the corridor. Illvers was coming after him. Illvers was putting the heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You're going to leave Bersbee alone!" Illvers blurted.

Very quietly Meador said, "You're going to leave me alone."

"Now look here —"

"You look," Meador said. He came just a bit closer to Illvers and his voice was almost a whisper. "This is rather annoying. I'm willing to listen to any suggestions regarding flight maneuver. But I'm perfectly capable of handling all my other problems without any advice — or warnings."

Without hesitating, Illvers had an answer. He said, "That's not the idea. we're not specifically worried about you. Men like you, and me, and Litchington, and Hackedorn — we're all average, and there're others to take our places when we go. But it's different with Bersbee. He's outstanding. He's almost — inhuman. He's more valuable to the R. A. F. than a score of ordinary pilots. That's why we've got to handle him like — like a — a —"

"Vase of delicate jade," Meador said, and mockery came into his eyes.

But Illvers was nodding emphatically. "Yes, a vase of delicate jade, if you want to put it that way. We've got to take good care of Bersbee. We've got to cater to him just as we would cater to a highly sensitive machine. It's plain enough, Meador, and I do wish you'd look at it the sensible way. We all realize that this sort of thing is somewhat out of

bounds. It's not contained in regulations, or orders of the day, or special duties. But it's bloody well got to be followed out. Not one of us can break through. Bersbee must be left alone. Now, I do hope you'll be decent about this, Meader. I think I've made it clear enough —"

"Oh, quite," Meader said. The mockery was still in his eyes, and he was smiling again.

Illvers tightened his lips. He breathed deeply and said, "Well? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do as I damn please."

Illvers exhaled fast, and his arms came down fast, and his body was taut. It was held back for slightly more than a second by steel springs. Then the springs were released, and he came forward. He was chopping with his right, and his head was thrust forward, lowered somewhat, and his eyes had an angry-bull light, and he threw the left, then the right again.

Against the wall went Meader. His upper lip was jammed against teeth. Blood was sliding from his torn upper lip and his torn gums. His mouth had a granite taste, and blood flowed over the gritty stuff. The side of his jaw was very loose.

He bounced away from the wall, and Illvers rushed him again. Illvers came in close and pushed a short right, then a left to the belly, and Meader doubled up. He knew that Illvers was going to uppercut him. He knew that he was going to be knocked unconscious, unless he quickly found a way to get the better of his man.

**T**HE uppercut came, and it straightened him, and once more he went back against the wall. He sagged, rolled down, and he was flat on the floor. He was hurt, and he was weak, but not as much as he pretended to be. He got up very slowly. Illvers walked in again, and the right fist was drawn back for the finishing punch. He knew then that Illvers didn't really want to hurt him. This was Illvers' way of impressing the idea into him. And he told himself that he really didn't want to hurt Illvers. He didn't want to hurt anybody. He merely wanted to impress them with the idea that they couldn't impress their ideas into him.

Illvers threw the right, and Meader was measuring it, fading away from it and sliding in fast. He hooked a left to Illvers' belly, and then he was brilliant with a right to the eye and another right to the eye and then a left to the mouth and a right to the jaw.

And then he straightened Illvers with another right to the jaw, while he drew his left arm back, as if he was reaching for a sack of flour. And he brought the left around, somewhat in an overhand punch that crunched against Illvers' chin and knocked him unconscious.

They were coming from the lounge. They were running toward Illvers. They were looking at Illvers and they were looking up at Meader, but they were not saying anything. Someone went to get water for Illvers.

Meader was wiping the side of his mouth and looking at the blood on his palm. He saw Flight Lieutenant Limm-Gawes moving toward him.

"Too bad," Limm-Gawes said.

"Rather." Meader pulled a hand across his mouth, looked again at the blood on his palm.

"Perhaps you ought to go to the infirmary."

"Oh, it's all right."

"I'm sorry, Meader," the flight lieutenant said. He waited for a reply. When he didn't get it, he said, "I hope you are, too."

"Not entirely," Meader said. He speared coldness from his eyes and turned and walked quickly down the corridor. He went up to his room and closed the door. He washed out his mouth with cold water. He put a few strips of tape across the knuckles of his right hand. He drank a glass of cold water and then he grabbed an engineering textbook and spent almost an hour reading and figuring out several problems. He stood up and took another drink of cold water. He lit a cigarette. He left his room and walked downstairs and down the corridor and saw the thin border of light around the door of Bersbee's room. He knocked on the door. He waited, then knocked again. He waited. He knocked again and waited again and then he turned the knob and opened the door and walked in.

Bersbee was sitting at a table. His back was to the door. A light glowed over the table. One side of the table was stacked with papers. As Meader walked slowly toward the table he could see numbers and symbols and diagrams on the papers. Clustered about the table were drawing instruments, a slide rule, a textbook on higher mathematics, a work on logic, a pamphlet headed, "The Philosophy of Statistics."

And coming closer, almost leaning over Bersbee's shoulder, Meader could see that the man was working on a problem that started out with a trigonometric diagram but then veered into an

involved progression of equations and formulas that he could not understand.

He said, "What do you call this?"

**B**ERSBEE shuddered, then whirled. He saw Meader, standing there, and he backed away, as if he was shocked and frightened. Then he stood up, and his face was white. He said, "Get out of here."

"I want to talk to you," Meader said.

"I'm busy," Bersbee said. He shook his head, and then put his head in his hands. He raised his head and said, "Get out, get out."

"I want to talk to you," Meader said.

"What do you want?" Bersbee was quivering. His face was now very white. He sat down and leaned an arm against the table and murmured, "What is it? What is it that you want?"

Meader nodded toward the table. "Explain that," he said.

Bersbee looked at the table, then at Meader. His eyes bulged for an instant, as if a great rage was working upon him. Then he was weak, and his shoulders were slumped, and wearily he said, "I can't explain it to you – nor to anyone else around here."

"Just why?"

"You'd never be able to understand me. You don't know enough mathematics. Look, I want you to get out of here – now."

Meader said, "Your flight tactics – all of them – they're based on these plans?" He pointed to the papers on the table.

"Get out of here."

"Based on statistics," Meader said. "And then you apply your conclusions to mathematical deduction. And somewhere along the line you manage to fit in a bit of psychology. Stimulus and reaction. You go into a vertical left turn. and you know just what the enemy will do. And therefore you immediately know your next offensive move."

"Get out!"

"You do most of your fighting up in this room, with the slide rule and the books and your brain. The rest is easy. You don't take any chances. You've got this thing figured out to a point where it's almost impossible for Jerry to hit you. Do you realize what that means? Do you realize what a wonderful thing it would be if you could teach this stuff to the rest of us?"

"You're talking like a fool." Bersbee was quivering and trying to light a cigarette. "Why did you have to come in here? Why did you have to –"

"You can't keep this to yourself any longer," Meader said. "You've got to explain it to the rest of us."

"No, I can't do that. It gets more involved every day. If you know anything at all about statistics and higher mathematics you'll realize that the deeper I get, the more difficult my problem becomes. As soon as I arrive at a solution, another one, twice as complex, comes up. It's getting so that I can scarcely understand it myself. It's getting so that the whole thing is becoming a carousel, going around faster, faster, too fast for me. I want to get out of this. I want to get out. Maybe if I'd stopped a month ago, or two, or three, it would have been all right, and I could have explained my findings to the rest of you chaps. But now it's impossible. I don't know what I discovered two months ago. I'm always going forward, getting deeper and deeper. That's why I – I can't sleep, I can't even taste what I eat. I – I'm getting so that I –"

**"S**TEADY on," Meader said. He quickly lit the cigarette that Bersbee was trying to light. He put it between Bersbee's lips. Bersbee took a long drag and tried hard. But the cigarette was falling from his shivering lips and he looked at the cigarette on the floor and then he let his head fall into his arms. The slide rule and a lot of papers were falling to the floor. Bersbee was weeping convulsively.

"This is my fault," Meader said. "They told me to leave you alone." He turned and walked to the door. He looked at Bersbee, who was weeping, who pounded his fists against the table-top, who blindly reached for the papers and the books. And then Bersbee was crunching the papers and the books, tearing, ripping, throwing the scraps from him, bringing his head into his arms, weeping in long, hoarse gasps that became longer, hoarser, until he was like a child who purposely tries to cry so hard that he won't be able to catch his breath. At the end of a choking gasp he raised his head and looked at Meader. But it was as if he was seeing nothing, and once again his head went down against the table-top and he was weeping.

"They told me to leave him alone," Meader murmured. He started to open the door. He was

telling himself that his stubbornness, his dogged individuality, had been to blame for all this. He was telling himself that he would have to make it up to Bersbee. He started to go out of the room. He turned, wondering why he turned, wondering why he was walking back toward the table, not listening to Bersbee, not looking at Bersbee, but looking at those papers not yet born. He was gathering them up. He was taking the books, the pamphlet. He was at the door again. Bersbee was weeping loudly. Meader didn't hear him. Meader was thinking about the statistics and the higher mathematics and the application of certain formulas to aerial combat maneuvers. He was hurrying upstairs to his room.

**I**N the Dispersal Hut the adjutant answered the telephone call. It was from Fighter Command Headquarters. Luckerson was watching the frown on the adjutant's face. Luckerson was flipping his cigarette to the floor and treading on it. Hackedorn was getting up from a soft chair and adjusting his lifebelt. Bersbee threw away an unlit cigarette. Bensing muttered a short prayer that he always muttered when he saw the frown come to the adjutant's face. Illvers stood up. Litchington stood up. Meader stood up.

The adjutant put down the phone and said, "It's a scramble."

They were out of the Hut, running across the field. The signal had already reached the ground crews, and motors were whining. Meader was tightening the chin-strap of his helmet and as he climbed into the Hurricane he turned and looked toward his right, toward Bersbee's plane. Bersbee was hesitating. He was slow in putting on his helmet. Meader was thinking of what had happened last night. He was telling himself not to think about it. He saw Bersbee climbing into the plane. He was telling himself that it would be all right. Everything would be all right.

He closed the glass cockpit roof, and then he was sending the Hurricane across grass, sliding into a crosswind take-off. As he pointed into steep climb, the earphones inside his helmet were buzzing, and he heard, "Eleven Heinkel mediums, escorted by twenty-plus Messerschmitts, approaching Portsmouth – height 16,000 feet – your vector 140 – bend it 30 right."

**A**ND then Limm-Gawes' voice was crackling the code words. The squadron widened out in echelon, reached 10,000 feet and kicked up past the 300 miles-per mark, continued to pick up. Meader was hunched, rigid for a minute, relaxed for a minute, rigid again, then completely relaxed as he remembered the first formula he had worked out from the papers.

The seven Hurricanes reached 20,000, closed into V formation, and then started to slant downward. They came up again, went over the 20,000 mark, and then Meader could see the enemy planes. In the grey blankness that was Portsmouth he could see smoke. He could see points of fire.

Limm-Gawes was flipping the final directions. Then he was saying, "Tallyho!" and it was every man for himself.

The Englishman went down in vicious, spearing dive, cutting through the Nazi formation, ignoring the frenzied underside bursts offered by the Messerschmitts that tried to form a protective sheet above the Heinkel bombers. The Hurricanes pulled out of the dive, broke through again, regained their altitude advantage, and repeated on the dive. A bomber was going down. A Messerschmitt was going down. A bomber was wallowing like a sick whale. It was in flames and it was going down. Another Messerschmitt was going down. A Hurricane was going down.

Meader peeled off from two Messerschmitts and fell on the tail of a Heinkel. He got swastika in his sights and he punched the gun-button, saw the eight lines of flame searing into the rudder, the tail assembly. He sneaked in closer, jumped slightly, and when he came down this time he found the cockpit of the Heinkel. The German plane went into a spin and Meader peeled off again from the two Messerschmitts, who were very hungry for him.

He feinted a dive, carved it into a loop, and as he came up, he saw the Messerschmitts change course and lunge for a Hurricane that was alone, over to the left.

It was Bersbee.

The Nazi planes spread wide.

Meader watched. He was telling himself that he wouldn't have to go down there. Bersbee could handle this. He wouldn't have to go down there, because Bersbee had a formula for this sort of thing, and interference would be a hindrance rather than an aid. Interference would spoil the beauty of

the thing. He wanted to see how Bersbee was going to handle it. A triangle was in motion, with two points closing in upon the third. The situation was now in the stage of A, and rapidly advanced to the stage of D. Meader was remembering the formula, telling himself that now Bersbee would work it back to the stage of B, feint to the right, attack on the left, continue the attack to bring the situation to a stage of G.

But Bersbee wasn't working it that way. He was making a mistake. Either that, or he had new ideas. He was in a dive, and his defensive tactics were frantic and poorly timed. Like a novice he was pulling out too soon – he was pulling out much too soon.

“Wait – wait –” Meader leaned forward, aimed his Hurricane toward the German planes that now lunged at Bersbee.

They had Bersbee. They were pitching bullets into him. He was crippled. He was twisting. He was smoking, and the Hurricane was whistling and trying to stay up there. Flames were crawling over it.

“Jump,” Meader said. “Why don't you jump?”

**E**VEN as he said that, he knew that Bersbee would not jump. He watched the ignited plane sizzling toward earth, and then he saw that the two Messerschmitts had joined with a third, and were converging on Illvers, over to the right. He waited

– waited until they were in the position that called for him to work the third formula he had learned from Bersbee's papers.

The Germans had Illvers in a trap when Meader sliced through, placing the situation in the stage of E.

In the lounge of the Officers' Mess, Bensing was placing a new needle in the phonograph.

Illvers and Litchington were talking to one of the new men. Illvers leaned forward earnestly, gestured with his silver tankard, still full, although the beer had been poured five minutes ago. The new man was nodding slowly as Illvers said, “You understand now? You understand why we want you to steer clear of him? You see, he's got to be left alone. He's just got to be left alone. Not a single question. Not even a hello, unless he says it first. He's downed 31 planes. He's saved Limm-Gawes. He's saved Hackedorn, and Bensing. He's saved me three times. Did you hear that? Three times. I'd die for him. Any of us would. And the least we can do is to see that he's left alone. I realize that this sort of thing is somewhat out of bounds, but I do hope you'll be decent about it and if –”

The phonograph whined once and was quiet. Hackedorn was quiet. Illvers was quiet, looking at his beer and then drinking it. Someone got out of a soft dark green leather chair, moved away quickly.

The room was very quiet as Meader walked toward the chair.