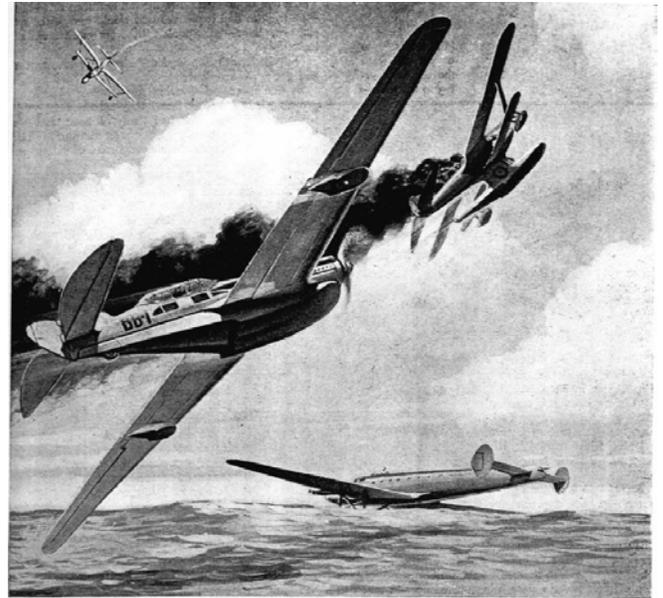
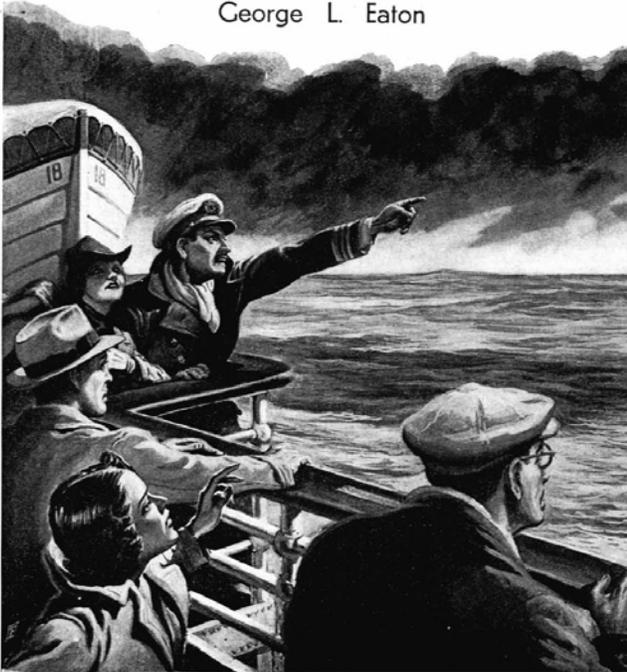


# Earmarked Gold

*A golden decoy turns against its master to right a vicious wrong.*

By  
George L. Eaton



The ship became a ball of smoke streaked with orange flame—

the contours and lines of the human race must not be without a sense of humor, for in some beings he places a heart of gold and then forces them to wear the mask of an ogre to hide it from the world. On others, to complete the paradox, he bestows the soul of the devil and the face of a madonna.

But he had not been laughing when he made the mold from which those two were cast. Their faces were evil and they were evil. He had given the world a break by stamping them with faces that advertised the black viciousness of which they were a whole. They had faces that one could long remember. That was one of the reasons those two were now hiding within the comparative security of a luxurious San Francisco hotel instead of frequenting the warmer night clubs along New York's Broadway for which they lived.

The likenesses of "Ugly" Barillo and "Lippy" Freeman were posted in a conspicuous place in a thousand and one post offices throughout the

## Earmarked Gold

By George L. Eaton

THE predeceous, lined faces of the two men who sat in that sumptuously furnished suite on the nineteenth floor of the Throckmorton Hotel, gazing out over San Francisco Bay, were not happy ones. Rather, their state of mind added to their naturally pernicious expressions.

It is doubtful that, even had they tried, they could have looked happy. Their faces were not built for it. That agency of Providence who designs

country. The attorney general of the United States had invoked a seldom-used authority in posting them as fugitives when they jumped their bail after being sentenced to two years in jail in an anti-trust case. They were fugitives from justice under a half dozen other indictments involving industrial racketeering in New York City. The special prosecutor had charged that Barillo and Freeman enforced the demands of "Slip" Ogden, their "higher-up," by every form of violence and intimidation known to racketeering. They were experts at their trade. They could hijack a truck, throw a bomb, slash tires, throw acid, burn factories and cut throats with the same aplomb the average man can butter a slice of toast.

When a special prosecutor had been appointed in New York to clean up the city, they had joined the suave Slip Ogden in laughter.

"Lemme bump this punk an' get it over with," Lippy Freeman had said to Slip Ogden.

"Let him alone!" Slip snapped. "He'll hang himself."

But after a few months they began to be apprehensive. This special prosecutor didn't work the way of all others. They planted spies and stool pigeons, but they couldn't get any information. After a while they began to notice that the little men at the bottom of their rackets were being picked up and taken to the special prosecutor's "singing school." They sang their story to the prosecutor and were then held as witnesses and given protection from the revenge of Slip Ogden's strong-arm men. Then the next men up the

ladder were picked up to sing their song to the prosecutor's men.

Finally they swooped down on Slip Ogden and thirty of the higher-ups who ran his rackets. The special prosecutor got indictments, but Slip, Ugly and Lippy were still laughing—only Ugly wasn't laughing so loudly now.

"Maybe this punk is goin' to get us," he said to Lippy

"Lissen!" Lippy said. "Slip is short for slippery. He's the slickest mouthpiece that ever chipped ice under a prosecutor's dogs. He'll put this punk on the skids with a one-way ride."

The next day Slip Ogden said to his two head men, "Boys, we're going west to get out of this damp, winter climate."

"We're goin' to jump our bail?" Ugly asked, his eyes wide.

"Unless you want to go to Dannemora," Slip said, evenly. "This boy has us tagged. We'll get out and stay out until he's out of office and we can adjust things. There will be an election in the fall and then this—this" —he tried to find expletives that would best fit the special prosecutor—"this punk will be out and we can slip back."

"Slip back with Slip Ogden," Lippy Freeman cracked and got a vicious glance.

By the means of wearing tortoise-shell glasses and growing hair on their faces, they managed to get by without detection. They had plenty of money and lived in an atmosphere of luxury that was disarming. They pretended to be

importers and exporters of various and sundry articles to and from the Orient.

Slip Ogden carried the pretense off very well because outwardly, he was a gentleman. He dressed well and forced Ugly and Lippy to dress quietly. He spoke excellent English and was soft-spoken and well-mannered. No one would have suspected that he was one of the most merciless gangsters in the world. He made his two head men keep themselves under cover most of the time.

But now their whole world had exploded in their faces. The special prosecutor who had convicted them had not disappeared with the fall elections—instead, he had been elected district attorney. They had learned that the few murderous mobs who were still operating in New York were already breaking up and slipping out of the city.

"That's going to make it easier for us," Ugly said deep down in his throat.

"Every copper in the country is going to be watching for 'em so they don't get their hooks into their city."

"Slip'll figure a way out for us," Lippy said, gulping the drink he held in his hand. "He'll have a racket up his sleeve. He's as bright as this new D. A. He ain't never let us down yet."

"Once'll be enough," Ugly grunted. "He ain't never had the G-men after him before."

"They're a bunch of——" Lippy stopped as three sharp raps,

followed by a pause, sounded on the door - then two more, then one.

"That'd be Slip," Lippy said and went toward the door. But before he opened it he slid his right hand down inside the front of his double-breasted jacket and wrapped his fingers around the butt of the automatic that nestled there.

Slip Ogden's eyes searched the faces of Ugly and Lippy briefly-but sharply-as he stepped into the room. His hard, blue eyes contracted for an instant then expanded. They were set in a face that was hard, cunning and merciless. The waxed, black mustache he affected gave a flair to his well-formed, sleek head. He was groomed to an almost painful neatness, wearing his clothes draped over his lean, hard frame with perfect ease.

What his antecedents were no one knew, but he had the appearance of being born an aristocrat. He nodded to Lippy and Ugly as he might have acknowledged the presence of two menials in the room.

Lippy and Ugly were tough and hard and cruel—the worst products of the underworld. But they knew that Slip Ogden, in his own way, was tougher. They looked up to him as a small boy looks up to his hero. They were afraid of him. They had seen the cold, ruthless efficiency with which he performed his tasks and they knew they had reason to be afraid.

They exchanged glances as Slip crossed the room and laid his light fedora and gloves on a desk. They waited for him to speak. They

never committed themselves until they knew what kind of humor he was in.

Slip Ogden poured himself a drink with meticulous care, sipped it and put the glass down to light a cigarette. Then he sat down and took a black, gold-edged r wallet from an inside pocket. He laid it on his knee.

"Boys," he said, "I came across a little item a few days ago that interested me. It interested me because it is a certainty that we must get out of the country. To do that we must have enough money to keep us going from now on. We've got to have a lot of money. I think I've found the way to get it."

He picked up the wallet, took a folded newspaper clipping from it and scanned it with his eyes.

"This clipping interested me," he went on, "and I made some inquiries. I think we're going to do some business. We'll have to take some other men in with us, but there will be enough for all of us. It will be dangerous."

"What is it, Slip?" Lippy asked. He couldn't keep still any longer.

"Wait a minute," Ogden snapped. He wanted to build up his story in his own way. "I don't think I ever told you boys that I once did quite a bit of flying."

They both looked at him with their piglike eyes open wide.

"What's that got to do with it?" Ugly asked.

"I had quite a record as a pursuit pilot during the War," Slip said.

Suddenly, some of the hardness and cruelty faded from his face. By studying him closely, one could see behind the mask he wore. One could see youth and courage and a clean perfection. Then it vanished and one could see only the empty shell of what he once had been.

He became Slip Ogden, racketeer, again. He unfolded the newspaper clipping and handed it to Lippy.

"I assume you can read well enough to manage it," he said.

The faces of Lippy and Ugly were contorted into tortured frowns as they studied the clipping—both reading with their lips moving. The item was under a New York date line and read:

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York yesterday received word that a shipment of \$6,600,000 in gold was on the way here from Japan. This will be the fourth consignment of about this amount to be reported since last Saturday. It will bring the total of gold sent here by Japan since the middle of last March to \$197,400,000.

When the gold movement from Japan began last spring, it was customary for the Japanese authorities to announce engagements of the metal as soon as, or even before, shipment from Japan was made. In the most recent series of shipments, however, the practice has been followed of notifying the Reserve Bank here of the consignment of the metal only a few days before the ship carrying it was due to dock at San Francisco.

This delay in reporting is due, it is thought in financial circles, to a desire to keep the shipments secret until vessels carrying them have left the zone of hostilities in the Far East.

The foreheads of the two gangsters were still wrinkled as they looked up from their laborious reading. Their eyes were frankly puzzled.

"One of those little shipments," Slip said, softly, "is earmarked for us."

"They're sendin' it to us?" Ugly asked, trying hard to get the thing through his dense head.

"If we go an' take it, eh, boss?" Lippy said.

Slip nodded.

"Piracy!" Ugly said and rubbed his throat. "They'll sun-cure us on the end of a rope."

"They didn't sun-cure Sir Henry Morgan," Ogden said.

"Is he a pirate?" Ugly asked.

"Not any more," Ogden said with that upward quirk of his mouth that was half a laugh and half a sneer. "He has been dead about two hundred and fifty years. He captured a number of Spanish cities and lots of Spanish gold along the Spanish Main in his day. They took him back to England for trial, but instead of sun-curing him— as you so quaintly put it—Charles II knighted him and made him lieutenant-governor of Jamaica."

"Ha, ha!" Lippy Freeman said.

Slip was looking at Ugly and Ugly, seeing the look in his eyes,

began to tremble. He had seen Slip look at men like that before. He had never seen the men again— unless he had been the man Slip had designated to wipe them out.

## II—MISTAKEN IDENTITY

MR. I. KINTER

HASSFURTHER, better known to the flying profession as "Shorty," threw the switch on his radio panel as a tiny light gleamed scarlet, and spoke into his microphone.

"Shorty acknowledging, Tony. Go ahead—go ahead," he said to Tony Lamport, superintendent of communications on Barnes Field, Long Island.

"Where are you, Shorty?" Tony asked. "Bill wants to know."

"Just at the moment," Shorty said, looking down under his wing tip, "I can see the cadet corps at West Point marching out on the field for their afternoon drill. I'm thinking about going down to join them. I always did want to be a soldier. You know—'There's something about a soldier, something about a soldier that is grand, grand, grand,' " he began to sing.

"Shut up!" Tony snapped at him. "Bill told me to tell you to whip up your horses. He's worried about Red."

"What's the matter with Red?" Shorty asked quickly. All the banter was gone from his voice.

"Bill will tell you when you get in," Tony said. "Hurry up!"

"I'm practically there," Shorty said and he pushed open the throttle of his supercharged, twin Diesels and laid the nose on Barnes Field.

A few minutes later he cut his gun, fishtailed down to reduce his speed and rolled his Snorter up on the apron.

Young "Sandy" Sanders, the kid ace of Bill Barnes' famous little squadron of fliers, was standing on the steps of the administration building, waving his arm at him as he climbed out of the cockpit of the big amphibian and started across the concrete.

"Hurry up, flatfeet!" Sandy shouted. "Bill wants to see you."

"All right, my diminutive little pal," Shorty said. The grin was gone from his lips and the twinkle from his blue eyes as he opened the door of Bill's office. He knew that

Bill didn't cry "Wolf!" unless there was some reason.

Bill pushed a hand through his tousled, blond hair.

His bronzed face took on an expression of relief as he

saw his right arm and chief of staff come through the doorway.

"Hello," he said. "Any luck in Toronto?" The words rushed out like the opening of a safety valve on a steam engine.

"I'll tell you about that later," Shorty said. "What's this about Red? Where is lie?"

"I wish I knew!" Bill snapped. "The last we heard from him was three days ago from Nome."

"Nome!" Shorty said. "What's he doing in Alaska? The last——"

"I forgot," Bill said, "you left here before he did. The afternoon you hopped up to Toronto, fourteen thousand dollars' worth of automobile drove on the field. That's when the trouble started. I was thinking that you left here after he did."

"What about the fourteen thousand dollars' worth of automobile?" Shorty asked. "What was in it?"

"What is usually in an automobile that starts trouble?" Bill asked, bitterly. "A woman, of course."

"All right," Shorty said impatiently. "Let's have it." He and "Red" Gleason had started flying Spads and Nieuports and S. E. 5s over the French lines when they were kids and combat work was in its infancy. They were closer than brothers.

"You remember young Dick Reynolds, the electric washing machine heir?" Bill asked him.

"Pockets full of doubloons and head empty," Shorty said. "I remember him. The Douglas people built him an air yacht and he started for Russia with some of his drunken pals to get some caviar. They disappeared over the Bering Sea last summer. Right?"

"Check," Bill said. "It was his sister who came around in the fourteen thousand dollars' worth of

gilt and brocade. She wanted me to go find him."

"Just like that," Shorty said.

"Just like that," Bill repeated. "She wanted me to take the whole outfit and the BT-4, loaded with supplies to look for him. She had a signed check in her hand and told me to fill it in for any amount I wanted to name."

"Yeah," Shorty said. "What happened after you refused?"

"How did you know that?" Bill snapped.

"I guessed," Shorty said dryly. "You never did like mugs who waved dough in your face. She put on the 'grand-dame' act and you said, 'phooey!'"

"Right again," Bill said. "But I told her one of my men would go up to investigate if one of them wanted to. I told her I would leave the decision with them "

"And Red volunteered," Shorty said. "She must have had what it takes. Red likes the gals like he likes arsenic. She must have been a beauty!"

"She was," Bill said. "Tall and statuesque, I think you'd call her, with limpid brown eyes."

"Come on, Bill, what happened?"

"Red said he would go," Bill answered. "He hopped the next morning, following the regular air routes to Vancouver, Ketchikan, Skagway and Nome. We heard from him last after he had left Nome. He was on his way down to Unalaska, a town on the island by the same

name in the Aleutian Islands. The place is an outfitting station for ships passing from the Pacific to the Arctic."

"Then what?"

"He checked in with Tony when he was off the tip of the Alaska Peninsula. That was three days ago. Since then we've heard nothing. We sent out alarms to the fields at Nome and Flat, but we've had no word from him. He's disappeared completely."

"If he was forced down," Shorty said, slowly, "he could still have made contact by radio and given his position."

"But he hasn't," Bill said. He got up and paced the length of his office and back again. "I'm worried as hell,

Shorty! Remember, we lost Mort Henderson and Cy Hawkins within the last year. I'm slowing up, I guess.

I can't take these things any more. I—I feel that it's my fault. I shouldn't have let him go. It's too early in the year. Any one of a hundred things might have happened to his ship."

"He's way below the Arctic Circle. Have you been in touch with young Reynolds' sister since Red disappeared?"

"No. What could she do about it? If she couldn't keep her half-witted brother from trying to fly to Russia for caviar, what could she do about this?"

"I don't know," Shorty said. "Probably nothing. But it's funny we had no radio message from Red. If he knew he was going to crack up,

he would have made contact at the last moment to let us know. Did you check up on the Reynolds girl in any way?"

"No. I couldn't see any necessity for it. She left a signed, blank check here to be filled in when we decided what the fee would be. The check had her name and coat of arms embossed on it."

"Where did she get a coat of arms?" Shorty wanted to know. "Her grandmother got tired of taking in washings and her grandfather was an electrician. They got together through sheer fatigue and developed the Reynolds electric washing machine. I wonder——"

"You wonder what?" Bill snarled. "Do you think she was a phony? What are you getting at?"

"I don't know," Shorty said, "except that the whole thing sounds a little screwy to me. It's funny this Reynolds dame hasn't made any inquiries of you."

"About Red?" Bill asked. His teeth clamped down over his lower lip. "How did you know she hadn't?"

"I guessed again," Shorty drawled. "I don't like this thing, Bill. It isn't like you to stick your chin out this way."

"Like me!" Bill roared. "Listen. I'm slowly going nuts about this new light plane we're going to try to put on the market. Everything has gone wrong. I've been so busy I haven't had time to sleep or eat. I took this Reynolds thing in my stride and turned it over to Red and forgot about it. It merely looked like a routine investigation to me to be sure

that there was no chance of young Reynolds being alive. What would you have done?"

"The same thing you did, probably," Shorty said. "But what do you say we give this Reynolds gal a ring on the phone and maybe ask her some questions? I'd like to know why she lost interest as soon as Red started off."

Bill reached for a Manhattan telephone book, turned the pages, and then took the telephone out of its cradle. He gave the Barnes Field operator a number and pressed the instrument to his ear.

"Ask her," Shorty said, "if she has heard from Red."

Bill nodded his head and a moment later spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Hello, Miss Reynolds?" he said.

"Who wishes to speak to Miss Reynolds, please?" a soft voice said in his ear.

"I recognize your voice. Miss Reynolds," Bill said. "This is Bill Barnes speaking."

"Just a moment, Mr. Barnes," the voice said, "I will see if Miss Reynolds is in. I——"

Bill heard a receiver click and another woman's voice cut into the conversation.

"Who is on the phone, please, Miss Johnson?" the second voice said.

Bill's forehead creased in long, sharply etched lines as a receiver clicked again and no one answered

the inquiry. He waited for a moment and then he spoke,

"Hello, hello," he said. "I am trying to get Miss Ruth Reynolds on the wire."

"This is Miss Reynolds speaking," a voice said that Bill had never heard before. "Who is this, please?"

"Who was on the wire a moment ago —on an extension, perhaps?" Bill asked quickly.

"It must have been my secretary, Miss Johnson," the voice said. "Will you kindly tell me who you are?"

"Bill Barnes!" Bill barked. "I want to speak to Miss Reynolds!"

"You are talking to Miss Reynolds, Mr. Barnes," the voice said. "What do you wish?"

"Don't you know me?" Bill asked. "I mean don't you know who I am?"

"Of course I know who you are, Mr. Barnes," she said. "But I don't know you."

"Did you come to my field on Long Island about a week ago. Miss Reynolds, and ask me to make a search for your brother?" Bill asked.

"I have never been on your field,

Mr. Barnes," she said. She heard Bill's explosion of breath and added, "What is wrong?"

"Plenty," Bill snorted. "Miss Reynolds, will you please stay in your apartment until I arrive there? I'm going to take off from my field immediately and land at the

seaplane landing at East Thirty-first Street. Your apartment is about Sixtieth Street, isn't it?"

"I was just going out," she said.

"Can't you tell me——"

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "I can't tell you anything over the telephone. But you will be very interested in what I have to tell you and what I have to show you when I arrive in about twenty-five minutes. Good-by."

His face was a thundercloud as he slapped the telephone into its cradle. He lifted it off again and asked for "Scotty" MacCloskey, the dour old Scotsman who was the major domo of Barnes Field.

"Warm up the Lancer, Scotty," he said. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

"There seems to be something wrong," Shorty said.

"There is, wise guy," Bill snapped in his exasperation. "Get out of that overall and grab a hat. We're going over to call on Miss Reynolds. She says she was never here."

### **III—A MESSAGE**

EIGHT minutes later Bill climbed in the forward cockpit of the big silver sesquiplane that was the Lancer.

Following his regular custom, he checked over his ammunition counters and his two .50caliber machine guns and the 37mm. cannon mounted in the Vee of the cylinders.

"Let's ride!" he said into the inter-cockpit telephone to Shorty, and released his hand brakes.

He blasted the tail around and rolled down the concrete runway at terrific speed until he reached the center of the field where the various runways converged. Kicking his right rudder gently he nosed into the wind, rocked his control column gently forward to bring up the tail and then lifted the big ship into the air.

The tip of Brooklyn and the Brooklyn Bridge flashed under his wings a few minutes later. He sped above the other bridges that span the East River, circled the seaplane landing once and struck the water with a cloud of spray and roared up to the inclined turntable. A uniformed attendant wheeled up a set of steps. As Bill went down them he shouted instructions at the attendant and raced toward the taxi stand with Shorty by his side.

"If we don't get there fast, she won't wait," Bill panted as he gave the driver the address and slumped back in the seat of a taxi.

"That kind never will," Shorty said.

A maid answered the door and led them into the library of the Reynolds' twenty-room apartment.

"Please sit down," she said. "Miss Reynolds will be right in."

But Bill didn't sit down. Instead, he paced back and forth across the room. He was waiting to get a glimpse of Miss Ruth Reynolds. He heard the tap of high heels on the floor and faced the doorway. A short,

rather stout girl of about twenty-six stepped into the room.

Bill's heart turned over and his stomach contracted as he stared at the girl who stood there. He knew he was being rude, but he couldn't help it. He opened his mouth, but no words came forth. He bowed his head for an instant to hide the anger and chagrin in his eyes.

"Mr. Barnes?" the girl said in a languid, bored way that made Bill more angry. He bowed again.

"And Mr. Hassfurter," he said, indicating Shorty. "Miss Reynolds, unless she has already gone, call your secretary quickly!"

Miss Reynolds' eyes opened wide and her left hand fluttered toward her heart "Why, really——"

"Please!" Bill snapped. "I should have told you over the telephone that I recognized your secretary's voice as the voice of the person who called on me last week and said she was Miss Ruth Reynolds."

Bill jabbed a hand into an upper waistcoat pocket and pulled a folded piece of paper from it. He spread it out under Miss Reynolds' gaze and said, "She left this with me."

Miss Reynolds stared at it for a moment and reached for a bell lanyard beside the doorway.

"Is that your signature?" Bill asked.

She nodded her head.

"Tell Miss Johnson I wish to see her here at once," she said to the uniformed maid, who appeared silently.

"Will you please tell me more about it before she comes," she then said to Bill.

Bill told her the same things he had told Shorty a short time before, running his words together in his haste to finish before Miss Johnson appeared.

But he needn't have hurried. The maid came back in a few minutes to say that Miss Johnson was neither in her office nor in her room.

"It looks, Miss Ruth," the maid said, "as though she had gone and had taken all her things."

"That will be all, Patricia," Miss Reynolds said. "What in the world," she said to Bill, "can be the object?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," Bill said grimly.

"She didn't even know my brother."

"How long had she been with you?" Bill asked. "Where did you get her? Who recommended her?"

"Just a moment," Miss Reynolds said. "I'm frightfully bewildered already. Let me think." She closed her eyes and tried to rub the creases out of her forehead with the tips of her fingers.

"She had only been with me a short time," she said. "Four weeks, perhaps. I can find out."

"Never mind now," Bill said. "How did she happen to get the job?"

"A—a friend sent her to me," Miss Reynolds said. Her eyes were a little frightened now.

"An old friend?" Bill persisted.

"No," she said. "I scarcely knew him. I—I met him—I see now I shouldn't have taken her—I met him at one of the fashionable night clubs, at a party. I don't remember much about him except that he was very charming. We were talking about the unemployed, and——"

She started as Shorty grunted, his eyes flashing. Bill glared at him.

"I told him I had been having a frightful time getting a competent secretary, and he said he knew of one he could send to me," she went on.

"He would have said the same thing if you had wanted a personal maid or a cook," Shorty broke in.

"But why?" she asked.

"Because your brother cracked up in the Bering Sea last summer," Shorty said. "He wanted to get Bill, or Red, or all of us up there."

"I don't follow that," she said. "He told me this Miss Johnson came of a very fine old family. Her family had lost all their money in the crash and she was working as a social secretary to pay her way. I wanted to help her. She was very capable."

"If you had wanted a pocket picked she would probably have done that "very well, toe," Shorty said. "She was a plant."

"But why?" Miss Reynolds wailed again.

"We don't know that yet," Bill said. "But we do know that one of my men is in very grave danger. You see, we don't live the same kind of life you do. Now we've got to find the answer to this one." He handed the

signed, blank check to her. "I would advise you to be a little more careful about what you sign."

Miss Reynolds' face turned a bright crimson.

"If there is anything I can do," she began as the maid came back into the room.

"Some one wishes to speak to a Mr. Barnes on the telephone," she said. "The person says it is very important."

Miss Reynolds pointed to a telephone that stood on a table. "Use that extension," she said.

"Hello, Bill," Tony Lamport's excited voice said in Bill's ear.

"Yes, Tony. What is it?"

"It's Red, Bill," Tony said. "He just made contact with me. There was something very peculiar about it. He talked as though he was under wraps—as though some one was telling him what to say. He said he was down off the Alaska Peninsula and had smashed his radio when he crashed. He said he just got it fixed so that he could contact us. He managed to get to a small island and gave me the position of it."

"What else?" Bill asked tensely.

"That was about all," Tony said. "His voice kept getting lower and lower and then faded out entirely. I've been standing by constantly trying to pick him up again. But he hasn't come in again."

"O. K.," Bill said. "I'll be back there in a little while."

"Oh, one other thing he said," Tony said. "I didn't get what he

meant. He said something about watching your nozzle injectors on your Diesels when you come after him."



Miss Johnson

"Did you write that down?" Bill asked.

"Yes. I took the whole thing down."

"Tell Scotty to check over the transport, the Eaglet and a Snorter," Bill ordered. "I'll be back there soon."

He put the instrument back in its cradle and told Shorty what Tony had told him. Little furrows gathered between Shorty's eyes as he listened. Miss Reynolds watched them both breathlessly.

"He's in a jam," Shorty said. "Some one was standing over him while he talked—some one with a gun in his hand."

"A gun?" Miss Reynolds said.

"Good-by, Miss Reynolds," Bill said. "I'm sorry if we've startled you. I'll let you know about this thing later."

"Please do," she said. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm awfully stupid."

"Not awfully—extremely," Shorty said under his breath.

They were on their way back to the seaplane landing in a taxi when Shorty suddenly slapped Bill hard on the knee.

"I've got it!" he said. "Nozzle injectors! Red was warning us that he was in trouble."

"I don't get it," Bill said.

"Remember the code word we arranged when I went out to the Philippines on my own? Remember, we took the name of the largest island, Luzon, and changed it around, spelled it backward? N-0-Z-U-L. Then we called it 'nozzle.' That was to be the code word I would send you if I got in a jam. And you came when I sent it."

"I remember now," Bill said grimly. "That's the explanation all right. Smart boy, that Red."

"Too smart to leave there," Shorty said.

"Leave there!" Bill roared. "Fellah, we're shoving for Alaska as soon as Scotty is through checking over our ships'."

#### **IV—OFF FOR ALASKA**

BEVERLY BATES, the brown-eyed Bostonian, who was the fifth member of Bill's little squadron, was waiting on the apron with Scotty MacCloskey when Bill and Shorty killed the engines in the Lancer.

"What about Red?" Bev asked as Bill slid out of the Lancer.

Bill saw the same expression of desperate concern in Bev's eyes that he had seen in Shorty's when he told him about Red. He knew the thoughts that were in the back of both their minds. He knew they were thinking about the two tragedies that had broken the long period of good fortune which had attended Bill and his squadron since its conception. They were thinking about Mort Henderson and Cy Hawkins—wondering if Red Gleason was to be next.

What, Bill asked himself before he answered Bev, is behind this thing? Is it some one who is trying to even an old score with Red, or are they striking at me? He shook his head angrily and answered Bev.

"Come into my office," he said. Then he turned to Scotty MacCloskey.

"You've got your men on a Snorter and the carrier-transport?" he asked.

"Yes," Scotty said. "But you didn't tell me about equipment. I don't know where you're going."

"Alaska," Bill said. "Arrange for a supply of fuel in Seattle and find out whether we can get more in Juneau, Alaska. Double the emergency equipment and ammunition supply. Put the regular crew in the carrier. Be sure to check Sandy's ship carefully. We may need her. How soon will they be ready?"

"I ought to have a couple of days to be sure. Bill," old Scotty said cautiously.

"A couple of days!" Bill roared. "You mean a couple of hours! Check the Lancer, too. Shorty will fly her. Bev will have the Snorter. Sandy and I will handle the carrier-transport. Make it three hours. I want 'em on the line then."

Scotty MacCloskey spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. He was a careful man and he wanted to be certain that the ships were ready. But he knew there was no use in arguing because Bill knew the condition of his ships as well as he did.

A few minutes later Bill, Shorty, Bev Bates, and young Sandy leaned over a chart spread out on a drawing board in Bill's private office. Shorty spread a caliper and laid it on two points along the string of mountainous dots that were the Aleutian Islands.

"From what I find," Shorty said, "it's one of those small ones between Rat and Andreanof Islands. It is almost directly on the route the *Graf Zeppelin* took on its world flight across the Pacific in 1929."

"What about steamship lines?" Bill asked.

"It's about a hundred miles north of the Yokohama-Vancouver lane and four hundred north of the Yokohama-San Francisco route," Shorty said.

"Listen, Bill," Bev Bates broke in, "have you formed any opinion about this thing? Have you any ideas?"

"No," Bill snapped, "I haven't."

"Do you think young Reynolds' attempted flight to Russia has anything to do with it?" Bev asked.

"No," Bill said. "That was just one of those stupid gestures that do more to harm aviation than to help it. It wasn't a drunken flight as the news-papers intimated. It was quite thoroughly planned. But it had no purpose. Like a lot of other people, young Reynolds wanted to get himself some publicity. Some one wants to get us up there and is using this method to do it."

"What for?" Sandy asked, his freckled face serious.

"Hell, kid," Bill said, "I'm no gray-bearded oracle."

"Say, Bill," Shorty said, "you didn't ask Ruth Reynolds about the man who sent the phoney secretary to her. Maybe, if we could locate him, we could get a lead."

"I thought of it," Bill said, "but decided against it. She said she met him at a party in a night club. That was part of this game. He was supposed to meet her and plant that girl in her house."

"I don't get it," Bev said. "Why all that elaborate planning if Reynolds or his sister have nothing to do with it?"

"They do have something to do with it," Bill said. "They served some one as an authentic and reliable background to get Red up there so that some one could grab him. They want us up there, too. They knew that we would come after Red. It's a clever little trap."

"Anyway, we'll be ready for them," Shorty said.

"I hope so," Bill said and reached for a telephone. He asked to be connected with Scotty.

Barnes Field was a bedlam of feverish activity when Bill and his men went out on the apron at dusk. The sixteen-foot props of the big carrier-transport gleamed dully as Martin, the head mechanic, blasted the three thousand horses in the two Barnes-Diesels. The twin props of the Snorter and the silver Lancer were ticking over slowly on the apron beside the transport. The goggled, white-helmeted heads of Shorty and Bev Bates jutted above the rims of the two fast amphibians a moment later.

Bill climbed into the commander's seat of the bomber-carrier with Sandy just behind him. He flicked the inter-cockpit telephone switch and checked Bailey, the bomber and machine gunner, in the forward cockpit; McCoy and Neely in the cockpits abaft the engines; Miles, who rode down under the belly of the ship in the retractable gun pit when they went into action; and old Charlie, the cook, who operated the gun in the extreme tail.

Above and behind Bill's head was a circular platform on which was mounted a rapid-firing one-pounder that could throw over one hundred shells in a minute.

In the midship section of the big amphibian was the hangar of the Eaglet, Sandy's fast little fighter. Suspended by its landing hook from an overhead girder, the Eaglet was

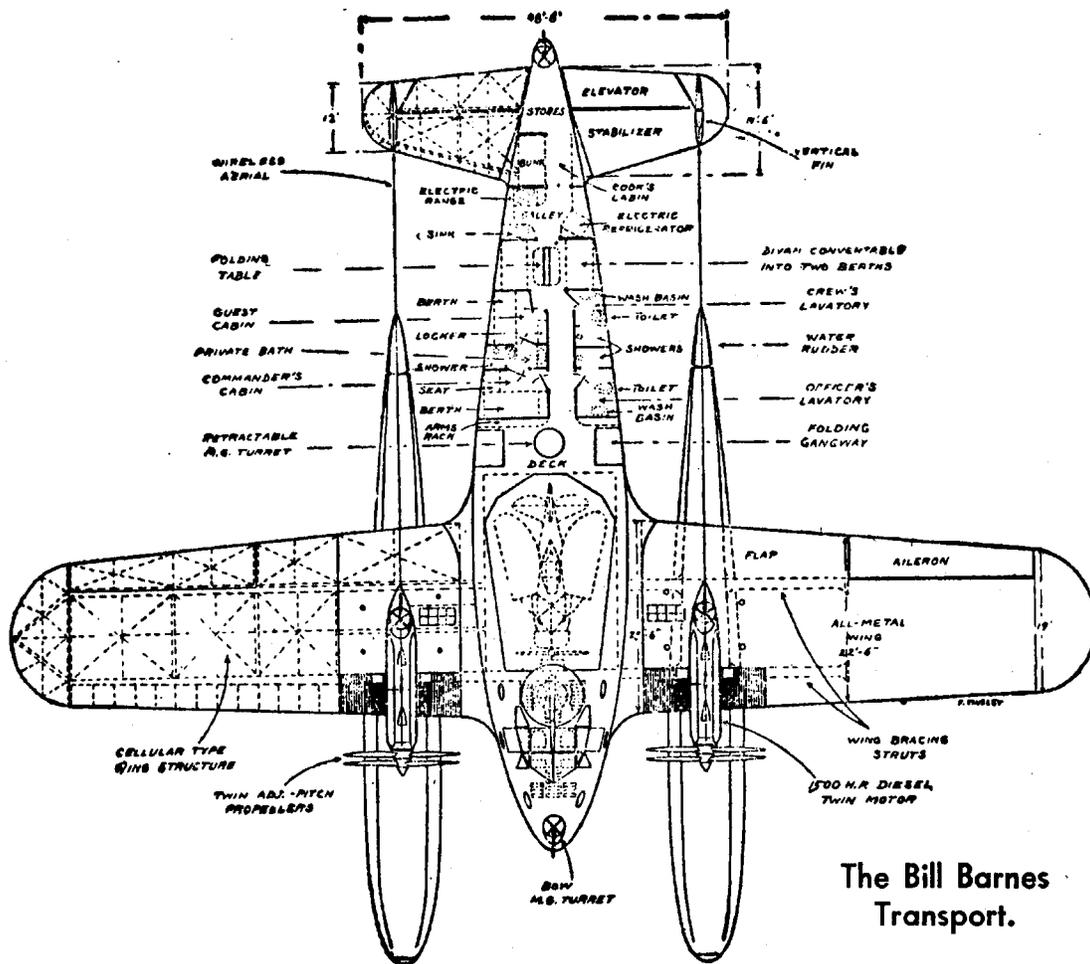
locked rigidly in place on the girders, and hung with its cockpit just above the level of the deck.

Behind the Eaglet's hangar was a retractable machine-gun turret that could be lowered below the bottom of the fuselage. Farther back were showers, lavatories, and Bill's private cabin-also a dining salon, with seats that could be converted into berths for the crew. In the tail was the galley, with an electric stove, ice box, and storage closets.

On the bridge of the monster were dual controls, a Sperry automatic pilot under the commander's seat, wireless equipment, a new Kreusi radio compass "homing device" and every other known navigation instrument.

From the bridge and pilot's compartment steps led downward to a machine gunner's cockpit in the nose, mounted with a .50-caliber Browning. Beneath the gunner's feet were bomb releases. In each of the wings, abaft the engines, were inclosed machine gunners' pits similar to the one in the nose. A runway connected these two cockpits with the main fuselage. The big ship was a carrier, a bomber, a flying fortress all in one.

Bill smiled as he switched on the two-million-candle-power landing lights of the "BT-4." An instant later the transverse bands of yellow-and-black pigment painted across the runways became visible as the huge floodlights were turned on in the



**The Bill Barnes Transport.**

traffic tower. He slipped his boots into the rudder stirrups and gunned the engines as Scotty MacCloskey went out the port gangway.

The monster transport rolled down the runway like some huge, prehistoric animal. Two hundred yards from the electrically wired fence surrounding the field. Bill eased back on the wheel and took the ship into the air in a long, low climb.

Far off to the right the spires and turrets of New York's lighted skyscrapers gleamed above the city as

Shorty whipped the Lancer down a runway and into the sky, followed by

Bev Bates in his Snorter.

"Level off at ten thousand and take a position on each side of me," Bill ordered over the radiophone. "I'll give you our course in a few minutes."

The hum of their engines changed as they adjusted them to cruising speed and Bill gave them their course. The million and one lights of New York disappeared behind them and the world ahead became a black void. Hour after hour the three ships droned on and on



He was half asleep in the co-pilot's seat of the transport when Bill roused him from his reverie.

"I want you to take the Eaglet out, kid," Bill said.

"Swell, Bill!" Sandy said. He leaped to his feet and started toward the Eaglet's hangar.

"Hey! Wait a minute. Come here!" Bill shouted at him. "Sit down a minute and I'll tell you what I want you to do."

"O.K., Bill," Sandy said. But he regarded Bill suspiciously. He knew this might be a stall on Bill's part to take him, Sandy, out of danger. He knew Bill had been jittery ever since the deaths of Mort Henderson and Cy Hawkins, and this wouldn't be the first time that Bill had sidetracked him to keep him from actual combat.

"I want you to take the Eaglet out," Bill said, "and when we get a little north of here, near the northern tip of Queen Charlotte Island, I want you to take a run up to Juneau and see what you can find out at the airport. Red made a landing there. Get hold of the airport manager. Tell him who you are and find out what Red had to say to him.

"I don't want to send Shorty or Bev because we may run into some trouble a little later in the day and I'll need them. Things are going too quietly. If some one wanted to get us up here they've succeeded, and hell may pop any time."

"I knew it!" Sandy said, pointing his finger at Bill. "You're trying to sidetrack me! You know we may run into trouble and you're trying to get me out of the way. I can hold up my

end any old day in the week. Bill. I—  
—"

"Shut up!" Bill roared at him. "I'm sending you because you can slip in there and out again in the Eaglet without being noticed. If I send a Snorter or the Lancer, the whole world will know it." Bill's face was flushed with anger. "I want you to learn to obey orders, kid. I know you can hold up your end and I'm not trying to sidetrack you. You may run into plenty of trouble yourself. Now hop to it!"

"O. K., Bill," Sandy said. "I'm sorry I ----"

"That's all right," Bill said trying to hide a grin. "Get on it!"

Sandy was on his feet in an instant, his face glowing with anticipation. In another minute he was in the cockpit of the little fighter that had been literally built around him and was fastening his safety belt.

Bill throttled his engines as Sandy waved a hand at him and signaled to Miles to throw the switch that would bring the powerful suspension gear into play.

As Miles threw the switch, the floor of the transport divided into two segments and swung downward. Then the telescoping crane supporting the tiny Eaglet slid through the opening in the fuselage.

When the little plane was about twenty-five feet below the under-carriage of the carrier. Sandy turned a crank that operated a high-speed worm manipulating the folding wings. There was a mechanical click as the locking lugs turned; then the wings

began to turn on their hinges. Another click and the gull-type wings were locked in flying position.

Bill's forehead was covered with cold, clammy perspiration. He couldn't ever get over the idea that it would be his fault if something went wrong with the mechanism and Sandy was hurt in one of those take-offs.

He held the ship steady while he waited for the first blast of Sandy's ^ engine. As the roar of the powerful eight hundred and thirty h.p. Twin Wasp joined the crescendo of the two supercharged Diesels of the transport, a smile flitted on his lips. His tanned face wrinkled with pride.

"The kid has what it takes," he said to himself as the Eaglet dropped away.

Bill flipped the switch on his radio panel and chanted Sandy's call letters into his microphone.

"Nice going, kid," he said when

Sandy checked back. "You know what I want to know. Just nose around. But keep your own mouth shut. You'd better load up your tanks again before you leave there. Keep in contact with me. I'll let you know our position as soon as you, get away. You'll have about an hour's run up there. Then you'll have to give it the whip when you leave. You'll be over open water, so keep in contact."

"O. K., Bill," Sandy said. He brought the Eaglet around on one wing, kicked its tail in the air like a bucking broncho and laid the nose on the capital of Alaska.

An hour later he was talking to Martin Cassidy, the red-faced jovial manager of the airport. He remembered talking to Red Gleason the week before.

"I knew Red in France during the War," he told Sandy. "He's an old pal of mine. Has anything happened? He said he would stop in to see me on his way back. He just refueled and shoved off for Nome. I had a little trouble getting juice for those Diesels."

"No," Sandy said when he had an opportunity to speak, "nothing is wrong. I'm supposed to join him up here and I haven't been able to make contact with him yet. I thought he might have told you something definite about his plans."

"He didn't," Cassidy said. "But you better drop down at Whitehorse and

Flat before you get to Nome. They may know something. What are you fellows doing up here?"

"Just a survey for the government," Sandy lied. "I'd like to load up with some gas if you can spare it."

"Rather," Cassidy said. "Be sure to drop in with Red on your way back.

He's a great lad, Gleason."

A few minutes later the Gastineau Channel flashed under Sandy's wings and off to the right Mount Fairweather towered sixteen thousand feet into the cold, clear air.

"A lot he could tell me," Sandy said aloud and flipped his radio switch to make contact with Bill.

"Probably Bill will think I'm a dummy."

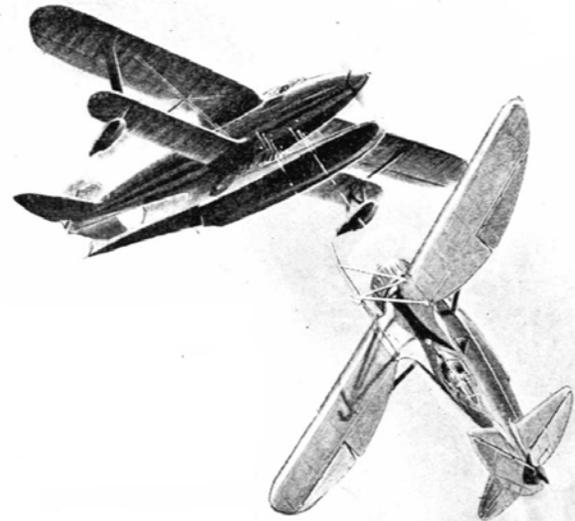
The deep growl of the Twin Wasp in the nose of his Eaglet became a thunderous roar as he opened his throttle and sped out over the Gulf of Alaska.

A few minutes later he had become definitely aware that there was something wrong with his radio. He tuned and checked and rechecked, but not even the rasp of static answered his efforts. He was debating what he had better do when he felt the Eaglet quiver like a mortally wounded animal. He could hear bullets drumming into its tail as a machine gun yammered above his head. For one startled instant he sat immobile, frozen to the stick.

Then he yanked it back into his stomach and zoomed up and over on his back as a black-and-red biplane streaked beneath him. At the top of his loop he half rolled the Eaglet to a level position and gazed over the side to see the rugged little biplane pull out of its dive and come around in a wide, sweeping bank.

"My golly," Sandy said to himself, "where did he come from?" His face was suddenly flushed and he could feel his blood racing through his body like white-hot fire. He opened his throttle wide and zoomed upward in an abrupt climbing turn until he almost stalled. Then he brought the nose down as the black-and-red biplane came streaking up underneath him with its twin guns spewing burst after burst of fire. Lead chewed through the leading edge of his left wing. He

threw the Eaglet out of the line of fire as anger half choked him.



The pilot of the biplane had hung it on its prop to take it upstairs, then brought it around in a flashing chandelle. Sandy pulled his stick back and raced to meet the diving plane." His finger tightened on his gun trip and his guns chattered their song of death. His bullets drew a line along the engine housing of the fast biplane before the pilot skidded it out of range.

Sandy was talking to himself through clenched teeth. All fear had left him after that first surprise attack. He had settled down to handling the Eaglet like a veteran.

"You snake!" he shouted at the pilot of the black-and-red ship. "You low-down, sway-backed son of a pig! You'll try to shoot a man in the back, will you, you knife-throwing rat? I'll teach you, you——" He was working himself \* into a frightful rage when he remembered that that was one of the things Bill had taught him not to do.

The two ships streaked and tumbled across the sky, filling the air with the roar of their thundering motors and the chatter of their twin guns. They fired burst after burst at one another with out telling effect.

Sandy's fingers clamped down on his gun trip time after time as the biplane came under his sights. But before his bullets reached the other plane, it had slipped away. He made noises in his throat and almost lost control of himself again. Then his lips became a single hard, straight line across his face.

"Concentrate!" he told himself. "Study his tactics."

He slipped the Eaglet out of range as the black-and-red biplane came roaring at him again with its guns yammering fire and death. He kept right on by the rugged black-and-red ship, then yanked his stick up and threw it to the left as he kicked his rudder. He came up and over in a fast turn and dived again. But when he clamped down on his firing trip, the black-and-red plane disappeared from under his sights as though some unseen hand had flicked it out of danger.

Sandy shook his head in disgust. He realized that he was still bearing down too hard. He knew that he was doing the very thing Bill had taught him not to do. He was "freezing on his controls" like a novice. He was trying too hard.

"But, my gosh, he's a fighting fool!" he said aloud.

The next time the black-and-red ship flashed across his sights he kicked his rudder ever so little as his finger gripped hard on his trip. The

nose of the Eaglet followed the course of the biplane for that split fraction of a second that is enough. His bullets wove a pattern from the engine housing to the tail assembly. The black riddled ship skidded off dangerously on one wing and yawed wildly. Sandy whipped the Eaglet around and went .in for the kill. His breath was coming in short gasps now and his body was saturated with perspiration. He poured round after round at the other ship as the pilot tried to take it out of danger.

Sandy jammed the stick forward to follow the biplane in its frantic dive. Then he eased it back as the other ship came up and over in a dazzling Immelmann turn. Now he was above Sandy and diving on him with his guns flaming.

Only two thousand feet from the ground and diving at terrific speed, Sandy pushed the stick even farther forward to come up in an outside loop. He nearly blacked out as he hung, head downward, at the bottom of the loop. T He opened his mouth and began to scream as the pressure became terrific.

Then he was up and climbing and his stomach felt as though it had climbed up into his throat. He gulped and probed the air for the black-and-red biplane. He knew where it was a second later when its bullets came drumming up through the belly of the Eaglet. He barrel-rolled and the biplane zoomed past him.

Then he was under its belly, with his guns vomiting. He could see his tracers find their marks before it side-slipped out of range again.

Sandy's hands and arms were trembling now they were so tired. His body felt as though it had been racked with fever. He whipped around as he tried to draw air into his tortured lungs and find his enemy. His mouth dropped open, and he could not believe his eyes. He saw the black-and-red ship racing eastward at terrific speed. It had peeled off and was running away!

For a moment Sandy deliberated on whether or not he should follow him. The plane was headed back toward Juneau. Perhaps he would be forced to land there because of damage to his ship.

"He must have something to do with our being up here," Sandy said to himself. "But why did he attack me?"

He kicked the Eaglet halfway around and then changed his mind. He decided that Bill would want him to follow orders and make contact with him as fast as he could. He studied his chart for a moment, took his bearings and laid the nose of the Eaglet on the tip of the Alaska Peninsula.

Then he went back to the task of repairing his radio.

## **VI—ONE MISSING**

BILL BARNES probed the air ahead of him with anxious eyes as the afternoon wore on and no word came from Sandy. He made contact with Bev and Shorty time after time to learn if they had picked up any word from him. He thought that

possibly his own radio receivers were out of order.

"How could you pick us up if there was anything wrong?" Shorty wanted to know, laughing. "You have the jitters, Bill. The kid is all right."

"Yeah," Bill said. "Probably he is. But it doesn't stay daylight forever. I'm worried about this whole layout, Shorty. Things have gone too smoothly. The only thing that has happened since that gal came to ask me to look for young Reynolds is the disappearance of Red. And he may be perfectly all right."

"He may be," Shorty said. "I don't want to make you worry any more, but I think we'll find out only too soon why we're here. It didn't just happen, Bill. This whole thing has a clever brain behind it. We want to keep our eyes open and our powder dry."

It was nearly dusk when Bill set the BT-4 down on the landlocked harbor of the little trading town of Unalaska, that last outpost of ships passing from the Pacific into the Bering Sea. The sun was down and the night was cold, as the Lancer and Bev's Snorter left twin wakes on the still waters. Rain, driven by a stiff gale, began to pound on their overhead hatches as they put out their sea anchors to ride out the night.

Bill Barnes had become frantic with worry. He went over and over different possibilities as to what had happened to Sandy as he spread out his charts to study them.

McCoy and Neely blew up the rubber boat on the transport and paddled it over to the Lancer and

Snorter to bring Shorty and Bev aboard the transport.

"We'll stay aboard," Bill said curtly to Shorty in answer to a question. "Charlie will throw together some supper. We've got to take turns standing watches at the radio. We'll go ashore in the morning and make inquiries about Bed. I can't understand our not hearing from Sandy. He wouldn't have left Juneau if his radio had been out of order."

"You can't tell what that kid might do. Bill," Shorty said. "And don't forget it was right in this section that Red disappeared."

"I wish I could forget it," Bill said bitterly. "I wish I'd never heard of it. This whole thing is getting to be a hell of a mess and we don't even know what it's all about."

"Sandy may have had trouble with his motor and headed for Kodiak," Bev said.

"Yes and he may be down with his radio out of commission," Bill said. "I don't want to send out a distress signal yet."

"I might hop back over the Gulf and look for flares," Shorty said. "He would be on the course we took."

"Sit tight," Bill snapped. "I want the rest of you here, then I'll know where you are."

Old Charlie, the machine-gunner-cook, opened some cans of stew and concocted a huge salad from canned green vegetables. They ate it while the rain continued to beat down on the metal skin of the transport with increasing fury.

They could barely see the lights in the low, squat buildings along the waterfront through the sheets of water and the inky blackness of the night.

"I hope that Sandy ain't down on the Gulf of Alaska on a night like this," old Charlie said to Bill. Shorty threw him a dirty look and Bev Bates kicked him in the ankle.

Bill didn't answer. He pushed his plate away from him as though the sight of food choked him and got to his feet. He went back on the bridge, threw the radio switch and began to chant Sandy's call letters for the thousandth time.

All through the night they took turns standing watches at the radio. And all through the night nothing came to them from the ether but the scratching roar of the storm and silence.

The rain had stopped when the first eager streaks of light crept out of the east. Bill Barnes was tossing back and forth on the cot in his cabin trying to get some sleep. Bev Bates was standing by the radio. He had just finished a short contact with Tony Lamport on Barnes Field and had thrown the radio key when the scarlet light on the panel brought him up in his chair again.

"BB—BB—BB—calling BB," came to his ears. "BBG—calling BB. BBG calling BB."

"Oh, Bill," Bev shouted, "Red is checking in!"

Bill's feet hit the deck with a thud. His powerful legs drove like pistons as he raced by the Eaglet's

hangar and up the steps to the bridge.

"Gimme!" he said and spoke into the microphone.

"BB answering Red. BB answering BBG. Go ahead! Go ahead!" he shouted.

The voice that came back to his ears was barely a whisper. He could just hear it above the crackle of static.

"Can you speak louder. Red?" he asked. "Are you all right? Where are you?"

"O.K., Bill," Red said. "I've got to talk fast and I don't dare talk too loud or they'll hear me. I'm a prisoner. Bill. I was forced down four or five days ago by a half dozen red-and-black, single-seater Barton Hawks. They all mounted two machine guns. I couldn't get away from them. They knew how to use their guns. I had to land or take plenty of lead. They flew me to a little island east of Rat Island. It has a small landlocked harbor like the one at Unalaska. They forced me to talk to Tony yesterday with a couple of guns on me. The only thing I could say, except what they told me to say, was that I'd had trouble with the nozzle injectors, on my Diesels. Did you get that?"

"I got it," Bill said. "Who's holding you, Red? What's the layout?"

"I don't know. Bill," Red said. "I'm being guarded by a couple of gangsters that would rather shoot me than speak to me. Their names are Ugly and Lippy. I managed to slip down to my Snorter while they're

asleep. They made me talk to Tony and told me what to say. They told me you were on the way to Unalaska. Is that where you are?"

"Yes," Bill said. "Haven't you learned anything from the two men who are guarding you?"

"Nothing," Red said. "They won't talk. This island is uninhabited except for them and some men living in a sort of barracks a quarter of a mile away. They're the same outfit. I think their boss is there. They won't tell me anything. Take down the position of this place, but don't bring the bomber over here. That's what they're after. I could tell that by their conversation. They call their boss Slip and they're afraid of him."

"Can't you take your Snorter out of there now?" Bill asked after he had written down the position Red gave him.

"My hands are tied and I think they've done something to the ship,"

Red said. "Remember those names—Ugly, Lippy, and Slip. They may mean something if I don't get out of here."

"You'll get out all right," Bill growled. "Sit tight, Red. I'll be there within two hours. Your Snorter is the only ship there?"

"That's right," Red said. His voice rose suddenly. "They're coming. Bill. I'm signing off!"

A new buzzing sounded in Bill's ear.

He called Red's name a half dozen times but no voice answered him. He looked into Shorty's questioning eyes.

"Where is he?" Shorty asked.

"Some one is holding him a prisoner on an island west of here," Bill said.

"You got the position?" Shorty asked.

"Yes." Bill pointed to the piece of paper lying on the chart rack.

Shorty picked it up, checked it on the chart and started to go down the steps toward the port gangway.

"Where are you going?" Bill snapped at him.

"I'm going to get Red," Shorty snapped back. "Did he say how many of them there were? Does he know why they're holding him?"

"He doesn't know much more than we do," Bill said. "Two men are guarding him. But there are more there. He doesn't know how many. He says they're after the BT-4, but doesn't know why. You wait a minute, Shorty. Let me think this thing over. We haven't had any word from Sandy yet. Red said this gang have a half dozen Barton Hawks, all armed with two machine guns each. They may have spotted Sandy, too—picking us up one at a time so they can get the bomber. We're playing right into their hands."

"Sitting here won't help Red," Shorty said, and moved toward the steps again.

"Wait a minute!" Bill snapped. "I'll go after Red in the Lancer. I'll have more guns and more speed in case I run into trouble. You take the Snorter and double back over the course we held yesterday. See if you can pick up some word from Sandy.

When you get part way back, you ought to be able to pick up Juneau and Fairbanks on your radio. Bev will have to stay here with the crew of the bomber.

"This damned thing doesn't make any sense," he said. "I don't want you to go all the way back across the Gulf. Use your own judgment. I'll try to get Red out of there. If I'm not back by the time you are, you had better come and take a look. Give me that latitude and longitude; you copy it."

"O. K.," Shorty said. "Let's go!"

## VII—TRAP

WHEN Bill Barnes took the Lancer off the waters of the harbor a half hour later, his thoughts were as gray as the drab, colorless morning. He had a feeling of impending tragedy that he could not throw off. He hung the Lancer on its props and took it up to ten thousand feet. He thought that once he was in the air he could dispel the gnawing fear that seemed to have crept into his very bones. He opened the throttles of the Lancer wide and watched his air-speed indicator climb from three hundred to four hundred miles an hour. When it had reached four hundred and fifty, he closed his throttles a notch and there he held her. He studied the position Red had given him and checked it on his chart.

"Nearly two hours," he said to himself and he began to think about the strange series of events that had happened in the past few days.

"It's almost a certainty," he said to himself, "that the disappearance of young Reynolds has nothing to do with the thing. Unless-unless--" And there he stopped.

The Island of the Four Mountains towered up ahead, looking like one vast cathedral with four uneven spires rising from its center. The sun was climbing into the heavens now, behind him, and the air was clear and cold. He knew that he should be able to throw off the feeling of anxiety that nagged at him. But he couldn't. Not even the brilliance of the day and the crisp, clean air he sucked into his lungs seemed to help.

Suppose, he thought, after all the things I have been through in the past few years, this is the end. That I end my life in the cold, drab waters of the Bering Sea. Suppose—

"Hey!" he shouted at himself. "Snap out of it, Barnes, or you'll begin to cry."

As the last of the innumerable Andreanof Islands sped beneath his wings, he cut his throttles, flipped the tail of the Lancer up and checked his position.

A single tiny island loomed off to starboard—just a rocky dot that marked the spot where the Bering Sea and Pacific mingled. He probed the air all around him as he nosed the Lancer down in wide, sweeping spirals. He estimated that the little island was about five miles long and not more than two wide. It was as barren and desolate a place as he had ever seen.

Then he saw Red's Snorter—left high and dry on the beach of the

landlocked harbor-by the receding tide. He saw a half dozen crudely constructed buildings and a pair of powerful radio masts. He circled low above the little island, but could see no sign of life. He supposed that they were keeping out of sight—hoping to lure him lower, within range of machine guns. He zoomed the Lancer upward and went into a conference with himself. He wished he had brought the bomber and the rest of his men with him.

He thought of dropping two or three of the twenty-five-pound bombs that nestled in the belly of the Lancer, going in for a landing and trusting to luck that he and Red could fight their way out again. But he knew that might be suicide.

Suddenly he forgot all those things and his eyes flew open as he sat up in his bucket seat and probed the air all around him. The roar of four or five airplane motors had joined the drone of his Diesels!

Yet he could see no planes. He looked back and up on both sides of him and thumbed the sun. Were his ears playing tricks on him? Was it a strange air current that made the Diesels in the nose of the Lancer a sound illusion? He bent his head and cocked it to the right, then to the left. It sounded one moment as though the planes were above him—the next, as though they were below. And it was increasing in volume as though the planes were screaming into a power dive or pouring in juice for a take-off.

He swung around in a wide, sweeping circle that would take him completely around the tiny island.

And while he was turning it happened!

Five red-and-black amphibians came roaring out of a rock-sheltered harbor, so close together that their wailing props nearly touched the trimming tabs of one another's rudders. Then they broke and went hurtling over the water and into the air in five different directions. They were spread out like the five fingers on an outstretched hand as they raced into the air. Their pilots hung them on their props and took them upstairs with the dazzling speed of the fastest interceptor.

Then they converged and formed an echelon that came tearing back like five steps—with their twin guns vomiting lead and death at the Lancer.

Bill had been watching them like a man in a trance, so complete was his surprise. For a few moments he hadn't been able to believe what he saw. Then he realized that the floor of the hidden airdrome was the surface of the harbor. It was a perfect camouflage. His

get above him before he thought of his own safety.

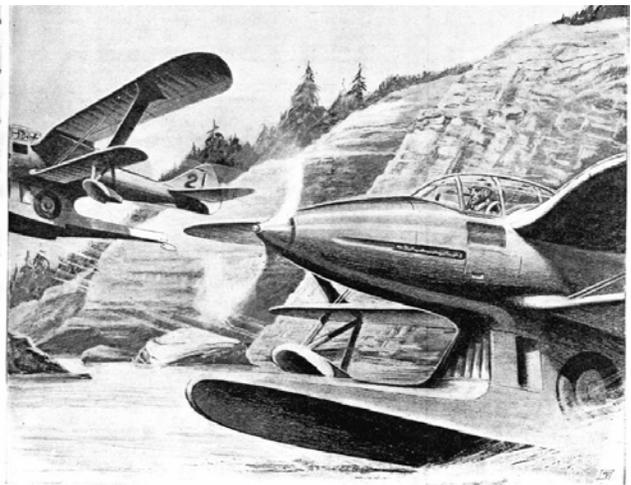
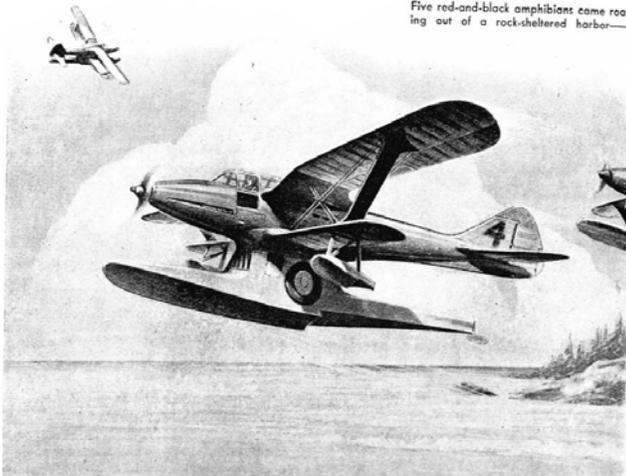
He stuck the nose of the Lancer down and slipped it out of range of their guns while he deliberated on what to do. He knew that he could open the Lancer up and walk away from them. But that wouldn't help Red.

He heard the bark of a light gun below him, felt the Lancer bounce and saw streaks of white and yellow smoke off to his left. He shifted his course as the antiaircraft gun below spoke again and missed.

White streamers of tracers floated through the air as the five red-and-black biplanes thundered down on him. He stuck the stick of the Lancer forward again as bullets laced just above his head. Then he came up and over in a flashing Immelmann to throw the ships off his tail.

Bill's mouth became grim as he leveled off and fired two quick bursts to test his guns. Opening his throttle, he stuck the nose of the Lancer up in an abrupt climbing turn until it almost

Five red-and-black amphibians came roaring out of a rock-sheltered harbor—



astonishment was so great that he watched them whip into the air and

stalled. There he kicked his rudder and rolled to the right.

He could feel bullets slashing through his tail and hear the tat-tat-tat of machine guns as the biplanes came up under him. He sent the Lancer sky-ward in a desperate zoom and then chandelled back to the attack.

The Lancer, with its terrific speed and maneuverability, was up and over and diving head-on at the five biplanes as though it had gone berserk. They dove and zoomed, skidded and rolled to get out of its flaming path. Bill's finger was fastened down hard on his gun trip. He raked one of the red-and-black ships with a withering fire, but the pilot slipped it out of range before his bullets struck a vulnerable spot.

He gunned his engine again and came over in a normal loop to roll right side up at the top. The five ships had spread out now and were trying to form a circle around him so that they could get him in the vortex of their fire. He wished, as he had never wished before, that Sandy was in the tail to help break their circle with the swivel gun.

Then the air seemed choked with slashing streaks of red and black as they circled on their prey. They were everywhere, charging in from all angles, their guns screaming lead.

Bill tried to break through that circle without having to run a death-dealing gantlet of lead. He realized that these five pilots knew all of the old and all of the new tricks of combat flying. They were a bunch of veterans who never made a mistake.

Their tactics were flawless as they converged on him. He felt as though he was hemmed in by a band of steel from which there was no escape.

When those five ships formed an echelon and dove on him, he had taken it in his stride. It had seemed similar to a hundred other attacks. But now he knew it was different. These men were all masters at their craft. He could picture their lined, hard-bitten faces behind their windshields. He knew that they were men like Red and Shorty, veterans of a thousand battles in the air.

He whipped the Lancer up and down, skidded and sideslipped, zoomed and crabbed to avoid the streams of death that were aimed at him. He knew that if he could cut out of that circle without being annihilated he could run away from them. But he couldn't cut out without putting himself in a position where they could chop his head from his shoulders with their bullets. They knew how to anticipate every move he made.

And he was getting tired, desperately tired. He opened the throttles of the Lancer even wider, taking a chance on "blacking out" to increase the speed of his maneuvers. But still they clung to him like blood-sucking leeches. Each one did his part as though he had rehearsed it a million times.

For the first time in his life Bill Barnes knew stark terror in the air. It wasn't that he was afraid of the death they were trying to mete out to him. It was something else that he couldn't understand himself. It was

as though he was inclosed" in an air-tight chamber from which there was no escaping— where he must surely and slowly strangle to death.

Cold, damp perspiration oozed out all over his throbbing body. He thought, "This is the end. The premonition I had this morning is coming true."

They were closing in on him now. He braced himself like a man who is about to take a blow in the face. Opening his throttles wide» he yanked the control column back into his stomach as he decided to go through or die trying. As he came up and over on his back and started to roll right side up, black despair seized him.

The Lancer skidded off to the right and the nose dropped. As it spun once, then twice, he warped and managed to bring the nose up. He was aware that the red-and-black ships were holding their fire as he started a glide toward the waters below. They fell in on each ' side and above and below him. The pilot on the port side leaned over the cowl and motioned downward with one hand. They knew he was helpless, that he could no longer maneuver for combat.

For one black moment rage surged through him. They had got him the way they got Red. And, probably, the way they had got Sandy.

He flipped over his radio switch and began to chant his own call letters into the microphone. "BB calling all ships," he said. "BB calling all ships!"

But no voice answered him. Once the scratching increased in his ear and he thought he heard a voice. He shouted into his mike, but the voice faded away and there was only silence.

Spume and spray that was like ice shot high in the air as he sat the Lancer down on the waters of the Bering Sea. The five red-and-black amphibians landed beside him. He slipped an automatic out of a pocket and stuck it in his overall as they taxied toward him.

They made motions for him to kill his engines and he obeyed. The five pilots had pushed their goggles back on their foreheads and were laughing at him when he climbed out to catch the line one of them threw him.

"Bill Barnes, the boy wonder, eh?" one of them shouted at him. "Throw that gat you have in your pocket over the side!"

Bill remained silent as he watched his automatic disappear beneath the water. As the line tightened, he manipulated his steerable water rudder to follow the course of the red-and-black ship in front of him. The other four ships taxied along beside him as they headed toward the little harbor.

The five hard-faced pilots weren't laughing as they ordered Bill out of the cockpit of the Lancer into a boat one of them rowed. They didn't even speak to him. But he could tell by the glitter in their eyes that any one of them would have been glad to cut his throat.

Two men, who were even harder-' looking than the five pilots,

took charge of Bill when he stepped out on the dock.

"Git up there with your pal, punk," one of them said to Bill.

Bill didn't even look at him. He started toward the crude little hut a hundred feet from the waterfront and saw Red Gleason standing in the doorway. He was so tired he could hardly walk.

### VIII—THE PLAN

"THEY got you, too, did they?" Red said. "I didn't think you'd try to come alone."

His face was cut and battered. Both his eyes were half closed and tinged with yellow, blue, and black. But his carrot-colored hair flamed as brightly as ever.

"I slammed one of those plug-uglies on the nose," Red went on in answer to the question in Bill's eyes. "They tied my hands behind my back and went to work on me."

"Who are they?" Bill asked as he slumped onto a bench and put his head in his hands. "I'm tired. They wore me down and shot my controls in half."

"They're fighting so-and-sos," Red said. "They did the same thing to me. Whoever is running this show is smart. Things have been clicking perfectly for them. They forced me down, then forced me to fly my ship in here. They let me know that you would be at Unalaska, then gave me a chance to slip away and make contact with you. They knew you'd

come to get me and then they could get you."

Bill lifted his head as the motors of the five red-and-black ships roared. He watched their pilots whip them into the air with admiration in his eyes.

"They're going after the BT-4 now," Red said.

"Why do they want it?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," Red said. "I never found any information about young Reynolds. That story was a stall to get us up here."

"I know that now," Bill said. "But what's behind the whole thing? If they wanted my bomber why didn't they steal it down on Long Island without all these elaborate plans? Why——"

A shadow loomed in the doorway and the man who stood there said, "Maybe I can help you out with that one." He laughed. "I'm glad you arrived this morning, Barnes. It is going to make things a lot easier for me."

"The pleasure," Bill said with no little trepidation as he gazed into the eyes of Slip Ogden, "is entirely yours." He knew without asking that this was the enemy he had been fighting in the dark. He knew that only such a man would be capable of the cold, ruthless efficiency with which he had been lured to the Aleutian Islands.

"I imagine it is," Slip Ogden said. "You're younger, than I thought you would be—young to have such a reputation."

Bill didn't answer him. He would have liked to have answered him by crashing his fist into his cool, insolent face.

"I wanted you up here with your bomber, Barnes," Slip went on. "That's why I didn't get it on Long Island. You'd probably like to hear all about it." He sat down. "But let me warn you first not to try to get rough. Two of my men are outside—Ugly Barillo and Lippy Freeman. You may have heard of them. They have quite a reputation, also. Not quite so savory as yours, but a reputation. Your friend here will testify that they are very handy with their fists."

"Nuts!" Red said. "If you have anything to tell us, tell it!"

"In my own good time, my friend," Ogden said and his cold eyes bored into Bed. "It might relieve your mind to know, Barnes," he said, turning back to Bill, "that your young friend Sanders is safe. From the report I have he is a better combat pilot than you are. And that report comes from no less a person than Claw Lawson."

"Claw Lawson!" Bill said. The image of an evil-faced man with a hook for a left hand flashed through his mind. He knew "Claw" Lawson as founder and leader of a nefarious squadron of fliers who would undertake anything criminal if it promised to pay enough money. "What has Claw Lawson to do with Sanders?"

"Claw was out scouting your ships when they got up this way," Ogden said. "He ran into young Sanders alone over the Gulf and thought he would make' you one

less. But Sanders out-fought him and forced him to peel off to get patched up. Sanders started to follow you, but had to turn back. He landed at Flat."

"Thanks," Bill said, and he meant it.

"But about your bomber, Barnes," Ogden said. "You probably know that I was forced to get out of New York a few months ago. The way things turned out I had to stay out. So I had to find a new way to live.

"An item in a New York newspaper caught my eye and attracted my fancy. It told about all the gold that is being moved from the Orient to San Francisco these days. It mentioned that they did not let the authorities in San Francisco know of the day of arrival until a day or two before the ships arrived. It was thought that was because of all the war trouble in the Orient. It suggested an idea to me. It suggested that one of those ships could be robbed at sea, from the air. I used to be something of a flier myself, Barnes."

He waited a moment, hoping Bill would ask him about his flying. But Bill did not open his lips.

"I got in touch with Claw Lawson and he said he thought it could be done," Ogden went on. "But if we put men on one of the boats coming from the Orient to subdue the crew, what would we do with the gold after we had it? If we transferred it to a yacht or a tramp we might buy. United States destroyers would catch up to us. I thought about your bomber. I know a

great deal about that bomber now, Barnes. I know it will carry nearly six million dollars in gold bullion. That is just about what these shipments come to.

"We figured we could take the gold off the boat from the Orient, load it on your bomber and then load it on a yacht a couple of thousand miles away, where no one would possibly look for us."

"Why did you want Red Gleason up here?" Bill asked.

"I didn't," Ogden said. "We tried to think of a way to get you up here with your bomber. We planted a girl on Miss Reynolds as her secretary. We knew, impersonating Miss Reynolds, she could give you a plausible reason for coming up here with your men and your bomber. But you didn't fall for it. You sent Gleason. So we had to get him so you'd follow to rescue him."

"You see, Barnes, we had figured on your reputation for sticking your nose in other people's business. It worked; you came. There will be a steamer along on the Yokohama-San Francisco lane tomorrow. She is carrying a little under six million in gold. After we figure nearly a million for our expenses, we will have about five million left. That will keep us for a couple of years, and we won't be bothered by having G-men chasing us all over the world."

"Why won't they chase you?" Red Gleason wanted to know.

"Why?" Ogden laughed. "Because they'll think Barnes and his men committed the little act of piracy. You're known to be up in this section. But no one knows why. After

we've loaded the gold aboard a yacht that is waiting a couple of thousand miles from here, your bomber and your men will be brought back near the scene of the holdup, Barnes. Destroyers will find your men adrift in the bomber without supplies, fuel, or radio. The bomber will be identified as the plane that carried away the gold. And your men will be in it, dead."

"It won't work," Bill said. "What about the gold?"

"There will be a little of it left in the bomber," Ogden said. "Just enough to make it incriminating. They won't know what happened to the rest of it. They will think your men threw it over-board when they found themselves in danger of sinking. A very neat little scheme, eh? Right from the beginning it has worked like a charm."

"What about me?" Bill asked. "If they don't find me in the bomber, they'll think I've double-crossed my men and got the gold away in some manner."

"You?" Ogden said thoughtfully. "Oh, yes. I didn't tell you that you will be found dead in your Silver Lancer. That will puzzle 'em still more, eh, Barnes?"

"Yes," Bill said, "that ought to drive 'em crazy!"

He reached forward and grabbed at the lapels of Ogden's jacket with his left hand and lifted him until his toes barely touched the ground. As Ogden started to squawk out a name, Bill's right fist caught him full on the mouth. The blow lifted Ogden through the doorway and out on the rocky ground.

Lippy Freeman had a gun in his hand as he came through the door. But he didn't use it. He pointed it at Bill's stomach while curses surged from his lips and he gave Ugly Barillo instructions.

Bill didn't even look toward Ugly as Ugly crashed a leather-covered blackjack on the side of Bill's head. His knees folded and he crumpled in an inert mass. An instant later Red crashed down beside him.



Slip Ogden.

## IX—RELEASE

WHEN Bill opened his eyes, the walls of the dark little hut danced back and forth. He fought an almost over-whelming nausea for a few minutes and opened his eyes again. He tried to struggle up from the bunk on which he was lying and found that his wrists and ankles and body were securely tied to it. A vision of Slip Ogden's sneering face floated before him and he cursed aloud.

"Are you all right, 'Bill?" Red's voice said from the darkness across the hut.

"Yeah," Bill said savagely. "I'm fine! I'd like to——"

"Forget it," Red said. "We've got to figure a way out of here. You've been out for hours. The BT-4 is riding on the harbor with those six biplanes of Ogden's. I heard her come in. They got her. I'm sorry to have to greet you with that. I found out from the plug-ugly who slapped you on the head that they got her by some ruse without injuring Bev or any of the crew. They dropped 'em off on an uninhabited island between Andreanof and the Island of the Four Mountains until they are ready to go back and turn 'em adrift aboard the bomber."

"What about Shorty and Sandy?" Bill asked.

"I couldn't find out anything about them," Red said. "You better take it easy and try to rest. You took an awful clip on the head."

"I don't know what the hell else I can do!" Bill said. "No one has ever made such a sucker of me before. I've been leading with my head ever since this thing started. I deserve to get it clipped. Are you tied to your bunk?"

"Yes," Red said. "But I think they'll untie us before they leave."

"Leave?" Bill said sharply.

"They're getting ready to meet that gold carrier from the Orient in the morning," Red said. "They'll pick her up about four hundred miles south of here."

"A nicely planned job," Bill said softly. "They have men aboard to seize her and stop her engines when they come in sight. They'll take the

gold off, load it aboard the bomber and fly it down near Midway Island to stow it aboard their yacht. The yacht will carry fuel for the bomber. After they've taken off the gold, they'll head for the South Sea Islands and disappear and my bomber and the Lancer will be found on the scene of the crime. Very neat, very neat."

"We've got to stop 'em somehow, Bill," Red said.

"Yes, we've got to stop 'em if we don't want to die. But how?"

Throughout the rest of the day they could hear the twin Diesels in the BT-4 being tested and re-tested. They heard the motors in the noses of the little red-and-black fighters roar to life and subside—heard the voices of their pilots as they worked over them.

Long shadows fell across the doorway and then night settled down on the lonely little island before any one came near them. Slip Ogden and Lippy Freeman and Ugly Barillo came back to their prison to gloat.

Freeman and Barillo put trays of food on the floor and unfastened their bonds. Bill's eyes locked with Slip Ogden's for a moment and held. Then he shrugged his shoulders and tried to eat the food before him.

"I thought you were a lot smarter than you are, Barnes," Ogden said. "Any one of a hundred things might have spoiled my little scheme. But you stuck your head right in the noose and pulled it tight. Without your kind co-operation I might have failed. Now that gold is practically in my pocket. Because of your help I'm not going to pay you for that punch in the mouth last night. I'll

let the boys pay you when they come back to put you in your Lancer. You're going to enjoy that."

"Get out of here!" Red Gleason stormed at him.

"Close your trap, punk," Lippy Freeman snarled.

"Let him talk. Let him talk," Ogden said. "I like his spirit. At least he has enough guts to talk back."

For fifteen minutes he tried to goad Bill into making some move for which he could retaliate. But Bill refused to even answer him. He kept his eyes on his food and would not be baited.

When they had finished eating, they were tied up again.

Slip wished them a mocking good night.

Throughout that long, horrible night Bill Barnes tossed and turned as much as the ropes that tied him would permit, cursed himself and his throbbing head. Both he and Red tried to free themselves, but their efforts only added to the tightness of their bonds.

"They have some kind of slip nooses on us," Red gasped. "The more we struggle the tighter they get."

"As Ogden said," Bill grated, "we stuck our head in the noose and pulled it tight. But we're not through yet. We've got to get one break before this tiling is over."

They were dozing at dawn when they heard the engines of the BT-4 and the motors in the noses of the red-and-black fighters roar to life.

Bill came out of the horrible nightmare that had engulfed him with his body soaked with perspiration. He struggled frantically for a moment while the cacophony of roaring motors beat against his eardrums. It took every bit of will power he possessed to lie still.

"It can't be true!" he said to himself. "If they succeed in using my bomber, it will be irrefutable evidence that I was helping them."

Even if he escaped with his life, it would really be the end of things for him, he thought. Ogden would be clever enough to call his men by the names of Bill's men. He would carry out the whole thing before the officers and crew of the gold-carrying vessel to give the illusion that he was Bill Barnes. They would swear on their lives when it was over that it was Bill and his men. Not even the things they had done in the past could offset the evidence against them if they lived. And if they died, the reputation they had worked so hard to build would die with them.

Despair such as Bill had never known before seized him. Instead of fighting on and on against any odds as long as there was life left in his body, he was ready to quit. For the first time in his life he knew that he was beaten. Sucking sounds that were closely akin to dry sobs came from his throat.

"Take it easy," Red said.

They heard six single-motored ships roar down the harbor for a take-off. Then came the full-throated roar of the 1500 h.p. engines in the nacelles of the bomber as she raced into the dawn.

Then all was silence—except for the lapping of the waters on the shore as the morning light crept across the doorsill. They strained their ears for the sound of voices or something that would tell them whether or not they had been left entirely without a guard. The thought of the Lancer and the Snorter ' riding in the harbor gave them new hope and strength.

"Get your eyes accustomed to the light and then try to study the knots," Bill said. "We've got to get free."

"Where yuh goin', sweetheart?" the voice of Lippy Freeman said from the doorway. Bill twisted his head and saw the scowling, snarling faces of Ugly Barillo and Lippy Freeman beside him.

All sense of reason or control seemed to snap inside Red Gleason as he heard Freeman's voice. His battered face became the color of his flaming hair as he screamed at them.

"You dirty, yellow rats!" he shouted. "You——"

Then his voice trailed away as suddenly as it had started. He cocked his head on one side with his mouth open a little. He held that position for a matter of fifteen seconds before he let his head drop back. He looked over at Bill and there was a smile on his face.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

Bill nodded his head and there was new life in his eyes. He watched the faces of Lippy Freeman and Ugly Barillo as they, too, heard the deep, resonant throb of the three thousand horses in the Barnes twin-Diesel

over-head and the wail of its two three-bladed opposed props as it nosed downward.

Lippy and Ugly heard it and ran out in the open to gaze skyward as Shorty eased the Snorter out of its long dive, shallow dived once and skimmed above the Lancer on the little harbor.

"I wonder if they know how to handle "that antiaircraft gun they have here?" Bill said to Red.

"It's doubtful," Red said. "Their education doesn't go beyond a Tommy gun, probably. It must be Shorty up there."

"It isn't any one else," Bill said, and there was a new lilt to his voice now.

Shorty Hassfurther saw the two forms that were Lippy Freeman and Ugly Barillo scurry across the rocky surface of the island toward the long, low building near the wireless masts. He brought the Snorter around on one wing and dipped down again as he saw them come out of the building with a machine gun and run toward some brush that grew down to the edge of the water. He zoomed upward, cut his gun and came down into the wind. As the Snorter's single, long float spanked the water, Lippy Freeman's finger clamped down on the trigger of the machine gun they had concealed in the underbrush. Lead and fire spurted out of the muzzle and drummed through the metal skin of the Snorter.

Shorty blasted his engine and kicked his water rudder so that the nose of the Snorter was pointed directly at that spot in the underbrush. His two powerful .50-

caliber guns sputtered their answer to the gangsters' challenge. A scream that was like the wail of nothing human sounded above the chatter of his guns. He released the trip and waited for an answering burst of fire.

But none came. Lippy Freeman and Ugly Barillo had committed their last murder. They were curled up beside their machine gun where Shorty's bullets had found them.

"All right, kid," Shorty said into his intercockpit telephone. "Take an automatic and get over the side and see what you can learn. I'll stay aboard so we can get away quick if we have to."

Young Sandy Sanders slid out of the rear cockpit of the Snorter and dropped into three feet of water. He held an automatic above his head as his feet touched bottom. Shorty climbed into the rear cockpit and swung the .30-caliber machine gun around so that he could spray the shore line.

"Get down on the ground so I can fire over your head if I have to use this thing," Shorty said.

The roar that came from the island as Sandy stepped out of the water brought him to a complete stop. He crouched forward with the automatic out in front of him while he stared toward the hut a hundred feet back from the beach.

"Hey! Sandy!" came Red Gleason's bull roar again.

Sandy ran, still half crouched with the automatic out in front of him, toward the shack. He knew he had heard Bed's voice, but he didn't

know what he was walking into. The sound of Bill's voice quickened his step. He went in the door cautiously, half expecting to be greeted with a fusillade of shots. Instead Red Gleason's roar greeted him.

"Quick, kid!" he said. "Get a knife and cut these ropes."

Sandy turned and raced back toward the Snorter without a word. He cupped his hands and shouted at Shorty that he had found Bill and Red and told him to bring a knife to cut them loose.

A few minutes later they were staring at the badly dressed cut on the side of Bill's head and at Red's battered face. They saw that Bill's face was white and drawn underneath its tan.

"What about those two mugs who were guarding us?" he asked weakly.

"I think they're dead," Shorty said.

"Make sure!" Bill snapped at Sandy. He suddenly realized that with the exception of Bev Bates, and he knew where to find him, all of his men were with him again. He seemed to take a new lease on life as color flowed back into his face.

"What about the Lancer?" he asked Shorty. "Is it ready to go?"

"I'll check it," Shorty said. "Go where?"

Before he answered him he said to Red, "Is your Snorter O. K.?"

"I'll find out." Red said and he started for the rowboat tied up at the dock.

"You've heard about Slip Ogden?" Bill said to Shorty.

"Plenty," Shorty said.

"He's running this show," Bill said. "He has our bomber and is boarding a gold-carrying steamer on the Yokohama-San Francisco lane four hundred miles south of here. We've got to stop him. He has Claw Lawson and his cutthroat outfit with him. That's the set-up. Where did you find Sandy?"

"At Flat," Shorty said. "His radio went bad and he was afraid to try getting to Unalaska without it. After I got him I couldn't make contact with any one. He left the Eaglet at Flat to have one of his tanks repaired. We shoved for Unalaska and the bomber was gone. Some natives told us about the half dozen red-and-black fighters, like the one that attacked Sandy. We combed the islands as far as the Andreanof group and spotted Bev and the crew of the bomber. I——"

"They're all right?" Bill broke in.

"They're O. K.," Shorty said. "Bev told me——"

"We haven't time to talk now," Bill snapped. "We've got to get there before Ogden gets that gold aboard the bomber. I'm going up to his quarters to see if he left a chart that will tell me where he is going to intercept the steamer. Get Sandy in your Snorter. We've got to go!"

He started running toward the building where Slip Ogden and his men had been quartered. The room was a wreck, as though some one had made a hasty job of packing by

throwing the things they didn't want on the floor.

That was where he found the chart that told him where he would find Ogden and his men. The spot was marked with a tiny cross and was almost due south.

The twin Diesels in the nose of Bill's Lancer were blasting when he reached the little dock. Red taxied it around close to the shore and Bill waded out to climb into the front cockpit.

"She's all right?" he shouted above the roar of the engines.

Red nodded his head and Bill blasted the tail around and waved a hand at Shorty. He took the big ship down the harbor and lifted it into the air with his old reckless abandon. He flipped his radio key and spoke to Shorty on the radiophone.

"Give her all she's got," he said. "We have about an hour's run. If those six red-and-black fighters, try to intercept us, you'll have to keep them busy while I go on to disable the bomber."

"Let her ride!" Shorty said.

## **X—RETRIBUTION**

THE *Bitsi Maru* plowed steadily westward as the captain and his force of deck officers assembled on the bridge to take their eight-o'clock sight.

"Eight bells," the captain called.

"Make it so," the first officer said as the quartermaster struck the eight bells.

As the officers finished working up their positions and handed them to the master, the deep-throated drone of a twin-motored plane joined the throbbing of the ship's turbines. Startled, they shaded their eyes from the glare of the sun and gazed upward.

The first officer's eyes widened as he studied the shining monster. His interest in airplanes was second only to his interest in ships. He hurried into the chart room, came back with a powerful pair of binoculars, and turned them on the ship overhead.

"She's powerful and she's fast, sir," he said. "And she's armed to the teeth. Five machine gunners' cockpits and a one-pounder besides her bombs."

"What is she doing up here?" the captain wanted to know.

"She——»

"Get your hands in the air and keep 'em there!" a voice behind them said.

The voice was as hard as the sound of steel on steel. The captain thought about the cargo of gold they were carrying in their strong room as he raised his hands.

A half dozen shouts sounded from the decks below, followed by the jangle of the telegraph in the engine room. The steady, rhythmic hum of the turbines stopped as six red-and-black bi-planes roared out of the sun overhead and swept the decks of the ship with machine-gun bullets.

The big bomber circled back into the wind to glide downward as

the *Bitsi Maru* came under the complete domination of the half dozen pirates aboard her.

Five minutes later Slip Ogden directed the lashing of the bomber alongside a cargo port that was opened. There was a dull explosion inside the ship and men began carrying little iron boxes from the strong room to the open cargo port and across the port wing of the big amphibian. A flat-nosed man with a voice like an angry bull sat on the saddle of a portable machine gun above the port. He roared occasional orders at the white-faced passengers lined up along the rail.

The six red-and-black fighters had settled down on the waters of the Pacific with their idling props and machine guns pointed at the steamer's sides.

Slip Ogden laughed softly as a man reported to him that no radio message had gone out from the *Bitsi Maru* and the wireless room had been demolished.

"We'll be away from here in forty-five minutes," he said. "Make a check on all our men and be sure they are all ready to go when we're loaded."

"Yes, sir," the man said, and went back aboard the steamer.

The BT-4 was sagging low in the water as the last of the gold was stowed into her "bomb bay. The six red-and-black fighters were circling low over-head, ready to form a protective screen around the bomber when she left the water.

Four miles above the surface of the Pacific, Bill Barnes put a pair of

binoculars against his eyes and studied the "six circling specks, the bomber and the steamer.

"All right. Shorty," he said into his microphone. His voice was calm. "Stick your nose down. Get one of 'em on your first dive. Watch out for the one-Rounder on the BT-4. Don't give him a chance to get you under his sights; Let her go!"

Bill jammed the control stick forward and opened his throttle. The twin props of the Lancer whined in protest as a gale screamed and shrieked through the bracing struts. Down and down the two ships sped until it seemed they must fly into a million flaming pieces and dissolve into thin air.

Bill's mouth was a twisted slash across his face as he instinctively listened to the high-pitched whine of the motor "and tested the vibration with his own body. His knuckles showed white, so tightly were his fingers wrapped around the control stick—easing it backward ever so little to see how the ship responded, then slamming it forward again.

At ten thousand feet, as his Snorter reached terminal velocity. Shorty coaxed the stick back with the touch of a master, until the nose began to rise. Then he jammed it down again, racing neck and neck with Bill.

Slip Ogden's eyes became round with horror as the eerie scream of those four diving props permeated his consciousness and caused him to look overhead. For one instant the expression of cold ruthlessness was wiped from his face as those two harbingers of

death roared down on him. Then he saw that his six red-and-black fighters were aware of the diving ships and were maneuvering to escape that first vicious attack.

"Have you picked your man?" Bill Barnes screamed into his microphone at almost the same instant the smug expression of confidence came back to Ogden's face.

"Yes!" Shorty roared back.

They eased out of their power dive and shallow dived to make their guns effective. As one of the red-and-black ships whipped around in a fast Immelmann. Shorty pulled his Snorter up into a loop. At the top he centered his controls. The weight of his body sagged on his safety strap as he hung head downward and lined up the bi-plane in his sights. His guns belched streams of death as his finger clamped down on his trip. The pilot of the red-and-black fighter tried to skid away. Then his nose dropped and the ship began to weave downward, half out of control. Shorty rolled his Snorter right side up and poured burst after burst into it as it started its last plunge and whirled into a spin.

The pilot of the ship Bill had singled out tried to escape in a fast climbing turn as Bill fired his first tracer. He eased his stick over and tapped his rudder as his guns began their song of death. His bullets wove a pattern from the hub to the tail structure. The bi-plane slipped off on one wing and yawed wildly as Bill pulled out and whipped the Lancer upward. He poured round after round into the whirling ship as it plunged to its death. There was no

pity or mercy in his heart as the plane struck the water, shooting a geyser high into the air.

As he straightened out, he heard Red's swivel gun chattering behind him. He scanned the air for Shorty and found him two thousand feet overhead, maneuvering to keep out of range of the one-and-a-half-inch shells from the bomber.

The four surviving red-and-black fighters had leveled off three thousand feet above Shorty and were preparing to attack. Bill watched the flippers of one of them as he instructed the others. He knew that before they tried to survive that attack he must silence the one-pounder in the circular turret in the top of the BT-4.

He cursed Slip Ogden again as he stuck the nose of his Lancer down. He had ever made a complete sucker of him, was some place aboard the bomber. And he knew that he must half wreck his own ship to prevent Ogden from taking it off the water. He could see men casting the lines away as he nosed down with his finger curled around his gun trips.

His tracers wove their pattern above the BT-4 and he eased his stick forward a little more. Machine-gun bullets pounded up through the wings and fuselage of his Lancer. But he held his guns straight on the tail—wide open. He saw the man in the after gun cockpit crumple up and collapse. Then his bullets tore into the bridge and the revolving gun turret above it. He saw Slip Ogden crumple over the one-pounder and he felt a tremendous surge of exultation.

He knew now that nothing could stop him as those four red-and-black fighters pounced on him from above. For a moment he took a terrific concentration of their fire. Then he hung his Lancer on its props and took it upstairs.

He saw Shorty slash across the rear of one of the diving ships and pump his bullets into the pilot. He saw the pilot jerk upward out of his seat and then fall back as his ship zoomed straight up and over on its back.

Then he was back in the fight with the fierce joy of fighting an enemy who should be destroyed. He saw the terror-stricken faces of the passengers of the *Bitsi Maru* as he brought the Lancer around on one wing tip and poured bullets into a red-and-black fighter that was going away. But he wasn't going away fast enough. Bill's stream of lead literally tore the pilot's head from his shoulders and the ship plummeted toward the sea.

There were only two of the biplanes left now. But they did not peel off and run as Bill had expected them to. They came storming in on Shorty to get him in a cross fire.

Shorty rolled his Snorter out of range as Bill got the first one under the sights of his cannon. He fired a burst of five explosive shells that detonated on the red-and-black fighter's engine housing. The ship became a ball of black smoke, streaked with orange flame, as it plunged out of the fight.

At the same instant Shorty came up underneath the sixth and last one to pour death into its vitals.

The nose dropped and it joined its brothers in the Pacific as the passengers and crew of the *Bitsi Maru* screamed their joy to the heavens.

BILL BARNES, Red Gleason, Shorty Hassfurther and the irrepressible Sandy sat in the captain's suite of the *Bitsi Maru* an hour later. They had checked the bomber and found that they could fly it back to Alaska for repairs.

"That," the captain of the *Bitsi Maru* said, flashing his white, even teeth, "was a most beautiful bit of flying."

"It had to be," Bill said. "But what does it get me? Both my ships and my men are wrecks. They're scattered all over the Aleutian Islands and Alaska. It will cost me a small fortune to fix' up the BT-4, the Lancer, and Sandy's Eaglet—to say nothing of my head."

"Your head didn't hurt as much as your ego. Bill," the grinning Sandy said. "You were afraid you were going to be taken for a sucker."

"Well," Bill snapped, "wasn't I?"

"Until the end—when it counted," the captain said. "My owners will be only too glad to more than recompense you for your time and the damage to your planes."

"That," Bill said, "will help. But don't think we came out on the long end because of my efforts." His eyes swept the faces of his men with an expression of pride. "I would have been a prime sucker if my men hadn't been behind me every minute. Shorty and Sandy pulled the fat out

of the fire." He got to his feet and his eyes were shining. "Now we can get back to our work and forget this thing."

"Say, Bill," Sandy said, his freckled face spotted with grime and smoke from his machine gun, "I haven't had a chance to tell you I've got to lay over a few days in Alaska. I got something to do up there."

"You've what?" Bill said, looking at him suspiciously.

"I met a couple of Eskimos at Flat," Sandy said. "They're going to take me up in the northeast, shooting."

"Shooting what?" Bill growled.

"Reindeers from the air," Sandy said.

"You better look out or your pal, Santa Claus, will give you hell!" Shorty Hassfurther said—when he could stop laughing.

### **Air Trails – March 1938**