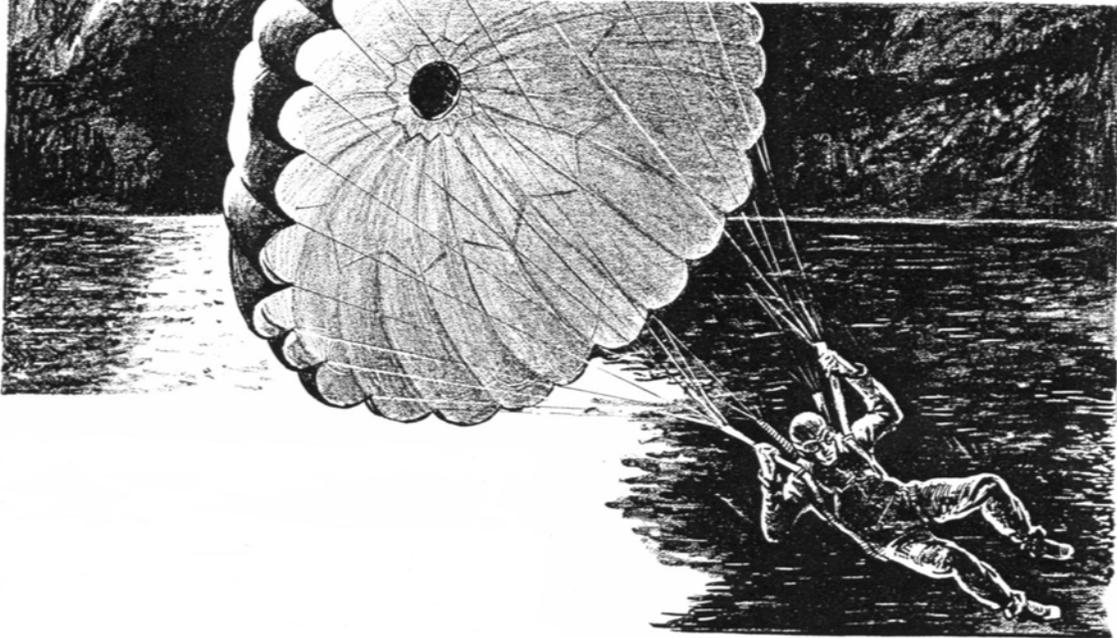




SHROUD LINES

By John DuBarry



BLACKIE MURDO unfastened the safety belt and took the heavy wrench from inside his coat. He stood up, straddling the control stick. The slip-stream pushed at him. He leaned against it and raised his arm. With all his strength, he struck at the man in the front cockpit. The blow crushed the back of the man's neck, but savagely he struck again. He caught at the sagging shoulders and straightened the body in the seat. Panting, he drew back and set the stick—flung the wrench over the side. It shone once, far down, in the hazy moonlight and was gone. Blackie Murdo stared after it through his goggles. Then, clutching the cockpit edge, he

lowered himself stiffly over the side, hung there for a moment, closed his eyes, and let go.

A sob filled his throat as his fingers reached into soft nothingness.

One—

Behind tight-shut eyes he listened to the silent sound of the word. Yes. Yes! Count——! *Two*. Would it ? It had to. To ten. Then it had—*three*—to open. It had to. The ring. Where was the—— Where, where, where? If he couldn't—— Four—five! No breathing until—— Suffocating. Dying. Hands wouldn't find—— Six——

Convulsively he tore at his coat breast, seized something, pulled. Nothing happened. He opened his mouth, to gulp. Then violent bands snatched his legs and a gun-shot boomed- above him.

He felt himself hanging.

The night-misted horizon rocked before his opened eyes. Breathing in desperate gasps, he looked down at the steely sheen of the sea, at the white line where it ended against the black land mass of the Florida Keys. Straining upward, he saw the great billow of silk. He moved his arms wonderingly. A ring, with dangling line, was in one hand.

It was quiet all around—real quiet, except for the pounding of his heart. All suped up—because it was his first jump. It'd be his last, too. Guys did it for fun; they were nuts. Never again.

Blackie Murdo looked down beneath his swaying feet. Air—just thin air—two thousand feet of it. A return of the panic he had felt when falling hollowed his stomach, and he

dropped the ring and grabbed the taut canvas straps overhead. They were firm as iron. Everything held. He was O. K.—safe. His aching lungs relaxed in a sigh.

It was kind of nice, even. He kicked his feet a little_ standing on nothing, but safe as a kid in its cradle. Space all around you. The land and the sea didn't seem to get any closer. Only a little breeze coming up, tickling your nose like you wanted to sneeze, to show you were falling.

How long would it take? Couple of minutes? It could take longer; he didn't care now. He was beginning to enjoy it. Inside him something grew, expanded. He felt good. The warm summer night was like wine. The moon was slipping in and out among cotton clouds. Floating free—like he was.

Blackie Murdo, for the first time in his evil life, knew the exhilaration of poetic feeling.

It was so peaceful. No coffee grinder swinging a prop in front of your face. He could hear it—way off. He peered into the sky. The 'chute had pivoted, facing him toward the sea. He kicked and twisted, but couldn't get around. Probably wouldn't see it anyway—a black speck, no riding lights.

Still going strong, though. Carrying one dead G-man. Sounded sweet, too. Five hundred horses, and never a balk. Shame to ram that sweet-running mill into the ground. Shame to wash out the Speedwing—flying itself hands off in a shallow power glide. And all going to pot, to make a funeral for one lousy Federal dick!

Blackie Murdo spat downward. The sea looked a little nearer.

But it would make a funeral for himself, too. He grinned, thin-lipped, into the gentle breeze that caressed his face. Oh, he was smart—smarter than Martinez, the dumb heel. Martinez, biggest dope dealer in Havana, had fallen for the guy. Probably in the can by now. Sold him a big order and wanted him flown over to the States with his load of the stuff. Right to the regular drop, too, where the boys could help him.

A rich peddler, huh? Some clever tailing, two pesos for a copy of the cable he'd sent, and a quick frisk of his hotel room had shown him up. An undercover man!

So what? The information the guy had wired washed the whole ring up. It was fly him, or take it on the lam forever.

So he flew him. And how! Tossed away a good plane and engine, but it was worth it. The wreck, and the parachute floating on the water, would spell accident.

Conked motor, they'd call it maybe. Nobody would look for Blackie Murdo any more. Blackie Murdo would be written off as dead.

The sea was getting nearer.

He grasped the straps again and pulled himself up a little to ease the cramp in his thighs. A mile swim, or a mile and a half. Cut and fray some of the shroud lines with his knife first so it would look like a natural break, like the 'chute had fritzed. They would think sharks had got the corpse. Sure. But those babies wouldn't bother him while he was alive and kicking. He would take it easy, hide out ashore while his clothes dried, and to-morrow thumb a ride north with some tourist. Then a new name. He had plenty of money. He'd

need a new pilot license. Take flying lessons from some hick to make it look good. That would be a laugh!

Motor drone crept into 'his hearing, cutting off instantly the giddy, racing mind-pictures.

What ship was *that*?

He scanned the shadowy sky, while his heart began thumping again. Somewhere, the plane was coming closer. It—sounded like——

Then a small black shape drifted across a cloud gap—and was gone. But it was there long enough for him to recognize it.

It was his own plane.

He stared after it while everything inside him seemed to become still. Then his heart picked up, only slower and steadier, and he let out a long breath.

Just that dead guy riding around. He must have slumped sideways and bumped the control stick—banked her a little—made a big circle. Heading for land again.

That was O. K. Getting faint now. She'd hit this time. Better this way, even, than a straight glide—bring the wreck nearer the shore. She'd lost altitude.

He, too. The sea was closing up on him. It wouldn't be long now.

He could make out the silvered tips of the moon path on the long, gentle swells. He was going to get his feet wet. Yeah—a real high dive, this was! Blackie Murdo, champ diver of the Atlantic——

Well, the Chinaman—— But that fat Chink must have hit hard. Boy, that must have been a smack! Six thousand feet, or was it eight?

Blackie Murdo frowned, trying to remember.

That was the only time he'd been in a jam. Those Coast Guard amphibians he could leave like they was back in the hangar. But that night—it was dark—they had run in a fast navy fighter on him. It looked bad for a while. He dumped the Chink quick—upside down— and out. But he didn't need to, the way it ended. He lost them. Got away.

He was traveling now. He could see the swells spreading apart as they grew.

That Chink sure must have splashed hard. Gave a shriek when he left that died away quick. Boy—— Dark now. Moon behind a cloud.

Blackie Murdo clenched his hands as the shriek of the Chinese met his ears. His eyes jerked through the air around him. It kept on. It was above him. In the 'chute——

He tilted his head and saw the black hole of the air vent in the center. The air going through—— That made the noise. All the way down it had been there, -he remembered. He really heard it now for the first time. That damn Chink——!

He didn't feel so good. Lonesome out here. Better if moon—— Dead guys, riding the air, yelling in his 'chute—— Nuts to that! Better get ready. It was coming up fast.

Clamping his hands on the straps overhead, he went rigid as he listened to the drone of a motor.

Coming back. It was coming back. Something was wrong. It should be inland. It should have crashed.

The stiff must be leaning on the stick——

Louder. Flying low. It was going to land out here somewheres. This wasn't what——

The moon slid into clear sky and laid a glittering carpet along the sea. In the dim, ghostly light, the biplane roared in a sweeping arc.

He watched it with widening eyes. It was screwy. It was heading toward him——

Blackie Murdo gripped the straps and tugged frantically. Then he writhed and thrashed like an animal trapped. He began to rave in hysterical gibberish at the lines that lowered him, swaying, while the engine thunder grew louder and louder and the moonlight glimmered on the whirling prop disk, bearing down on him.

Then his mouth sagged open and his throat tensed, but the scream never came. ...