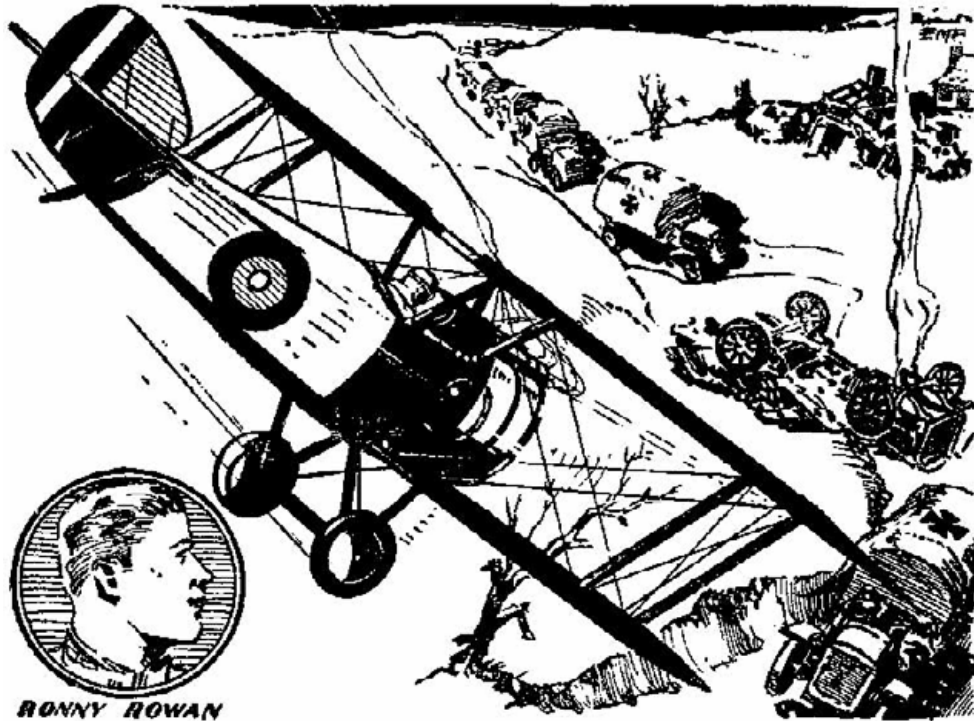


His Superior Officer's Secret, Brought Finally into the Light, Alters the Bitter Grudge of Captain Ronny Rowan!



Ronny blazed at the train of trucks

The Colonel's Answer

By ARCH WHITEHOUSE

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RONNY ROWAN never expected to become a flight commander—a captain. He had never thought much about it, especially after he found himself posted to No. 74 and discovered they were flying Camels. He found he had other worries beside rank.

Worry number one—a large juicy worry—was Colonel Hiram Nolan, "Punch" Nolan to the lesser lights of the Fourth Wing. Nolan was not many years older than Ronny Rowan, but he had been out early with a Limey outfit behind Lens, and he had stopped a Spandau slug in the seat of his whipcord breeches while doing a trench-strafting show.

That was it—trench-strafting and low-altitude shows.

"If you want to find out what sort of stuff you have in your outfit," Punch Nolan would bark,

"send 'em on a trench-straft. It won't take long."

Punch Nolan was trench-straft crazy.

That's how Ronny Rowan became a flight commander. He was the only one who continued to come back; and if you wait long enough, you'll find yourself leading five other Camel pilots, with two green streamers fluttering from your tail.

CAPTAIN ROWAN wheeled his pack of sky hounds around over Thourout, about fifteen miles inside the Jerry lines. Slim Blaine had the single streamer. Cocky Ward and Frank Warden were just behind him, taking his prop blast on their inside wing tips. Jock McPherson, a Peterson Scot who had left his old man's woolen mill to shift for itself, edged up to Blaine and Blotto Thompson, and took up the outer corner.

Ronny wanted them to complete the turn and close up again. They were terribly green. Couldn't make tight turns in formation yet. Only when there was a Limey outfit in the air nearby. They weren't going to be shown up by any Limey crowd.

They finally came in again and took up the formation. Ronny Rowan flipped a signal and they closed in tighter. He knew what they were thinking. This was the second strafe they'd been on today. The sanctity of tight formation until they got to the Jerry balloon line. Then there was the red light from Ronny's Very pistol—the signal to break up and raise the devil.

It sounded good. It read swell on the orders, but it was quite another thing when you really left the mob and went strafing. You feel like you did the first time someone kidded you to try a jackknife off the twelve-foot board—only worse.

"Just because we got a balloon a week ago," Ronny growled again, "we get this show regularly. Why don't he send 'A' Flight on it once in a while? No, always 'C.' And 'B' has never done one. Always high offensive patrols playing dry nurses to a flock of DH bombers who can take care of themselves. Pretty soft for 'B'."

Ronny never learned that at Phillips-Exeter and his literature professor would have swallowed his store teeth had he heard him. But that's what war and Camels do to you in time.

He let them creep in again and gave the sky above an eyeful of look-see. Nothing upstairs—so far.

He recalled what Nolan had said to him over the Flight phone. Something about a counteroffensive. Had to be stopped until the British divisions could get a rest after the big March show. Poor devils had been at it for four years. That seemed an awful long time to Ronny, and yet somehow he could not make it jibe with so many trench-strafing shows. Besides, it couldn't seem any longer than the three weeks he had been out here.

"Nail everything that moves, shoots or holds gas," Punch Nolan had said. "We've got to stop that concentration of troops or they'll be through to the Channel this time."

"Let 'em have it," Ronny had mentally argued. "Filthy place, the Channel—what I have seen of it. Fish heads floating about, orange skins and stench."

But he said nothing. Nolan went on:

"Your mob is the only one up here that has the

nerve to do it, Rowan. I think it is your profanity. But no matter, you've got to go again. Everyone else is bunged up—casualties and undercarriages."

"Yes, sir," Ronny had answered stiffly. He was still unused to being a captain.

The Camel flight eased along taking the concussion from the Jerry Archie bursts. It made them dance and the smoke was acrid. Once it made him sick. That was on his second patrol, but nobody bothered to mention it and the greaseballs washed it off the tail-plane without comment.

There were the balloons. Just ahead. Four of them in a row. Nosey devils in those baskets, too. Ronny never liked balloons. Something about the shape of them that reminded him of when he had his tonsils out. He reached down for his pistol and held it over the side. He pulled the trigger and the red light spat out. Then as he watched it something went past him—in flames!

"What the—"

The Camel had a big white "M" on the fuselage. What he could see of the fuselage. It was going down, spinning in a swath of yellow-red flame.

"Jock—McPherson!" gasped Ronny Rowan. "What the devil!"

He glanced up. Two Pfalz D-12s were climbing back after their sudden thrust. That cursed Very pistol did that. If he had not taken his eyes off his front to reach down for it, that would never have happened. He knew they had all been so intent on watching him reach down for it that they had relaxed their vigilance. And Jock McPherson had been taken out of the play.

"Swine! They know we have a job," he roared, knowing how silly it sounded. Of course they would be fools to slay down and try to tackle six Camels—especially that low down. You can't beat a Camel below twelve thousand.

The job faced him now. It faced them all and they had to answer the order. A red light from a Very pistol. They split wide and charged on for the balloons. The orders were to rush them with a long burst, slam on over and then nose down for the roads and mop up.

Ronny Rowan went at the bulbous bag and let drive three hundred yards too soon, but held his Bowden down all the way up until he could see the knots in the rigging through the Aldis sight. Then he yanked up and heard a dull plop.

The balloon burst into flame and seemed to writhe in agony as Ronny's wheels skittered over

the top.

Then there was another plop.

RONNY looked back and saw the tail assembly of a Camel trying to screw its way through the fabric of the burning balloon.

"Who was that?" Ronny squealed. "What fool did that?"

But there was no time to look now. He turned and saw a tangled mess of burning balloon, a part of a wing tip and the snaking flicker of the steel cable as it raced toward the lorry-winch.

Someone had flown into it!

There was no time to ponder now. The M.G. fire below was pattering on his panels. He treadled the rudder and almost banged into a flat spin. He fought her back and nosed down for the road. A train of trucks, covered with canvas. A line of grey-green insects—marching. Ronny Rowan snorted, bawled, and went at them.

He saw trucks turn over and an occasional flash of a Camel wing nearby. He stayed in the aerial hell until his cans rang hollowly and the guns no longer answered the Bowden call. Then he went home hedge-hopping all the way and planked down and ran up to the cab-rank.

There was one Camel there already. Blotto Thompson. A dull rumble behind him and he saw another marked "N" coming in—Slim Blaine. Slim always came home singing at the top of his voice. In ten minutes they saw another come fluttering in, one wing low, and bounce three times.

Cocky Ward stepped out over the side, kicked at the insignia on the fuselage covering and lit a cigarette.

Complete write-off!

SIX went out—two of the ships failed to return! McPherson and Frank Warden. Well, Warden made sure of getting that balloon, anyway. There's the guy who should have had the two streamers!

"Nice work, guys. Go get yourself sozzled. I'm going up and poke Punch Nolan in the nose. Get me a motorcycle, Sergeant!"

There was a strange, cold, cruel glint in Ronny Rowan's eyes when he said that. He was thinking of Warden, flying into that balloon.

"Come in, Captain!" Colonel Nolan snapped crisply.

Ronny Rowan bashed through the door like a

cyclone almost taking the map and three pictures off the wall.

"Look here Nolan," Ronny opened, "let's forget the colonel and captain business. I just lost two pilots on this fool show of yours."

For a minute, Punch Nolan went very red and the blue veins in his nose became very distinct. The big hook most certainly took on a more decided curve. He got up, walked around his desk and kicked the door shut.

"What happened?" he snapped, still much the military man.

"Everything! McPherson and Warden flew into a balloon! The rest of us crawled back on fabric and bare spars. Lieutenant Ward landed with his undercarriage shot to bits and spread himself all over the field. What the devil do you think you're doing with my men, Nolan?"

"This is very irregular, but necessary, Captain," Nolan replied reaching down into a drawer and pulling out an inviting black bottle. "Take a swig of this and you'll feel better."

"I don't want your damned liquor! I don't touch it! That's what's the matter with you old washouts up here at Wing. Guzzle this stuff and think up bright ideas for us to carry out."

But Ronny took the bottle and regarded the hole where the cork had been. The colonel looked at him sympathetically.

"I can understand how you feel, Rowan," he was saying, "but there is a war on. You can't deny that, you know."

"Shut up, Nolan!" Ronny roared wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "Let me talk!"

"I'm perfectly willing—providing you let me say something when you get through."

"You'll let me say what I think?" Ronny barked, half choking this time.

"Go ahead, but that's the stipulation. I say one thing, when you get through!"

Ronny did something with the bottle again and caught his breath.

"All I want to say is this, Nolan. We're not going out again on any of your damned trench-strafting patrols until we get replacements and a reasonable amount of time to work them in on our side of the line."

Nolan nodded and watched the bottle.

"You're making plain flying infantrymen out of us! We're getting trench feet."

"I know it!" almost screamed Nolan. "Now go

on!”

Ronny wiped his mouth again with the back of his hand.

“You keep us down so low, we got vines growing up the blasted undercarriages,” he barked. “We really need mud-guards over the wheels! We know more about the back areas than the balloon observers who have nothing to do but sit in a wastepaper basket and squint through binoculars!”

“Go on!” Nolan nodded.

“Our damned altimeters would bust off if we went above four thousand feet. Even they couldn’t stand it. You sit here, guzzling black and white, while we go out and bash ourselves into Jerry barbed wire and balloons. Trench-strafig!”

He got his breath and did something with the bottle again.

“Go on,” Nolan nodded, his arms folded across his chest.

“I’ve always wanted to tell a guy like you, things like this, Nolan. You can have my bars and send me up to the slots. At least we’ll get a break up there. You can die with someone near you and say something. You’ve got no one up there to talk to when you’re going out. That’s trench-strafig, Nolan!”

“You’re saying plenty now.”

“Shut up. I’m not through yet. This is damned good stuff, Nolan, if it’s whiskey. Is it?”

“Go on, Rowan!” Nolan barked. He was getting redder.

“That’s all there is to it. We’re not going back again today, Nolan. We’re not going back again tomorrow! We’re not going back for a long, long time. We lost two men today—damned good men! They were both too good for guys like you to even lick their boots. McPherson went down a flamer and Warden hit a balloon. He probably went down in that flame all tangled up, Nolan. And do you know what they do when a guy is tangled up alive in a mess like that? Do you know, Nolan?”

“I—I think I do, Captain.”

“You think you do but you don’t! I’ll tell you what they do. They aim a machine-gun at it—at all the fire and wreckage—until the guy stops screaming!”

“I know all about that, Rowan, I knew that long ago. I saw them do it once,” replied the colonel slowly. “Warden flew into a balloon, eh?”

“Smack into it! I guess he wanted to make sure.”

“Warden was a good man, Rowan. He should have had your streamers, you know.”

“I know that. He had more hours in than I. What did you have against him?”

“You were a better leader, Rowan. Warden needed someone like you up front. You see, I know something about trench-strafig. I got mine on one of those shows behind Lens.”

“You knew? You have been on one? And you sent us out every day to face that?” screamed Ronny. “I’m sorry, sir, I’d forgotten. It’s different now—Jeez! This bottle’s empty! Who drank it all?”

“You did, you young squirt!” Punch Nolan smiled. “And now that you’ve had your say let me have mine. I’ll write it on this piece of paper. And remember. I know what you have been up against. Archie, M.G. fire, balloon cables and flaming onions. You can’t tell *me* anything about it.”

HE gave Ronny another black bottle and then scrawled something on a strip of paper and handed it over.

Ronny put the bottle down and glanced at what was written on the strip of paper.

“Jeez, Colonel. I didn’t know. That took nerve. When do you want us to go again?”

“There’ll be four more Camels ready for you when you get back. They’re fueled and loaded. You’ll rake that sector again until it’s too dark to find it. That’s all, Captain!”

Ronny Rowan drew himself up into a stiff salute, clicked his heels and said: “Glad to, sir!”

He left with a stiff slow step and Colonel Punch Nolan turned and stared at himself in a glass hung on the side wall. He realized for the first time what the war had done to him and that it was taking its toll.

Four Camels raced away into the low glow of the afternoon. Ronny Rowan was up front and Slim Blame took up the rear point. They were gorged with .303 and also 20-pound Coopers.

“Frank Warden flew into a balloon,” Ronny was saying all the way up. “He should have had my bars. He had more time in than me, but the colonel—bah!”

They raced across the slag heaps at Lens and battered their way through a curtain of flaming onions. Greenish-sizzling balls of death chained together and coming up so slowly and yet so accurately. They turned behind Montigny and

headed north to cut in behind their targets.

The blue Fokkers planted at Courries came up to stop them but Ronny Rowan blasted his way through the first two that got off. Slim dropped down and nailed another before it could get off the airdrome. It rolled over on one wing tip and went up in smoke.

COCKY WARD held a spot behind Rowan's tail and they S-turned to wait for Slim. Then they shot off again, zipping along the canal toward Lille and found six Limey S.E.5s taking on a dozen two-seaters. They plunged into that mess and waited until the S.E.s were well set and then roared on again for Thourout.

"The colonel's a game guy considering everything," Sonny mused as he picked out his sector. "Takes stuff to send men on a show like this. It must be hell, sitting back there, wondering who will come back."

They got Ronny's red Very light and closed in.

Down they went; a diamond of death. The Coopers spun out and the Camels jerked with the release of the load. Then they found the concentration slot and poured it to them. Ronny saw flat chalk-white faces staring up at him. The M.G. from below swept up and enshrouded them, but somehow they hurtled on in spite of it.

The Jerry-armored Rolands swept down but they ignored them and escaped on their throttles, pouring sweeping bursts into the sap-heads, M.G. posts and communication trenches.

They wheeled and blocked out the Rolands with a tight charge and saw two come together as they tried to open up and let them through. Ronny screamed and remembered Frank Warden. There was an ammunition train crawling along a sunken road that led into Estairs-le-Bas.

A beautiful ammunition train! Warden would have loved that train. They swept down on it and opened again. The Coopers on the port wings went out and spun down, hurtling destruction.

They saw wheels, bodies, chunks of motors and white crates go up in a mad tangle. Ronny cleared in time to avoid the blow-up that followed. He nosed down on the light trucks ahead and picked out a mobile Ack-Ack lorry. He swept after it, his wings fanning the crumpled tower of a church.

He pressed everything he had and the first truck raced into the village, thundered up the steps of a building and crashed through the wide doorway.

Ward completed the job with his last Cooper. A corner of the building went to its knees like an old man and the lot foundered and toppled into the street.

Rowan turned and looked his mob over. He gasped! A Camel was climbing like mad. The tail fluttered and the elevators floated away like two dizzy kites. The Camel rolled over, burst into flame and nosed down hard and smashed into the tower below.

Smash!

That was the last they saw of Slim Blaine.

For what seemed hours they kept it up, returning to the advance emergency drome at Herzeel for more Coopers and ammo. It was dark when they hammered the last burst home and splashed a pill-box from the rear. They saw it go up when Ward's last Cooper fanged into the rear aperture. Ronny fired his white light and said:

"That's all, Colonel. There ain't no more. We gave all we had."

They turned home. Rowan, Ward and Blotto Thompson.

They found the flares they had put out for them. There was no question of their being tired this time. They were literally lifted out and slid straddle-legged down the sides of a stepladder. Oil-streaked, pitted with Cordite. Their hands would not stay put. They dithered and quaked until someone handed them a black bottle.

"Cripes!" one of the mechs said, "even Rowan drank that time."

They staggered away, arm-in-arm, toward the black outline of a Nissen hut. Ward tried to sing but cackled instead. Thompson was crying, openly crying, and enjoying it. Ronny Rowan burned his nose trying to light a cigarette.

"All—all I kept saying up there," gagged Wardie, punctuating his words with his free hand, "was what in hell made you take us again! You said you were gonna punch the colonel's nose. I'm tired—an' you took us off again, Ronny."

"I came back, didn't I, an' ordered you up again. Trench-strafig, eh? Funny that, eh, Cocky old boy?"

"What made you do it, Ronny?" pleaded Cocky Ward, as they flopped on rickety beds. "Why, I ask?"

"He—the colonel, wrote this on a paper, after I bawled him out. I—I think I bawled him out, anyway. It was about Frank Warden. He wrote this.

You read it.”

BLOTTO THOMPSON grabbed at the paper, crawled across the floor on his hands and knees and read under the glow of the tin stove:

Frank Warden is my brother. He took another name, so that no one would say he was getting anywhere on pull. He was queer that way—and I loved him for it. I could have used

my influence, but didn’t. And it took all the will I had to send *him* trench-strafig.

Nolan.

“My God!” Blotto Thompson said hoarsely.

“Jeez! What a soldier!” gasped Cocky Ward.

“And we think we have a tough time trench-strafig,” whispered Ronny Rowan, rolling over.