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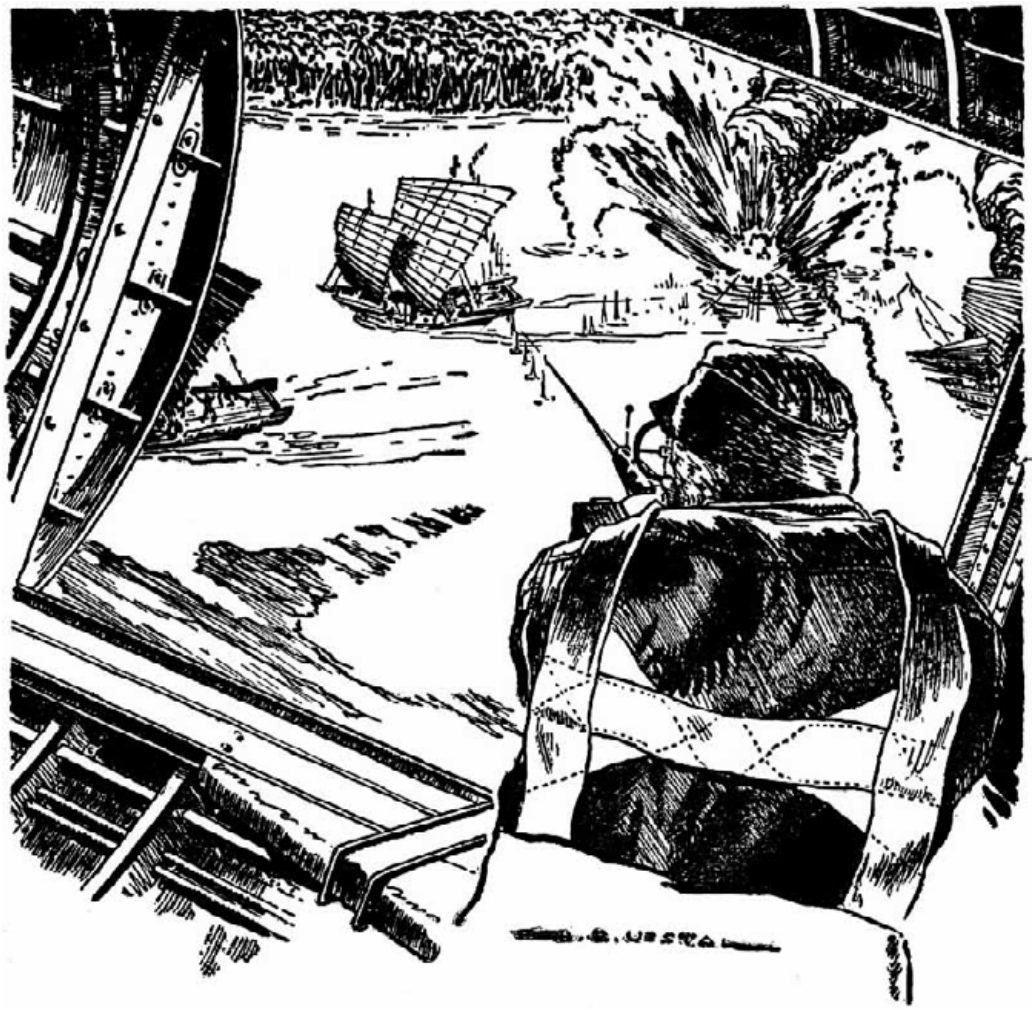
JINX RUN

By SCOTT SUMNER

"Never volunteer for Mission 13," they warned. "It's bad luck." But Hash did. And over Amoy, even the green correspondent could see that they would never get back.



I tripped the trigger, and tracers lined splashes across the harbor.

AS AN AAF soldier-correspondent I was strictly excess baggage on this mission, and I was mighty glad the little tail gunner had crawled back into the waist to keep me company. But when I saw him squinting ominously at the port engine, I felt the first rumblings of something uncomfortable deep in my stomach.

"Anything wrong?" I yelled. I had to yell; you could run a boiler factory in a B-25 and not notice it.

"Pilot just called me," he shouted back. "He thinks number one prop kicked the runway on take-off. We're nose heavy from all the extra guns and ammo. If it did get chipped, the vibration could tear the engine off."

He seemed to take it quite calmly, and his shrug suggested that when the engine fell off, then he'd start worrying. Airmen are like that. So, absorbing some of his confidence, I smiled and shrugged back at him. I knew something of his background, as a matter of fact, his squadron Public Relations Officer had suggested I interview him, but I wanted to get acquainted with him a little more casually and naturally, first.

He was small, slender and quick-moving. He had bright, black shoe buttons for eyes and a ready, if somewhat toothy grin. His name, incidentally, was long and polysyllabic—the kind that stops a roll-calling First Sergeant cold. Everybody just shortened it to "Hash" and let it go at that. I remember thinking that "Hash" was about as U.S.A. a name as you could give a man.

So I smiled, and shrugged back at him and said: "Anything I can do?"

"Don't think so, Cap," he said, shaking his head. "Unless you want to set up the flak suits."

He was smart, too, you see. He knew that I wanted to keep myself busy so I wouldn't have to think too much about our target. Only an hour ago I'd watched the armorers nurture all the guns with nickel steel; nose turret, waist and tail. After that, they put rockets in the wing tubes. We were to fly this mass of destruction all the way to Amoy Harbor and throw as much of it as possible into a train of coastal junks. They'd be putting out for Fort Bayard near the Indo-China border just about the time we'd arrive. So Intelligence said, and we had to take their word for it.

But one thing about which they didn't have to remind us was Amoy's flak. You heard about it all over China, and in India and Burma, too. Variously, it was described as so thick: "You could stick a cigar out of the plane and light it on an explosion," or "if your engine conks, you could just land on the flak, itself." Intelligence had understated a bit and told us that enemy planes would be very unlikely, but that ground fire might tend to "hamper the operation considerably."

Looking for the flak suits, then, was a job I tackled with a fair amount of enthusiasm. I poked around over the closed belly hatch first, searched the tail next, then came back and explored behind the radio desk. Hash was busy priming the waist guns. I tapped his shoulder.

"No flak suits," I said.

He turned, wrinkling his forehead at me. "You sure?"

I told him where I'd looked. Then he nodded slowly and snapped his fingers—small, sensitive fingers they were.

"They cleaned out the ship, today," he said. "They must've forgotten to put them back."

I watched him closely as he moved into the crawlway leading to the tail. I couldn't see his thoughtful frown, of course, but I knew it was there from the taut way he held his narrow shoulders.

A strange man, Hash. Out of the same biscuit tin as the rest, yet subtly, disturbingly different. And then I reflected on what I knew of his background, and wondered that he wasn't even more different . . .

AROUND HEAD popped out of the thin space over the bomb bays. It was Hibbard, the engineer and turret gunner. I grinned at him.

"Coming back to see how the other half lives, Sarge?"

He didn't laugh at my joke. I don't know, maybe it wasn't so funny anyway. He wriggled from the passageway, let himself down with about as much grace as an overloaded B-29, then wiped his flat nose with an oil-stained finger. He flicked his eyes back and forth, not letting them meet mine.

"Everything okay for you, sir?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks," I told him.

"You know how to handle the waist guns?"

I nodded. "I can shoot 'em. Won't guarantee to hit anything, though."

Officially I was being logged on the Form I as waist-gunner. Actually, I was taking a magnetic wire recorder along to try to describe and pick up some of the sound effects of the mission. The AAF sent correspondents like myself to all the battle fronts early in 1945 to report on air war for its official weekly radio program. Almost invariably the air crews were beautifully cooperative and there was never much of the barrier of formality between us and the enlisted men.

Because of that I could look at Sergeant Hibbard and say, as I did: "Come on, Sarge. What's on your mind? Spill it. You didn't squeeze yourself over the bomb bay just to ask how I was getting along."

He glanced momentarily toward the tail before he answered.

"Well, Cap'n," he said, "I just wondered if anything's gone wrong back here, too." There were shadowy ripples on his brow.

"Wrong? I don't think so. The flak suits are missing, that's about all."

"I thought so," he said, nodding his thick head. "He shouldn't have volunteered for this mission."

"Who shouldn't have?"

"Hash," he said, hefting his shoulders rearward. "I got a funny feeling about havin' him along."

"You've flown with him before, haven't you?"

"Sure . . ." he said, drawing the word out and

then letting it hang in midair.

"From what I've heard he's a top-notch gunner, too," I pointed out.

"It's not that," he said. He was shifting his feet uncomfortably, scraping one big G.I. brogan against the other. "You see, this is Hash's thirteenth mission."

I looked blank. "So what?"

"Thirteenth," he answered. "Don't you get it? Bad luck."

"Propwash," I said.

He was persistent. "We almost didn't get off the runway. The prop may be nicked. Weather says it's scattered cumulus from here to Amoy, but there's a hell of a reasonable facsimile of a thunderstorm line about thirty or forty miles ahead. Now your flak suits are missing. That's too many things to go wrong right at the start."

"But how can you blame Hash? He had to fly his thirteenth mission sometime."

"Sure," he nodded. "But he didn't have to force it by volunteering. See what I mean?"

I clapped his shoulder. "Look, Sarge, forget it," I said. "Maybe Hash had a good reason for wanting to come along. Besides, Intelligence says there won't be any enemy fighters, so Hash is just supercargo like myself."

He shrugged then, and climbed back atop the bomb bays. I watched his wriggling feet disappear, then sat down at the radio desk and put the earphones on my head. Funny, a big, beefy guy like Hibbard being superstitious. Yet, it was usually these rough-and-tumble birds who had horoscopes tattooed on their chests and wept in their beer over sentimental songs. Thank Heaven, I thought, I wasn't superstitious.

And just to make sure I wouldn't ever be superstitious, I put my knuckles down on the radio desk and rapped wood.

THEN I heard words crackling in the earphones. "Pilot to waist, over." I answered and then the pilot came back:

"Scott, you and the tail gunner better hang on back there. We're going through a thunderstorm."

The pilot's name was Knudson and he came from Minnesota; he was incredibly young, blond and rawboned. I think North American's designer had him in mind when he conceived the B-25; that was how beautifully he handled it. He anticipated what I was going to say about the thunderstorm and added: "Guess weather slipped up this time. But these babies looked as though they formed orographically over the mountains and it's pretty tough to predict that kind."

"Roger," I said. "We'll hang on."

Hash dropped the K-ration and scrambled to his battle station

I went into the crawlway and inched back to the tail compartment to tell Hash. Combat missions were enough trouble, I thought sadly, without having to put up with weather, too. Tough luck, those thunderstorms. Tough luck. I stopped and scratched my chin. Tough luck? A jinx working? I shook my head. Luck, jinxes, black cats, witches on broomsticks. Nuts.

Hash, after I told him the news, followed me back into the waist. We moved about for a moment, settling ourselves, then sat. Almost immediately we hit the storm. I didn't have time to grab; the airplane went down and I went up. My head hit the top of the fuselage hard, when I came back again I grabbed the ammunition box for support. We began to whip all over the sky. Outside of the Plexiglas window there was nothing but milky grey stuff. I could feel my stomach turning over. I knew the edges of my jaws must have been getting green. I looked at Hash to see how he was taking it.

The son of a gun was grinning at me.

I steadied myself; by gum, if he could he casual I would, too. Maybe small talk would help, I thought. Just conversation—about most anything.

"Hash," I said, "what made you come along this trip?"

"Needed the mission," he said. His small black eye-buttons looked off to one side.

"There would have been another mission tomorrow. A milk run. And it would have counted just as much as this mission."

"Yeah, but I need all I can get," he said. His eyes dulled a little as though he were looking far off. He upped his shoulders in a faint shrug to show that he didn't particularly want to talk about it. I knew, then, why Hash seemed so different at times than the others. It was because communication with him wasn't quite the same.

In a war, you see, your men have got to be as standardized as your weapons. They've got to have the same reflexes, the same hungers, and even the same gripes. It makes all of their minds tick in pretty much the same way. Most of the time a grunt, or a couple of unprintable words will get across an idea that a philosopher would use a whole book to explain. It's one of the reasons soldiers will never fully explain to civilians what war is like.

Hash had been standardized with the rest since he'd joined the Air Forces, but it was his conditioning *before* that which prevented him from being completely like the others. Watching his eyes, I wondered if he couldn't be thinking about that odd past of his, right now. I wondered it he could be recalling a schoolyard bully who had given him a trouncing because of what he was. Or a good citizen jostling him out of line at the theater. Or a fraternity steadfastly passing him up at pledge time . . .

A sudden tattoo of hail on the plane's metal skin yanked me away from my reflections. I wondered if I couldn't get *something* out of Hash.

"What're you going to do after the war?" I asked casually.

He showed his white teeth, very even teeth, but a little too large for the rest of him. "Eat a cheeseburger," he said. "I'm sick of Chinese eggs and C ration."

"No," I grinned. We were on familiar ground again. "I mean—are you going to get a job?"

A broken shadow rippled across his face. "Have to finish school first," he said. "After that . . ." He drew his lips inward and bit on them gently. "After that I'll get a job—if I can."

"What do you mean, if you can? You're as good as the next guy, aren't you?"

This time his dark eyes swung on an azimuth with mine and stayed there. He spoke too softly for me to hear, but I could tell, from the movement of his lips that he said: "Am I?"

SUDDENLY there was no more stuffed cloud outside the windows, and the airplane had leveled. Hash and I both jumped to look. There was China down below, all right, endless green mountains and a vast mosaic of rice paddies. But which part of China was anybody's guess. I switched the interphone and called the pilot. "How're we doing, Knute?" I asked.

His youthful voice was hesitant. "Well, we're off-course, that's for sure. The navigator's trying to figure it out now. We may have to radio for a fix."

"Won't the Jap listening stations pick up our signal if we do?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I'm worried about. Damned if everything doesn't seem to be going wrong today."

I tried to keep the word "jinx" out of my mind, but it burrowed in just the same. I guess you get a little keyed-up and foolish about such things when you're on a mission. I looked at Hash and saw that he had started back for the tail again.

Some ten minutes later the order came to radio for a fix. I told Knute: "Roger," and then started to bat out the Morse on the Liaison transmitter. Secret receiving stations in various parts of China would pick up my C.W. on directional receiving antennas, then relay their figures to a central control station in Kunming. Control would plot these directions on a map and where all the lines crossed, of course, would be our position.

It seemed as though I waited for hours, actually it was only ten or fifteen minutes before the fix had been taken and Control's fist was chirping, sending me the data. I relayed it over the intercom immediately, then signed off. The Japs had receiving stations with directional antennas, too. I didn't want to stay on the air any longer than necessary.

Outside it had cleared completely. The sun glinted on our wings and the engines droned on. There was no hint, yet, that our nose-heavy takeoff had damaged the propellers. Below, a large river appeared, looping and winding like a dragon's tail. The green jungle carpeted away from it on either side, looking so soft that I felt I could have jumped into it without injury.

Then Knudson's voice came again: "We've got our position, now. We should reach the target in an

hour."

Suddenly Hibbard's voice, rough and hoarse cut in. "We can't make it, Lieutenant—we better turn back!"

"Turn back?" Knudson echoed. I could visualize him sweeping his eyes over the dash, checking the air speed, the oil, the manifold pressure. "What for? We're okay."

"Everything's gone wrong. We got a jinx on board. We'll never make it!" Hibbard sounded almost hysterical.

"What jinx?" asked Knudson, with a touch of impatience.

"It's Hash, sir. It's his thirteenth mission. He shouldn't have come."

Knudson said: "Don't be silly, Hibbard."

"But look what's happened—it proves it! A close takeoff; maybe a bad prop. A thunderstorm. No flak suits. Then we get lost and have to use the radio. They'll have every anti-aircraft gun in China waiting for us at Amoy."

"We're not turning back," Knudson said.

"I won't go on!" Hibbard's voice was rising. "I'll bail out, I'll . . ."

"That'll be enough, Hibbard!" The young lieutenant's voice had rime ice all along its leading edge.

There was a long pause and then Hibbard said quietly: "Yes, sir."

It was some time later that Hash returned from the tail. He had two boxes of K-ration in his hands and gave one to me. He sat down beside me using the canvas-covered frequency meter for a chair.

"Dinner ration," he said. "It's got the cheese in it. You like cheese, sir?"

I NODDED perfunctorily and kept watching him. We each took our trench knives, dug into the paraffin covered boxes and began to eat. We didn't speak, but it suddenly became apparent to me that we were having a conversation—a silent one. It sounds crazy, but you can do that on missions. If it had been in words, it might have gone like this:

"Well," I would have said. "Here we are on another one. I suppose you're thinking about the same things I'm thinking about. Wondering if we'll make it this time so we can get back to 'em."

"What things do you want to get back to, Cap?"

I might have spread my hands to cover up my inarticulateness. "Oh, you know. Steaks. Tile bathrooms with running hot water. Football games. Sunday dinner with the family."

"Sure, I know," he'd have answered. "But with me the memories are different. You know that. You know I wasn't brought up in your America."

I knew that, all right. I had snatches of Hash's past, some from the squadron P.R.O., some from casual bull sessions with his barracks-mates. I knew why Hash sometimes acted a little mysteriously according to their standards. Now I could almost hear these things from his own lips:

"There was the curio shop," he seemed to say. "I was only a kid and it hadn't occurred to me that anything could be wrong with a curio shop. But when I came home from the university that day there were men parading up and down in front of it carrying signs. The signs told everybody not to buy anything there. When I asked my father, he just shook his head sadly and sent me off."

He put a dagger slice of cheese on an energy biscuit and munched it thoughtfully. "That night they smashed the windows with bricks and helped themselves to the things inside. My father reported it to the police, but they couldn't do anything because the others were too powerful. Besides, some of the police were in sympathy with them.

"It wasn't long after that that they came to the house. A score of men, foaming with curses, elbows locked, faces a hot red in the light of the torches. They burned the house.

"I went to live with friends. I had to sneak through alleys on my way home from school. But they got me one night, tracked me down and found me. It wasn't as bad as it might have been. Everything healed in about six weeks and I've only got two or three scars. My parents weren't so lucky. They just found them in an irrigation ditch one morning . . ."

I nodded as though Hash had actually said these words to me. There was the essential difference; the rest of us were at war to keep things we had. Hash was at war to eliminate something from the world; something called Fascism, Nazism, Intolerance, the Devil—the name didn't matter much when you were on the boot end of it. Nor did the location . . .

The earphones abruptly were barking: "Target ten minutes off! Stand by!"

I nodded and gestured to Hash. He dropped his unfinished K-ration and scrambled to his battle station in the tail. I kept the earphones on my head and, stooping, removed the lid from my wire

recorder. My face fell apart in mid air—*I had completely forgotten to load the machine with wire spools; is would be impossible to record anything!*

THE THOUGHT I'd been fighting off all along made a sudden salient into my mind. *Jinx!* I don't know exactly why, nor am I too proud of myself now that I look back on it. Maybe the idea of a jinx offered an easy excuse for my own stupidity in not checking the wire spools in the first place. And while my reason insisted that the idea of a jinx was completely absurd, my subconscious kept hammering on the thing. The mission is jinxed—we'll never make it!

I spent the next few minutes busying myself with the waist guns, struggling hard to blot out the idea. It seemed like no time at all before the harbor, rivers fingering from it like tentacles, appeared below. We banked and started down.

There were tiny dots on it, ships and sampans, looking like water bugs, their wakes wiggling behind them. And just about that time the flak began to come up. There must have been fifty-seven varieties. White puffs and black puffs and tracer streaks. Some would burst just off the wings and then seem to streak away in the opposite direction as we moved past it.

Accurate? Either the Japs down there had uncanny director machines or they were reading the pilot's mind. It got so thick that I took to picking out patches of sky instead of flak puffs—there were fewer of them.

"There's the convoy!" called Knudson's voice excitedly. "Intelligence called it right—they're right down there at one o'clock!"

I looked as he dipped the wing; there were four junks slugging along in single file near the mouth of the harbor. They were so close together that we could get them on just one or two strafing runs. That is, if the flak didn't get us first.

"Let's go!" said Knudson, then, "I'll pull out to the left and you can let 'em have it from the waist and tail. You got that back there?"

"Roger," I said, and then heard Hash's thin voice from the stinger: "Got it, sir."

The floor under me dipped sharply and the horizon swung to a cockeyed angle. We started down. I gripped the gun handles and spraddled my legs. I doubted very much that I'd score a hit because my instruction in aerial gunnery had been confined to a couple of grunted remarks by the crew chief: "This is the safety catch, and these are the triggers and the red tipped ones are tracers." It didn't make much difference; the real fire power would come from the nose, and Hash and I were along on the very remote possibility that we'd be attacked by a Jap plane.

One of the black puffs suddenly blossomed not fifty yards from the wing tip. The ship rocked crazily and I heard fragments thunk into its sides. A jagged hole was abruptly there in the Plexiglas, inches from me. I felt my knees get weak.

We were getting into machine-gun range now, and the tracers from below were glowing, shivering pieces of worms coming in our direction.

Then the water came at us like a moving wall. The junks were ahead and I couldn't see them at the moment, but I knew what they'd look like flashing past as we banked away, and I made ready to fire. At that moment the whole airplane bucked and shuddered and I knew the nose cannon had been fired. The forward guns set up a noisy yammer.

We flattened our glide and the centrifugal force made an accordion out of me as my feet pressed hard into the floor. We slapped over on the left wing and started to climb. I glimpsed the junks, saw bluish smoke rising from them, and spurts of flame on their decks. I tripped the triggers; the gun jolted under my hand in three short bursts. My tracers fell far astern of the junks and made a forest of feather-lopped splashes in the harbor.

On top of my bursts I heard Hash's tail guns slobber away. I saw his slugs splatter the deck of the first junk and then crawl along to the others. I don't think one of them hit the water. That, I had to grin to myself, was real shooting.

I CAUGHT the head on silhouette from the corner of my eye first. It was still distant, and not much more than a blob over the horizon. I stared at it; my jaw dropped. The realization of what it was went through me gradually, like a chill. It came toward us with a terrible speed, a knife-edge wing and a circular cowling. I gaped for a full second before I could make myself think and act. And then I pressed my throat mike and said, a little hoarsely:

"Waist to pilot—Zero, nine o'clock high!"

I should have realized what had happened when I didn't hear the feedback of my own voice in the earphones. I must have been too excited to notice. I waited for a moment, got no answer, and then

repeated the call: "Zero—nine o'clock high!"

Still no answer. And then I looked at the intercom box, and the wiring and everything else. It hadn't been hit—it had just gone inexplicably wrong, as radio equipment sometimes will. Inexplicably? Could it have been the jinx—the same jinx that brought a Zero out of a clear blue sky when it was a well-known fact that practically no Zeroes were left in China?

We were skidding around, now, so that we could come in on a second pass on the junks. The Zero was steadily waxing fat in my sights. It wasn't yet time to shoot, but I threw out a burst, anyway, hoping to attract the attention of the men in the forward compartment. The tracers fell away in their peculiar, illusory curve.

And then the Jap fighter was only a few hundred yards away, head on. His wing guns would start to wink at any moment. The flak had stopped—they were relying on the Zero to shoot us down. I held my breath, chopped my back teeth together and squeezed the twin triggers. You could have put a small mountain in between where my tracers went and where the Zero was.

He let go a short burst from his own guns, and at that moment Knudson slapped our nose down for the second run on the target. The fighter rocketed overhead and out of sight. I jumped to the right waist window, but he was already out of range and turning back. . . .

The forward guns sounded again. I kept my eyes glued to the banking Zero, watched him bring himself about and behind us. I hoped that Hash would spot him in time—hoped until it hurt. The next few seconds dragged themselves out as though they were being tortured on a rack. And then, there was a harsh yammering from the tail.

We made our second pull-out on top of that and the floor pressed into the balls of my feet again. That was when a bright pinwheel of flame suddenly hurtled from behind and under the tail. As we banked, I could see it hit the water and send up a dizzy spray of smoke and steam. Goodbye, Zero. I let cubic yards of breath out of me in one monstrous sigh of relief.

The junks were already sinking, and I was very happy to see that we had begun to hightail. We got right down on the deck and ran from the renewed flak just as fast as we could. It wasn't until the endless mountains and paddies had been under us for nearly an hour that I could relax again.

Hash had come out of the tail and was sitting on the frequency meter.

"Brother," I told him, "that was close."

He nodded, grinning. "For a while I was almost beginning to believe I was a jinx."

"How'd you know about that?"

"I heard Hibbard on the interphone," he said. "I don't know—maybe we were jinxed to start. But it broke when they sent up a fighter instead of flak. Our chances were getting slimmer all the time, and when the ground fire stopped for that fighter it gave us just the lull we needed."

I nodded. "And if the interphone hadn't gone out, I'd have warned the pilot, and we wouldn't have made our second run . . ."

Then I leaned back a little and looked squarely into his dark, shoe-button eyes. "But, tell me—why did you insist on taking this trip, your thirteenth mission? No shrugging, now—what's the straight dope?"

THE SAME faraway focus that had reflected his thoughts of the looted curio shop, the burned house, and the two lifeless bodies in the ditch, appeared.

"There's no time to waste," he said. He spoke slowly, prospecting for words. "I've got to do all I can, fly every mission I can possibly fly. Not for the medals—although even they might mean something when I go back and try to fight for my people. The idea is, that I've got to earn the right to fight; earn it so completely, that anybody can recognize it. See what I mean?"

I saw it all right. The end of the war would mean no more fighting for the rest of us but it would just be the beginning of Hash's fight.

What's that? You're asking me if Hash came from Germany or Italy or someplace like that? No, sir. I thought you knew. He came from the United States of America, just like you and me.

His full name is Hashimiro Takasachi, and he's third-generation Japanese-American. But we called him Hash—about as U.S.A. a name as you can give a man.