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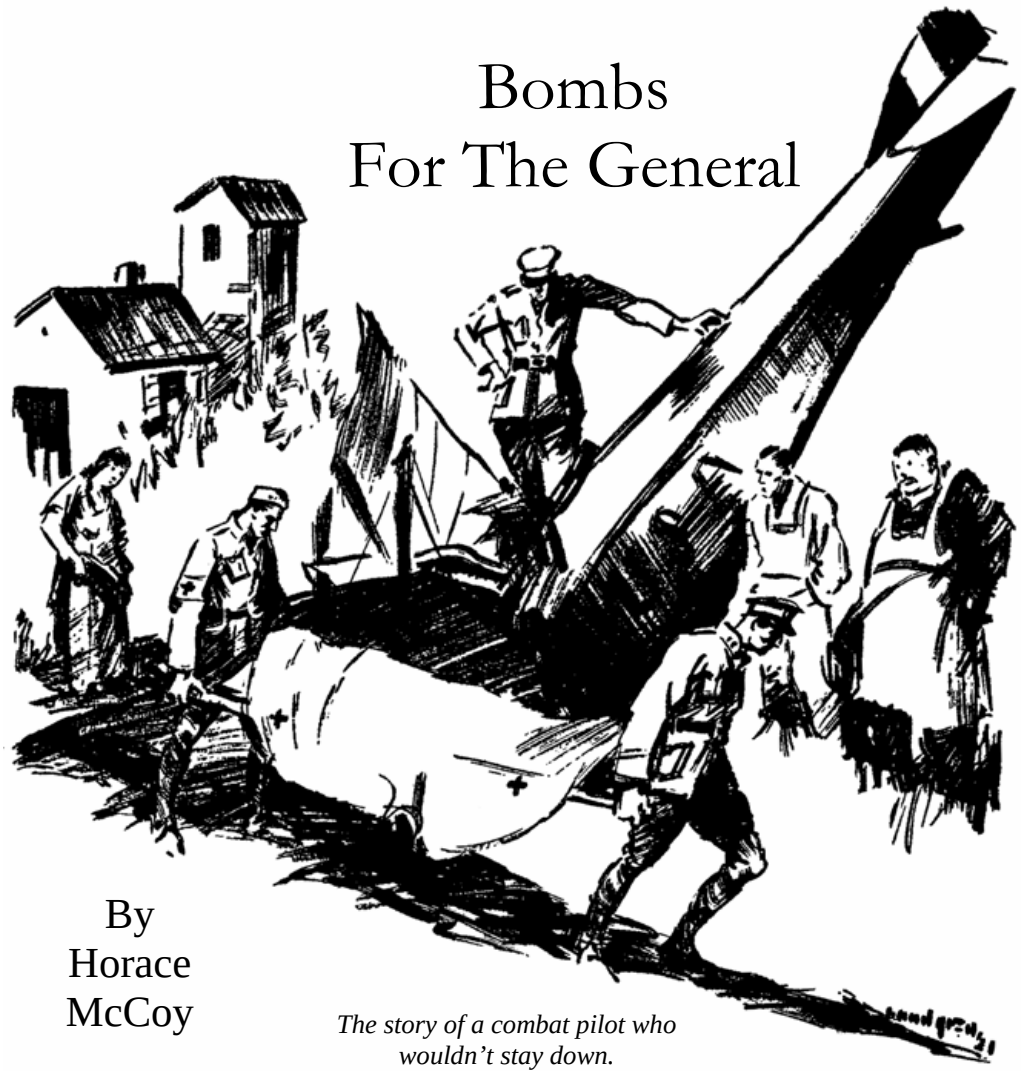
Bombs For The General



By Horace McCoy

The story of a combat pilot who wouldn't stay down.

THERE was no high tribunal on the Toul front in the early summer of '18 to pass judgment on whether or not you had the stuff to stick in combat work. You had one chance, just one, to make good and *bang!* as fast as that it was over. If you stood the test you had long hours, a wracking grind and perhaps a hero's death to look forward to; if you failed you went back. It mattered not how swell a guy you were nor whom you knew at G.H.Q.—back you went.

Quite a few were going back in those days. They lacked some sort of spark or callousness, something was missing. Few had the inclination, nobody the time, to help them discover what it was.

Up in Flanders the harassed Haig had just issued his desperate "backs to the wall" order; from Arras to Luneville the Boche were raising hell and out on the Somme somebody had pot-shotted Richtofen and his triplane into immortality. Thus inspired, the Allies banged into the air with every crate they could muster—the Baron was gone—recklessly determined to drive Jerry out of the sky . . . and at the Toul airdrome General Gerard and Billy Mitchell were hanging the green and red ribbon of the Croix de Guerre on Peterson, Meissner and a promising young lieutenant named Rickenbacker. . . .

Those cherished bits of bronze were the rewards of experience. Without that you couldn't hope to do much; and yet the attitude of the fighting pilots was strange, for they expected the green men coming up to have it. When you reported for duty you were expected to have had at least fifty hours on combat, or that was what you felt. Where did they expect you to get it? At birth? Out of a bottle of vin rouge? Where else? Certainly you couldn't get it at ground school. They gave you, Heaven knows, everything else—the works, then they transferred the responsibility of your soul to God and shoved you

off to the front.

And you came along, eyes sparkling, chin high, your boots drumming defiantly on the Rue Royale as you stopped over in Paris for what you were certain was the final look-see; your brain hummed a fierce litany to the memories of Guenemer and Chapman and Nimmie Prince and other stout souls who had gone west; and you clicked your jaws together and jumped off on the final lap swearing to show those dirty Huns a thing or two about air fighting.

Youth! High spirited, striding along the skies seeking a place to die! Never realizing, never caring much either, that experience was so vital.

SUCH a chap was Big George Dorman. He was tall and gangling and rawboned; he came from Texas where all horses buck and all men shoot. Now for fourteen months he had dreamed of nothing but air warfare. And he came equipped too, as well as any man could. When he rode the 'cognac special' out of Issoudon for combat duty he had a thorough knowledge of gunnery, meteorology; he knew the vagaries of Spads, Camels and Nieuports—knew them backwards and forwards and down through the middle. He backed this knowledge with as sturdy a heart as ever any crusader of any age knew.

For a warrior so well accoutered it naturally would be presumed success was inevitable. But it wasn't.

Dorman had failed.

Odd how a chap who lives so intensely for his first taste of actual war, who has run over it in theory a hundred times and more, odd how a chap that keen for service jams himself at the first opportunity.

Odd, too, that he should have at once been transferred back to Orly and made a ferryman, for there were scores up there; weary, tired men and men who simply had a bellyful of war—scores of them who would have welcomed such a change. But ferrying . . . gad, sirs, there was a job for you! Running tested ships up to the advanced airport and taking the crippled back to base. A job for an old man it was.

And yet here he was, Dorman, the big Texan who had come the four thousand miles from the Rio Grande to the Moselle to scrap the Huns—here he was riding the cockpit of a camber-splintered Nieuport 23 back to Orly while a hundred kilometers north . . .

Passing over Chaumont at five hundred meters he looked down on the great rectangular chateau that was Pershing's headquarters; and he visualized himself putting the bus down nearby and marching smack into the General's office and demanding action. He could almost see the surprise on Pershing's face.

"General, sir," he'd say; "I'm Lieutenant Dorman, late of Pursuit Group, one of the Ninety-Fourth. The first time in battle I funked and was sent back. Now I'd like to return."

General Pershing would (or would he?) put on his professional visage and say: "How'd it happen, Lieutenant?"

Well, no matter what the General would say, or wouldn't say, he'd get the story right there and then, truthfully, unembellished and with nothing overlooked. He might be offended, he might be amused and then there was a chance that he'd have some attaché throw the lieutenant out on an ear, but the story he would hear.

Two days (Dorman would begin) he'd been up when it happened. May nineteen was the date; dull, gray and misty. Atrocious flying weather but just the sort of weather you'd find around Toul in the early summer of '18. It looked like a day of no patrols, no work except for the alerts; a day when you could get together in the cubicles over several bottles and rub elbows with Campbell and Winslow and Lufbrey and listen to the masters. Oh, a green youngster could have done worse than draw this outfit!

But along about noon the mist blew itself on up towards St. Mihiel and the clouds lifted. The sky cleared and good visibility was restored. Dorman remembered Luf winking a shrewd eye at Campbell and saying:

"Well, Doug, it looks like work outside now."

And Campbell, delightfully intimate with the biggest name in A.E.F. flying, laughed and said: "Sure, somebody has to work to make up for all you gold-bricks."

Only Campbell was kidding. Of course, Luf wasn't really gold-bricking. He was down with a pretty high temperature, he was stretched out on his bunk. The bunk, if nothing else, proved his greatness for it wasn't a plank-bottomed, uncomfortable bunk over which you dropped a mattress and were content. No. Luf's bunk was made out of the rubber shock-absorbed wrappings

off defective undercarriages—and gentlemen that was luxury then.

Luf had his boots off, his blouse was unbuttoned and his Sam Browne belt was unhooked. He didn't look like the fellow whose name was in all the headlines back home. His hands were clasped behind his neck, his little mustache wiggled fraternally as he smiled. . . . Luf was forever smiling in a sort of futility, as if he sensed the finish.

Across his blouse were six ribbons in a double row, and one of them was unclasped and sticking out at right angle. Dorman remembered that; he was sitting on an empty five-gallon wine keg marveling at the indifference of the men who come to grips with death and for whom each moment may be the last. That ribbon, for example. Solid blue bar, it was; with thin red and white pipings at the ends. The D.S.C. And there it was about to fall to the ground. A lot Luf seemed to care.

Laughter and talk and jokes . . .

Silly sort of war, Dorman reflected. Damned silly. Like a play. Here gathered the great and the near-great to laugh and talk in raucous tones of women and leaves and leaves and women . . . and sometimes, (not often) of the narrow squeaks they'd had. Luf told them of what a hell of a show it was that day up at Rancourt, on the Peronne-Bapaume highway, when C-3, which was Guynemer's outfit, got in a mess and had to be helped out by Bert Hall, Pavelka, him and a couple of others out of the Lafayette.

"A great scrap," Luf had said. And then he had looked up at the little roof and went on. "I wonder if our kids'll read about it fifty years from now?"

And then he had laughed.

Indifferent. Hard. Cold-steel. Dorman wondered if this were necessary to greatness.

Then all of a sudden the sun popped out and drove a vermillion shaft through the window.

Everybody shouted. They knew what that meant.

"There it is! Up and at 'em in a minute, lads!"

Correct. With the scattering of the mists there was hunting to be done and in an hour the group was off in echelon formation. They took three new replacements over with them, just three. Too many new hands on one sortie limited the poaching and made the responsibility too great.

DORMAN stood at the tarmac and watched the flat-winged birds drive their way over the Woevre, his heart pumping torrents of blood against his temples and his palms wet with sweat. He felt that he was pretty close to something.

He stared into the sky, his thoughts off in the blue, unaware of anyone within a thousand miles. Then, suddenly, he looked around and there was Saufley, the little sergeant, first class, who could spot motor trouble before the landing gear was on the ground.

"What?" asked Dorman, for he was dimly conscious that Saufley had said something.

Saufley grinned. And when he spoke you knew he had done duty with the British.

"Bloody fine hunting they'll have," he said, looking up at the specks. Sergeants, first class with combat units, had a queer way of feeling when new replacements needed information. "J-2's across the line."

"Oh," Dorman said. He didn't know exactly what J-2 was. Saufley knew it.

"The Fifth group of the Fifth German army," he went on, kicking the dirt with his toe, as if to say he didn't envy the Ninety-Fourth's men. "The best, now that the bloody Baron has gone, I guess."

Dorman, however, was not awed. He said with elaborate contempt, "The bigger they are the harder they fall."

Saufley looked at him and grinned.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Dorman said. He drifted his eyes inside the hangar and saw three trim Spads in the shadows. "Those guys can't match Spads."

"Don't kid yourself," Saufley said. "That kind

of thinking'll get you hurt. Never done combat, have you?"

Dorman shook his head.

"I'm going over this afternoon," he said. He went on, "but I think I can handle myself all right."

"Sure, you can. But don't ever forget the other guy is pretty good or he wouldn't be up there. Lissen, I ain't one of these smart alecs who think it's clever to buddy around with the officers. But I wanna tell you not to underestimate the Boche. Them Germans ain't dummies." He shook his head and added, as if to himself, "Not by a damn sight."

"I know it," Dorman said, "just the same I'm anxious to get over with eight-one-nine."

"Good bus," Saufley said. "She's only had twenty hours and got the original linen on 'er. But the left gun is sorta temperamental." He started off inside the hangar and Dorman followed him.

A battle plane was life to Dorman, a bridge by which the distance to Elysian fields could be spanned, and he touched his Spad as if it were a living thing which could understand his fingertips. Once or twice he was stricken by self-consciousness as Saufley looked at him swiftly. Dorman was suddenly aware, for no reason, that he should be more dispassionate. After all, it was a war.

For an hour then he milled around the great drab hangar, frankly alive; cognizant that out there was fighting. It seemed different somehow, for back in school this was what they all lived for. Up here it was more serious; there was less laughter and derision of the enemy. Back in the school the Huns were a lot of stumblebums who didn't know what it was all about, but up here the men who had been over and met them knew differently. They were highly prized as foemen.

Then it happened. So swiftly, so suddenly Dorman was never able to get it straight.

There was a deep drone from up above and he first thought the group was coming back. But there was confusion in the hangar, for the mechanics had recognized the hum of the motor.

"Jerry!" they shouted, and got out into the open immediately. They thought bombers were in the air.

Dorman dashed for the door and looked up. There they were, a scant three hundred meters up, daring the Archies—two Fokkers, in a dive with their Spandaus spitting. The Maltese crosses glared ominously; it was the first time he had ever seen the enemy in full flight.

And then it dawned on him that they were far back behind the Allied lines; and the blood surged again.

This was his chance and he knew it.

"Hey!" he shouted at Saufley. "Hey!"

Saufley turned around and looked.

"What the hell?" he cried.

Dorman cupped his hands.

"Gimme a hand! I'm going up!"

SAUFLEY turned his eyes upward. One of the Fokkers had been scared away by Archie fire. It was breaking all around him and he had turned and was thundering back. But the other was coming through a literal wall of steel. Saufley ran back over to the hangar.

Dorman grabbed him. He was excited.

"Roll out eight-one-nine! Load up those guns!"

"Lissen, Lieutenant," Saufley said. "You better—"

"Beat it!" Dorman said. He slanted his head upward and saw the Boche strafing the road that led to Toul. The enemy was having a great time. Dorman raced over to the cubicle and dashed inside. He grabbed his helmet and his flying coat and was putting them on as he came out. Lufbery was at the side of the house, staring interestedly at the proceedings.

"Where the hell you think you're going?" he yelled.

"To teach Jerry a lesson," Dorman flung over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute—"

But Dorman was across the field The mechanics had rolled out his Spad. He jumped and caught his foot in the stirrup, crying to Saufley: "All set?"

"Yes, sir," Saufley shouted. He was infected with some of the enthusiasm of the tall Texan.

Dorman swung down in the seat and a mechanic grasped the prop.

"Coupez!"

"Coupez!"

The mechanic centered the blade.

"Contact!"

"Contact!"

He adjusted his goggles and put on his gloves. He reached out with his hands and touched the feed blocks on his guns. They were loaded. His gasoline line cocks were turned right; there was his signal pistol and four cartridges. In his box were pencil,

paper, some cigarettes, a flash and two bars of chocolate.

His feet were on the rudder bar; his hand raced along to the throttle. The motor spluttered and caught, he jiggled the lever and eased it open. Dust and pebbles threw up the backwash and bounced against the stabilizers.

Saufley twisted his shoulder and head to brace himself and protect his eyes from the slipstream and came running around to the cockpit.

"Has the lieutenant any papers on his person that would be of value to the enemy?" he yelled.

Dorman shook his head. He pulled his throttle shut, then opened it and waddled out. He got his windage and had a final look around; there was the Fokker just about over headquarters of the General commanding the Air Service. It looked as if he were in a dive, tiny puffs jumped from the Spandaus as he sprayed the roof with lead.

Dorman kicked his ship around and gunned it; and it got away in a flutter of wings. He slipped wide around the hangar and went after the Boche.

His finger slipped up onto the trigger and he squeezed it. He saw the crank arms jumping and could dimly hear the rattle of his guns. Well, thank God, they were all right. He settled down a little more so he could get his eyes on a level with the ring sights. Now. This was something like. Would this be a thrill for the lads back on the ranch or not?

CHAPTER II.

FOUR minutes later he was at thirty-five hundred feet and he swept the sky in layers again to make sure he was all alone. He was. It was almost as if the sky had been invented exclusively for him.

He nosed over and opened his guns. His tracers reached far out with smoky fingers and fell short, in little arcs.

He did not realize this was the most common mistake of green men—ineffectual firing. Nor did he know the Commanding General was speeding to the Toul airdrome in an open Fiat, his glasses trained on the Spad, as best they could, what with the bumping along the road and the quick turns.

The Fokker evidently was aware that his opponent was not an experienced pilot, for he rolled over to get on top. One almost could see the avariciousness on his face. A mastiff setting himself for the rush of the terrier. But the terrier tore in, regardless.

Both guns blazing, Dorman held his nose down until the Fokker rolled and then he brought it up and tried to get into firing position. The Fokker was side-slipping away, then he leveled off and Immelmaned back. Dorman yanked his stick back for a loop, but the Fokker had figured where he would emerge and at the close of the circle there was lead rattling through Dorman's wings. It spattered his windshield into bits and fanged into the instrument board.

His heart closed with the cold of weakness and fear, and he dived low to free himself of the hail of lead. He knew he had not fought the approach with care, and he bit his teeth and swept to the left in a climbing turn.

For a moment he got above the line of fire and felt relieved; then he half-rolled to get on top. The Fokker raced by a hundred and fifty yards away and Dorman kicked his rudder around savagely and squeezed his trigger again.

The crank arms wouldn't move. Madly he yanked at the cocking lug. It wouldn't budge. He yanked again and the wind screamed in his face. Still it refused to move.

The little spot of fear that had burned at him now swelled and gave way to flame. His mouth was dry and he couldn't swallow. Big George Dorman had a panicky moment. He was helpless. Out ahead the Fokker, like a thing inspired, had banked wide and was coming back.

Dorman put his nose down and came home.

He bounced down into the landing field and as he pulled over to the starting line another Spad was trundled out of the hangar. A pilot was getting in as it came through the door. He had a silk stocking tied around his mouth and nose and the straps of his helmet were dangling below his chin. His uniform coat and his flying coat both were open and Dorman could see his shirt beneath. His boots were only half-laced.

It was Lufbery.

As Dorman kicked off the switch Luf got away. He pulled straight off with the windside and made straight for a line of bois-d'arc trees ahead; and just when it seemed his wheels would get caught in the foliage he yanked his Spad up and went after the Fokker.

But the Fokker was no longer in a playful mood. It rolled of a sudden and scudded for home, with the drab brown Spad on its tail. It may be,

sometimes these things did happen, that the pilot recognized an adversary of merit. There was a double explosion of black from the exhausts of the Spad as Luf gunned it and drove after the daring German pilot.

Dorman crawled down and Saufley came trotting over.

"Say," Dorman said, "drop a match in this cockpit. What the hell's the matter with these guns?"

Sergeant First Class Saufley didn't say anything for a moment. He just looked. A cold, contemptuous look. Then he spoke.

"Tough luck," he said.

HE TURNED around and saw a slender officer approaching rapidly. He was about forty, and he was in a light overcoat. From his cap gleamed a silver star. Saufley snapped to a salute, Dorman raised his hand awkwardly. He felt ill, for something shone through the officer's eyes.

"Your name, Lieutenant," he said, spreading his legs.

"Dorman, sir. George Dorman."

"Oh, yes. Reported this week for duty."

"Yes, sir."

"Come to my headquarters in half an hour," he said.

"Yes, sir."

He snapped his hand to a salute, and the general turned on his heel without another word.

Saufley said, "I'll have the guns gone over."

Dorman nodded abstractedly.

"Who was that?" he asked.

Saufley rammed his hands in his pockets and screwed down the corners of his lips.

"My God, you mean you don't know?"

Dorman got a little sore.

"I sure as hell don't," he said.

"Well," Saufley said carelessly; "that wasn't nobody much. Just Billy Mitchell."

Dorman's eyes widened.

"Oh," he said. "General Mitchell. I guess he saw the—er—mess?"

Saufley nodded. Dorman pulled off his helmet and went over to the cubicle. He flung his helmet against the wall and swore loudly and took off his coat and shirt and poured a pan of water. He washed himself loudly and continued to swear, then he dressed and went back to the hangar.

"Get somebody to take me over to headquarters," he told Saufley.

Saufley went inside the hangar and in a moment a mechanic rode out with a motorcycle and sidecar. Dorman piled in without saying anything. He looked back off in the direction where he had seen Luf chasing the Fokker but there was nothing in the sky. It was serene and blue.

General Mitchell had his headquarters in a two story house on the Rue Pigalle, and the motorcycle jerked to a stop before the huge iron grillwork.

Dorman got down and went inside. He announced himself and in a minute was shown into a deep-ceilinged room. There was a desk in the center and behind it sat the General.

Dorman saluted and the General nodded.

"Lieutenant, Major Lufbery has just been shot down."

Dorman paled. All at once a mist ascended before his eyes, the General seemed very far away.

"Sir?"

The General nodded heavily and looked out the window.

"Major Lufbery has been killed," he said again.

Dorman bit his lip and his head dropped. Luf was gone; Luf the great. It didn't seem possible.

General Mitchell turned his head and looked at Dorman.

"His ship caught fire and he jumped out. He fell in a shoemaker's flower garden eight miles up the river. You know why, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

"You should have handled that enemy, Lieutenant. Your failure has cost us our finest pilot. You're being transferred to ferry duty at once."

Big George Dorman opened his mouth to protest, to say something; and then he suddenly closed it. He had washed out as a fighting pilot, he had blown his first chance—and now he was getting his medicine. Well, he told himself he'd take it on his heels.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I shouldn't—"

"That's all, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Dorman saluted and went out.

CHAPTER III.

FERRY duty. God what a laugh that was. A month now he'd been doing ferry duty. A month of peaceful flying. Why, a guy might as well be back home!

George Dorman yanked up the nose of his Nieuport 23 and passed over the flat-roofed houses on the edge of Chaumont. What he should do, he told himself again, was to put the ship down, go in and tell Pershing all about it. Tell him he'd had his lesson and that if he could get just one more chance . . .

But, of course, he didn't. He took his Nieuport back to Orly, checked it in, and because he'd been doing a lot of thinking that day and was all in a fuddle he went down to Papa Jean's grog shop that night and proceeded to get gloriously, thoroughly and completely soused.

The next morning his head felt like a balloon; it pulled him up and took him into the mess hall exactly two hours late. But the mess sergeant was a good egg, and he fixed Dorman some coffee, oatmeal and a thick slice of lamb.

Back in the barracks he learned that Red Rogers and Ben Taylor had been transferred up to the Twenty-seventh and already had flown up to report for duty. That information, combined with the effects of his spree the night before, conspired to send him down into a state of depression again.

Pretty damned soon, he reflected, the war would be over and unless a fellow did something quick he never would get back into a show. The debacle of that early summer afternoon ate at the back of his mind and made him so self-conscious he imagined that every time he passed an officer he was being regarded with pity, that everybody was saying behind their hands, "There is the bird who got Luf killed."

Already he had grown cynical and had isolated himself and had but one prayer, a chance to vindicate himself.

He never could vindicate himself back here. He had to get up front to do that. And that seemed as impossible as spanning the poles.

"God, why can't I get a chance?" he muttered. "I can fly rings around some of those birds up there. Damn! Damn! Damn!"

He reasoned that when a fellow was all torn up inside about anything he ought to go up. A man should go up when he got his thinking apparatus hung together.

So in spite of the admonitions of the field staff, Dorman went up. He took a DH4 but it was a short flight. He circled the field a couple of times and thought about jumping over to Romorantin to see his old buddy, Al Peebles, who was in the Fifth A.S. Regiment. But he couldn't bring himself to do it; and he decided to put the bus down and go down and get tight all over again.

Coming down he was swept by a ghastly emotion; in an instant he realized he had forgotten all he ever knew of flying, and he had no feel. He remembered his arms and fingers like wood . . . and he bounced twice and then the D.H. swung over in a perfect somersault and pitched him out.

He picked himself up as the men rushed out to salvage the wreck, and walked off to the barracks. He was sore and at the point of open rebellion and had decided the way to settle the war was with his fists. The first man who said anything to him he didn't like was going to get busted in the jaw.

Ten minutes later an orderly came into the room and told him Major Carew, who was the commanding officer, wanted to see him.

Dorman whirled around, his face livid and for a moment the orderly thought he was going to be smashed.

"You present my compliments to the major and tell him to go to hell!" he cried to the orderly.

The orderly stood his ground, shook his head and bit his lip.

Chick Lancaster, who was one of the mob waiting for assignment to combat, came in and said, "Wait a minute, orderly." He turned to Dorman and said, "Listen, you've lost your mind! Go on and see the C.O."

Dorman's face got red but he held himself in check. Lancaster was the only man in the post he had ever said anything to. He was a rough and tumble battler from Indiana and always spoke his mind.

"To hell with the C.O.! Orderly, tell Major Carew if he's got anything to say to me he can come here and say it. To hell with everybody!"

Lancaster grabbed him by the shoulder and

jerked him around.

"Look, George. You're only making things worse. You can't buck the whole damned army."

Dorman wiggled his shoulder to free himself and squared around and doubled up his fists. His eyes were blazing.

"Chick, you keep outta this! I can handle it." He looked at the orderly and said, "Go on, *allez!*"

Lancaster blocked the exit and his voice got hard. "Orderly, go on back and tell him the lieutenant is on his way."

Dorman said, "I'm gonna bust—"

Lancaster moved over and turned sideways. His right fist was drawn back.

"You're going to get some sense in your head if I have to punch it in there."

The orderly went out.

Dorman's lips quivered and he yanked off his helmet. A trickle of blood came down from his forehead.

Lancaster said, "You're hurt, George. Fix yourself up and go on."

Dorman put his hand up and it came away red. "You go to hell," he said coldly and went over to the washstand. He soaked a towel and patted it against the cut and in a moment it had stopped bleeding. Lancaster came over and stood beside him without saying anything.

Dorman carefully turned his head and saw the understanding in Lancaster's face. Remorse engulfed him and his eyes filled with tears. He massaged them out with his doubled fists and got sore all over again. He turned away and muttered.

"—damn! —damn!"

He drove his doubled fists into his hips and his body convulsed with impotent rage. Lancaster followed him over to the table and sat down beside him.

"Listen, get a grip on yourself for God's sake. You're in bad enough as it is now. Unless you check up you'll never get back to the front."

"I know it," he said. He lifted his eyes and said. "Chick, I guess I'm just a damned fool."

Lancaster laughed and said, "Forget it. Beat it over to see Carew and when you get back I've got a spot of Three-Star stuck away."

Dorman tried to smile.

"Okay," he said.

HE EXPECTED the major to raise hell, but he was wrong. Max Carew had not won his majority for nothing. He knew men. He was to prove that later when he emerged from combat work as one of the finest squadron leaders of the war. He could be, and was sometimes, hardboiled; but to him each man represented an individual case and was not to be treated by a general formula.

"Sit down," he said to Dorman, when the latter had come over to the office.

Dorman sat down, a little surprised, and waited for the blow.

Carew turned his chair around and said, "Boy, you've got a lot of things in your mind that you've got to get out." He paused and waited, but Dorman didn't say anything so he went on. "You're sore at everybody. You've been sore for a month. Well, that's not getting you anywhere."

Dorman glared at him but still didn't say anything.

"What the hell's the matter with your head, Lieutenant?"

"What do you mean, Major?"

"Just that. You're thinking crooked."

"Maybe I am," Dorman said shortly. "Maybe I am. But you know what the trouble is as well as I do."

Major Carew smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I think I do." He leaned over and folded his arms on his desk. "Well, Dorman, you aren't the only one who wants to get up and see a little action. You don't suppose this is pleasant for me to sit back here in a graveyard, do you? Not by a damn sight! But that's the way of the army.

"There's a war on and the generals know what they want. Most men can stand it—but sometimes there's one who hasn't got the guts to face the music."

Dorman twisted in his seat and rubbed his hands together.

"Now, listen, Major—"

"You listen, Dorman!" the Major cut in swiftly. "I've seen men like you before. You had a chance to make good and muffed it and now you're taking it out on the whole damned army. You're a sorehead and a disorganizer. You've got the whole post up in arms. You're a quitter if I ever saw one."

The Major looked at him out of the corner of his eyes, saw the big fellow biting his lips to control himself and went on. "You don't ever expect to get back up there by sulking, do you? Well, you haven't a chance." He hitched his chair closer and laid his hand on Dorman's knee. It was rather an

awkward gesture.

"You're not the only man in this war, you know. There's a lot of us over here and we've all got a job to do. The fellow who doesn't do it is passing the buck to somebody else."

Dorman looked at him in mingled rage and humiliation. Something in the major's voice got under his skin. He lowered his head to avoid the major's eyes and said,

"I want to fight, sir. I want to fight more than anything else in the world." He trembled and the Major said,

"Steady, now. Of course you do. And you will. In the meantime there are men who look to you for certain things. You aren't giving them a break. Nobody knows what this war is all about. It's tough to go on waiting and waiting . . . but it's got to be done. Hold up your end of it. Now go on back to your barracks. There are five Spads to take up tonight."

Dorman's eyes widened.

"Tonight? You mean you're sending me up after—"

He hesitated and the Major said, "After what?"

"Why, I cracked a DH—"

The Major laughed and said, "Well, did it teach you anything?" He looked at the lieutenant sharply, the trace of a smile on his lips.

Dorman inhaled deeply, "I'll say it did."

"Fine." The Major got up and stuck out his hand. "Are we friends?"

Dorman took the hand and said, "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"That's all right," the Major said. "Just keep holding on."

"Yes, sir," Dorman said and went out.

He entered the barracks whistling and Chick Lancaster grinned and came over.

"What happened?" he said. "You don't look like a little boy who caught hell."

"I didn't," Dorman said.

"He didn't decorate you, did he?"

"No, but he never said a word about the crack-up. Not a word. If he'd bawled me out I would have felt better. But he didn't."

"Swell," Lancaster said. "Come on and we'll have a snort."

Dorman lifted up his right hand.

"Not me," he said. "I'm off the stuff. I'm going up tonight with a convoy."

Lancaster was surprised.

"What the Hell?" he said. "So am I."

"Are you? Well, you oughtn't to be boozing then."

Lancaster was frankly amused.

"By God, he sure reformed you in a hurry."

There was a noise at the door and a slender chap with keen eyes and short-clipped hair came in. He had a dunnage bag with him and he dropped it in the corner and squared off in front of Lancaster.

"Well," he said, "where do I park the body?"

Lancaster said, "Better go see the adjutant," and the keen-eyed chap went out.

Dorman watched the retreating form. He asked, "Who's the fresh guy?"

"Kid from Arizona," Lancaster said. "Out in your country. His name's Frank Luke."

That didn't mean anything to George Dorman. He sat down in a canvas-bottomed chair and said, "The First must be short of ships. I never heard of ferrying at night before."

"They been catching hell, all right," Lancaster said. "It's being talked around even back here that the drome is in for a good bombing pretty soon." He looked at Dorman quizzically. "Come on and take a snifter."

"Thanks," Dorman said. "But I'm off that stuff."

"Hell, one snifter won't hurt. The ships haven't gone to the test block yet. There ain't a chance to get 'em off before midnight."

Dorman shook his head.

"I just don't wanna drink, Chick, that's all."

CHAPTER IV.

MIDNIGHT. Blackness pressing in against five trim fighting ships going up on an emergency order. Five trim fighting ships in the hands of five trusted pilots . . . pilots eating their hearts out for a chance at action . . . five cogs in a mighty machine of war.

Dorman's ears rang with the hum of his motor and for the first time in a month he was conscious of his part in the scheme of things. Major Carew had been right; there wasn't anything to be gained by beefing. Well, from now on he'd do the best he could and trust to luck . . . and on and on he flew in that sea of darkness. It seemed as if he were motionless in a great void.

It wouldn't be long, he reflected, before he'd get his chance. Every squadron in the lines was feeling

the sting of the enemy. Every day some crack pilot got knocked down and it stood to reason that soon the depot at Orly would be minus several ferrymen. . . .

Sometime later he noticed he was alone. The yellow rings from the other exhausts had disappeared, and for a moment he was chilled. He checked his compass and looked out again, and as he settled back he had a queer feeling that all was not well. But his bearings were true, so he didn't worry.

Ahead of him there presently flared the magnesium light of the landing field. It flared only for a moment and then died; and Dorman smiled and put his nose down. Toul. The jump-off place for the squadrons.

As he cut his gun he heard a sullen thump and a great explosion of white far out in front caught his eye. In the closing glare he saw a geyser of dirt and his eyes went up.

Two great black planes hovered above—Gothas.

They had figured the arrival of the replacements perfectly; the hum of the Hispanos had drowned out the roar of their own motors, and they had marked the field by the brief magnesium flare.

With a start Dorman realized the Gothas were closing in and were just about over the neighborhood of headquarters.

There was another bath of light from below as one of the bombers dropped another, and with a shout Dorman snatched at his stick and squared his feet on the rudder bars. He leaned forward in his seat and strained his eyes through the darkness; his motor whined on a rising note and the ship leaped away into the night.

Off to the right there was a dull red puff and the village lighted grotesquely like a toy town in a Christmas window. That would be the Archies.

Dorman climbed until the drone of his motor told him he was nearing a stall, and then he leveled off and picked out the flashes from the exhaust of the Gotha. The big ship was banking wide to evade the Archie fire, but Dorman nosed over and tried his guns.

The crimson and yellow flashes spurted over his hood; he took his finger off the trigger and picked out the Gotha. The gunners of the Boche had located him and he could tell from their fire they were slowly getting him into their range. He banked wide and in a moment the huge black moth was in his nose. His finger raced forward to the trigger and his guns chattered.

Whether he had hit or not he couldn't tell. The flashes from his guns half-blinded him, so after the first burst he pulled his stick and zoomed. Down below a battery of Archies began their bombardment and bursting shells filled the air.

"You damn fools!" Dorman shouted. "Lay off!"

Both Gothas were below Dorman now, and one of them turned loose with his swivel gun and Dorman saw he was out in front and evidently was headed for home. He came down again in the darkness, figured the speed of the Gotha and his own bus and fired when he thought he should have the bomber centered. He was firing from dead reckoning, but in a moment there was a flame from the big ship. It fanned out and reached along the fuselage hungrily; and made a perfect target out of the enemy.

The Gotha crew evidently realized it was their last stand, for two men could be seen in the front nacelle wrestling with a mounted gun. It spit fire up at him, but he rolled over and got altitude.

The fellow was doomed. Dorman wanted the other one.

He went up to two thousand meters and looked out. The Gotha was blazing through the middle and around its edges he could see the outskirts of Toul. There were many white spots against the black ground; they would be faces.

But where was the other Gotha?

The Gotha itself answered the question. From the left came another blinding white glare as it dropped its bombs, impervious to the fate of its sister ship.

Dorman grinned and kicked his rudder around and was off like a streak for the second bomber. The wind screamed through his wires and tore at his eyeballs. Through his little windshield he could see the tips of his propeller dyed in a dull red circle from the burning Gotha that slowly settled behind.

HE WAS aware too, that on the ground below there was some confusion. Men were swarming around in the darkness, pocket flashes glowed beside a great brown monster that was the hangar. Then he saw a smudge of light as the door opened and a little moth came rolling out; behind it was a second.

Dorman swore aloud into the wind.

Two of the squadron were coming up. They were going to give him a hand. Like hell they were!

Then, in a second, the flashes from the exhaust of the two ships below spat out as they got away. The lumbering Gotha was making straight for the hangar.

It was not difficult to divine their motive. They were racing to destroy the hangar before the American bullets ended their career, and Dorman's brain leaped under the inspiration and he banged his throttle ahead and nosed down.

He had to get the bomber before it got the hangar.

Already the men below had sensed the same thing, for the lights went out and there was blackness. But the Gotha bombing crew already had the hangar spotted.

Dorman didn't know exactly his range, but he marked the light exhaust of the Boche machine and opened his guns at four hundred yards. He held them open and slowly nosed down, certain that in that broad sweep he would find his target.

Then before he knew it he was directly over the big machine. It seemed that all hell had caught fire below him; two tourelle guns got into action and he felt the whine of the German lead ripping and tearing through his plane. In half a dozen places in his legs it felt as though someone had jammed hot needles into his skin; and he swore at himself again and circled back to get his victim before the two men from the ground could maneuver into advantageous position.

He came around fast and saw the Boche gunners firing wildly at the point he had disappeared over at the right, and then he dived and fired again. He was so close now he could see a twin stream of fire pouring into the heart of the big fellow; and he zoomed just in time to save his undercarriage.

He climbed on off, his legs stinging like the devil. He could feel something warm inside his pants' leg trickling down . . . and he swung over in a quick Immelman and got ready to come back. He caught sight of the black form below him and went down after it like a hawk.

He had no idea he was close to the ground. Then there was a terrific explosion and a white sheet of flame that seemed to cover the earth. His Spad was caught in the midst of it; it seemed to balloon upward and then he was conscious that both his wings had snapped off.

He threw up his hands to protect his face as his eyes closed.

CHAPTER V.

IT WAS DARK. Gradually a light gleamed far away . . . and came on with the speed of a falling star. Big George Dorman blinked his eyes to clear the mists and made out faces. One of them was Chick Lancaster's. He dimly remembered the other one . . .

He tried to move his legs, but they felt funny. His head ached. His mouth was dry.

"Easy," said Lancaster. He moved closer. "You had a hell of a spill."

Dorman smiled.

Another face came close. He fought with his brain to tear away the obscurity . . . and then atop the head that was close to him he saw a silver star gleaming from the little cap.

Then he knew.

That was General Mitchell.

"How do you feel, Dorman?" he asked.

George Dorman licked his lips.

"Okay, sir. I'm okay. What happened?"

The General grinned.

"The Gotha crashed and its bombs exploded. You were a full fifty feet above and got the repercussion."

"Oh," Dorman said. He moved his head. "Feels like I been here ten years. Is the war over yet?"

He looked at General Mitchell queerly.

"Not yet," the General said. "I think it'll last long enough for you to get in. As soon as you're in shape you're coming back to the group. I'll hold a place for you."

"Thanks, sir."

"Those Gothas," Mitchell went on, "had bombs

for the General." He leaned over and whispered. "I'm recommending you for the D.S.C." He smiled and bit his lip and went out.

Lancaster sat down on the edge of the bed.

"By God," he said, "you must have been born with a horseshoe in your mouth."

Big George Dorman grinned and thumbed his nose at him.

THE END.