



SPLASH BOMB CHAMP

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WHEN "battle stations" were sounded, early in the afternoon, Monty Brett was stretched out on his bunk. He wasn't sleeping. He was trying to untangle some of his snarled thoughts.

The clamor of the gong in the steel corridor outside his room brought him upright with a force which scraped his head against the springs of the bunk above. He cursed dutifully, but his feet hit the deck without delay.

As the latest replacement on the flattop, *Falcon*, he had seen no action yet, not even a practice hop. He moved fast, grabbing his life jacket, helmet, goggles and plotting board in a series of swift motions. He was running out the door when the loudspeaker bellowed, "Man your battle stations!" He grimly hoped that this alert was genuine.

He raced along the corridor, meeting a few other pilots who were heading in top speed in

the same direction, toward the ready room. He could hear the subdued thunder of many motors warming on the flight deck.

In the ready room the feeling of breathless hurry was replaced by an air of business-like efficiency. Brett found an empty chair, and the other chairs filled rapidly. Most of the men, intent as they were upon the job at hand, had time for friendly nods or excited, pleased grins in the directions of their flying mates, but it was noticeable that no such expressions of recognition were tossed toward Lieutenant Commander Monty Brett. Such glances as there were were impersonal and speculative for the most part. Some were openly antagonistic.

Brett didn't miss them, despite the fact that his attention was riveted to his plotting board. He didn't actually see the looks, but he could feel them, just as if someone were peppering him with small sharp darts.

The flying data was coming down from

air-plot. The “talker” took the information through his ear-phones, and repeated it to a sailor who transferred it swiftly to the big blackboard. Brett, in turn, transferred the necessary dope to his plotting board—wind direction and velocity, weather conditions above the target, his own point option, and the course which the carrier Falcon would take when the planes had left. When the men had finished writing, Commander Gregory said briefly:

“Our scouts spotted a small Jap task force heading in the direction of the Fijis, one heavy cruiser, three destroyers and a small carrier. When they found they were spotted they turned and headed north. With luck you can intercept them.”

A moment later the loudspeaker summoned, “Pilots, man your planes.”

The exodus from the ready room was swift and orderly. On the great nine-hundred-foot flight deck the planes were crowded toward the stern in what looked like a hopeless jumble. The wings of the dive bombers overlapped, and the wings of the torpedo bombers were folded above the pilot like the wings of a great bird. The motors had been cut to eliminate the danger from the whirling props while the pilots found their planes and climbed aboard.

Brett knew exactly where his SBD should be—to starboard, ahead of the torpedo planes. There would be no escort of fighter ships today. The target was too far away.

Monty Brett was tall and rangy. He moved with a loose-jointed gait which was deceptive in its accuracy. There was no waste effort as he wove his way among the closely packed planes on the flight deck.

The lines of his face were clean-cut, sensitive. He could be hurt—easily—a fact which was perpetually disguised by an overlying shell of hardness. His eyes were hazel, wide-spaced, with the steady look of a man who never hedged a bet, and who would never step aside an inch from the course he

knew to be the best, despite whatever consequences might arise. He would never compromise with duty.

The set of his jaw confirmed this. It was solid, without arrogance; His lips were full, well formed and did not deserve the grimness stamped upon them. They were the lips of a man who liked to laugh, but who had had small opportunity in the recent past. They had been stiffened by the relentless, constant pressure of a great responsibility.

His dark hair was prematurely sparse. He chose to believe that it had been partially worn away by his flying helmet during the three thousand hours he’d spent aloft. Whatever the reason, it heightened his forehead, and made him appear older than he really was. He was only twenty-eight.

He reached his “Dauntless,” ducked under the wing, and came up beside the cockpit. He shot a casual, curious glance toward the back cockpit, wondering what sort of men had been assigned to him as radio-man and gunner. The shock of recognition froze him to an instant of immobility. Of all the men in the U. S. Navy, *his* rear cockpit man would have to be Ray Carter, radio-man, first class.

THE surprise of the meeting did not seem mutual. Carter, apparently, had known who would be his pilot. There was a hard, sardonic humor in his gray-green eyes, but the lines of his face were wooden with restraint. It was a handsome face, almost too handsome. There was strength there, plenty of it, but the strength, as Brett well knew, was not the strength of discipline. It stemmed from a devil-may-care fearlessness, a complete belief in himself and the assurance that his background and his breeding were impeccable.

The dismay in Monty Brett’s expression was brief as a flash of light. He knew, however, that Ray Carter hadn’t missed it. Carter’s long-lashed eyes glittered with quick challenge.

"Hello, Carter. This is a surprise," said Brett.

"Yes, sir," said Carter, non-committally.

Brett stepped to the wing, swung a long leg into the cockpit, and settled himself in the seat. The plane captain, Murphey, also on the wing, swiftly adjusted Brett's radio headpiece, and plugged it in. Hopping back to the deck, he engaged the long crank, and waited for the first order. It came almost immediately, through the big "bull horn":

"Prepare to start engines!"

Murphey started to grind upon the crank. The whine of the energizing wheel began to grow in volume.

The bull horn bellowed, "Stand clear of propellers!"

The energizing wheel was howling now, joining its tone to those about it.

"Start engines!"

Brett pulled the starting toggle. Murphey stepped back and grabbed a fire extinguisher—just in case. This was a ticklish moment. The big motor coughed, cleared its throat, then caught. Brett grunted with relief as the sharp roll of its exhaust told him that everything, so far, was Jake. He checked his instruments and controls while waiting his turn to take off. Then things began to move with the coordination of a watch.

THE flight officer on the bridge had the red flag up, "Prepare to launch!" The *Falcon* was already driving hard into the wind. The first dive bomber taxied up to the starting line, and the flight officer raised the white flag, which automatically transferred authority to the launching officer on the deck.

The latter was equipped with a white baton. He moved it in a swift circular motion, and the ship on the starting line revved up its motor. Suddenly the baton held steady, pointing straight ahead. This was the final signal. With brakes released the bomber lunged forward for the takeoff.

WITH mechanics upon each wing-tip, Monty Bretts' big ship was soon upon the line. His pulse was pounding steadily and strong. He was strangely calm, despite the fact that he'd looked forward to this moment for so long—his first real combat hop.

When the launching officer's baton snapped forward, Brett released his brakes and let 'er roll. The three blades of the big prop grabbed the air like a screw biting into wood. The prop was set at full low pitch, and the accelerated forward movement plastered Brett's back against the seat. In another few seconds he was in the air. He held straight for several hundred yards, then banked gently to the right, in order to relieve the following plane of his propeller wash. He started his climb toward the meeting place three thousand feet above.

Once there the thirty-six planes of the dive bomber squadron split up into four "divisions" of Vs, each division containing three "sections" of three planes each. Brett flew at the point of the second section of the first division. The skipper, Hal Farrel, a two-striper, led them in a climb. Brett went on oxygen at ten thousand feet. The squadron leveled off at eighteen thousand and headed for its target.

Relieved of the tension of the take-off, Brett could feel the presence of the man in the cockpit behind him, and his presence there was not conducive to relaxation.

Brett had been a dive bomber instructor at Pensacola—the best. The gold braid higher up had regarded him as indispensable. The kids he taught had regarded him quite differently. They hated his guts.

Brett's skill with water-filled practice "splash bombs," was fabulous, and he could teach the things he knew. He had taught them with a blunt impersonal savagery, which had made them stick. He had made dive bombers—good ones. His record was impressive.

So was his record as a tyrant among the men he'd taught. Brett knew it, regretted it, but got some satisfaction from the fact that his teachings had saved many men and planes. At least a half-dozen of these men were flying with him now.

Ray Carter, for example. The catch here was that he'd washed Ray Carter out for a commission. Had reported him as allergic to discipline, needlessly reckless, intolerant of fundamentals.

Later, Brett had managed to get himself assigned to combat duty, a tough uphill battle all the way. They hadn't wanted to let him go. Yet here he was. And here was Carter. Cozy.

Jane Hall, a navy nurse, and ensign, was in the picture, too. Triangle stuff. She had been stationed at Pensacola, too. Carter had known her in private life. Brett had met her at the base, and had gone completely overboard. Carter probably believed that Brett, by stalling his commission, had sought to wipe out competition. Nice mess.

Yeah, any way he looked at it, he was on a spot, and it wasn't the sort of spot from which a guy could alibi himself if anything went wrong.

He'd bawled hell out of some of the men who were flying with him now, because they'd missed their practice targets. These same men had, since then, had their chance at living targets. Brett hadn't. Nor had he flown through ack-ack, flack, nor smelled the stink of tracer bullets.

The skipper, Farrel said, "Heads up! Target! Form echelon of sections to the left!"

II

BRETT obeyed the order, swinging across to take his place in the stepped-up line of bombers. With the maneuver finished he strained his eyes for a sight of the Jap warships. He saw the threadlike wake of the boats first, then the ships themselves, like tiny water bugs on the surface of the ocean.

The Zeros had undoubtedly left their flat-top by this time, and would be climbing hard for altitude. Brett waited for his nerves to dance. They didn't.

Farrel said, "First and second divisions take the flat-top. Third division, the cruiser. Fourth, destroyers. Prepare to attack!"

Ack-ack was coming at them now, jarring closer as the Jap guns figured out the range. The squadron leader peeled off in his dive. Five more peeled off before Brett's turn came.

He heard Carter open up with his pair of .30 calibers in the back cockpit. The Zeros had arrived. Brett saw the red balls of tracers, and felt the impact of bullets on his wing. He didn't even glance in that direction. His concentration on his target was too perfect.

He pulled the charging handle of his bomb, peeled off when his turn came. His movements were automatic, and precise. He adjusted his throttle, moved the prop to high pitch to prevent windmilling, let out his perforated diving flaps, and glued his eye to the rubber mouthpiece of his telescopic sight.

The flat-top already had one bomb hole in its flight deck. The water about it was churned to a froth by near misses. It was circling in a panic. Brett aimed for the stern to stop that foolishness.

He was fully in his dive, now, almost vertical. He studied the wind circles and the cross lines on his sight with calm detachment. He kept the "pipper," the tiny bubble, in exactly the right spot, exactly where he wanted it. He did it without thinking, making tiny automatic adjustments on his stick and rudder.

Something slammed against his leg. His target swerved, but he brought it back, dead center. A Zero went howling past him. Brett knew, then, a Nippo slug had hit his leg. So what? The leg still worked.

Four thousand feet—now three. He didn't have to watch the altimeter. His finger curved gently about the release button on his stick. Twenty-five hundred feet! He pressed the

button.

A gust of air was waiting for him. It hit the ship and skidded it to one side. The timing of the gust was murderously accurate. No power on earth could have prevented the wide deflection of the bomb. Brett knew where it would land—harmlessly to starboard of the carrier.

He hauled the stick back violently, not giving a damn just then if there were a dozen Zeros on his tail. He felt the pressure of the pull-out, but it didn't black him out. It never did, another reason he had been a good instructor.

No Zeros jumped him. He was lucky. He spiraled to six thousand feet before he remembered his leg. He glanced down, then, and found he had a nasty gash. He said through the interphone, belatedly.

"Did they get you, Carter?"

"Yes, sir, a little. In the leg."

"Bad?"

"Not very." Then, as an afterthought, "Did they get you?"

"Yes. Also in the leg. Can you stop your bleeding and dust it with sulfa powder?"

"Yes, sir, I can manage. Can you?"

"I think so."

Brett had himself fixed up by the time they headed toward the *Falcon*. No need to use their option points, there were no Jap planes left to tail them. The Jap flat-top was sinking. The cruiser was listing badly. One destroyer was down. The other three, though badly mauled, were managing to get away. Four bombers had been lost. The price was cheap.

THE pilots seemed to think so. They kidded back and forth. An ensign named Seth Hammer said:

"Hammer to Brett. How did you make out, Mr. Brett?"

Hammer was a former student.

Brett took an instant to control his voice, then said, "Missed a mile."

"Tough luck," said Hammer. "Now if

you'd only had a water bomb instead of—"

"Shut up, Seth!" Farrel's voice cut across the air, but not before Brett had heard a few appreciative chuckles, enough to tell him what he knew already. His former students had him where they wanted him. Carter, in particular, Brett knew, was enjoying himself now. Brett's eyes were bleak behind his goggles.

WHEN he and Carter were sent to a base hospital at Auckland, Brett had to admit the irony of the situation, the fact that his and Carter's lives were running, now, in such close parallels.

He didn't know the half of it, however. He found Jane Hall at the hospital, stationed there. It was a great discovery, and all of that, but the days of his recovery were not as carefree as they might have been.

He'd never been too sure of Jane to start with, and now with Ray Carter on the spot again to offer competition, Brett felt that his own style, clumsy at the best, was cramped.

He did his best, however, but never found the nerve to make an issue of it, to call a showdown, and find exactly where he stood. He had one final chance, but muffed it, under the distraction of a new and potent worry.

Jane popped into his room one day and broke the exciting news that she had just been transferred to the hospital ship, *Flanders*. It had happened bang, like that—she was about to sail—she only had a second—and didn't Brett think she was a lucky gal?

"Hell, no!" yelled Brett. "Those hospital ships are dangerous."

"So what?" she demanded.

"—I don't like it," spluttered Brett.

"But I do and—I've got to rush. Here." She kissed him quickly and hurried from the room.

That part would have been okay, except that Brett had the unsettled feeling that she was tearing off to kiss Carter good-by too. He slugged his pillow with his fist, "Damn!" then settled down to some real worrying. Jap subs

were nuts about defenseless hospital ships.

Two weeks later he was fit for duty. So was Carter—and there it was again, that paralleling of their lives. They were both sent back to the *Falcon*, and Brett braced himself with a poker face for what he believed was waiting him.

He hoped they'd razz him, kid his shirt off. He could have taken that—in fact, he would have welcomed it. The trouble was, they didn't. They accepted him as if he'd never been away. They were polite and courteous, too damned polite and courteous, as if he were still an instructor. They excluded him from their activities, not pointedly, but naturally. Brett climbed into his shell and stayed there, although it wasn't a form of isolation he enjoyed.

The Japs, having had their ears pinned back at Kula Gulf, had called time out to frame their alibi. The *Falcon* remained on the prowl, looking for whatever trouble might present itself. She finally had to manufacture some.

Obedying the summons to the ready room, Brett took down the dope on his plotting board. The objective, it appeared, would be Rabaul. Commander Gregory told the pilots:

"Spotters have reported a big concentration of cargo ships and transports in the harbor. A flight of fortresses will go over first and unload from twenty-five thousand feet. Your job is to mop up as much of the leavings as you can."

It wasn't the sort of job Brett wanted at this time, but he knew he'd have to make the best of it. The hunting, undoubtedly, should be good, but it wouldn't be the kind of hunting he preferred. The dive bomber and torpedo squadrons left the carrier and set their course for New Britain. Once more they flew without the benefit of fighter escort.

The formation was as close-packed as a bunch of grapes, yet Brett had the uneasy feeling that he wasn't part of it. Even Carter, in the rear cockpit, seemed remote, though he

undoubtedly was hoping that Brett would make a mess of things again. Carter was like that. He'd risk his own neck for the pleasure of seeing Monty Brett turn in another clumsy show.

New Britain came in sight. Then came the skipper's warning:

"Zeros! Keep in close!"

III

THE Zeros came down at them like a swarm of furious hornets. There were probably twenty of the slender, vicious little ships. They came in recklessly, trying to smash the squadron through sheer weight of numbers. In an incredibly short time, Brett heard the hammering of their guns, saw the red glow of their tracers. The Nips were "throwing apples."

It was the toughest spot of all, for a bomber pilot—a period of almost frozen inactivity. Brett knew, as did the rest, that the best of all protection was the maintaining of a tight formation. It meant a complete dependence upon the rear-cockpit gunners, men who had been trained with mathematical precision in deadly, coordinated angle fire.

The Japs found this out. Their flimsy crates were vulnerable to .30-caliber guns. The formation held intact, giving the gunners steady platforms, and permitting them to concentrate their fire. Zeros began to drop in blazing spirals toward the water.

Brett sweated with impatience. It was torture to just sit there, waiting. Now and again his hand moved automatically toward the trigger of the fixed guns in the bomber's nose. It was just plain hell to know that these guns were useless, at the moment, that he couldn't join the fight with them.

The Zeros were thinning out, but the bombers were taking a savage mauling, too. Brett felt his ship jerk violently, several times, under the impact of machinegun bursts. A heavier jar out toward the tail, told him a

cannon ball had plowed through the fuselage. After each impact, Brett asked quietly:

“Are you okay, Carter?”

And each time Carter answered, “Yes, sir.” The steady, controlled firing of his guns confirmed it.

Three bombers failed to reach their targets, and some were limping when they got there. Brett’s ship was still working nicely when the squadron roared across the northern tip of the island. He carried it through the smooth maneuver which brought the squadron into echelon attack formation. They ran into the anti-aircraft fire now, and it was savage. More land-based Zeros came to the attack, diving crazily into their own ack-ack.

The harbor was below them now. It was dotted with a heavy concentration of transport and cargo ships. Brett judged their number, roughly, as at least a hundred. Many of them were already burning from the accurate eggs which the flying fortresses had laid. Others were tilted for their final plunge. There were still enough left for the dive bombers and the torpedo planes.

Hal Farrel said, “Let’s go! Watch the man ahead of you, and don’t gang on the same target.”

Farrel peeled off, and the attack was on. The sweat stopped trickling from beneath Brett’s helmet. The heat was off. The waiting was over. Now it was the pilots’ turn to do their stuff. It made a big difference in a fellow’s nerves—smoothed ‘em out like buttering a piece of bread.

Brett’s turn came, and he kicked the heavy ship into its dive. A Zero, spitting fire, came howling at him from the side. Brett’s hand remained steady on the stick. Jap slugs ripped through the greenhouse glass. Brett’s head jerked as a bullet nicked the leather of his helmet. He merely grunted with annoyance, and went head with his adjustments. Ack-ack boiled about him. He dove straight through the middle of it, scarcely knowing it was there.

Diving flaps open, throttle eased, prop in high pitch, bomb charged—he began to gather speed. He didn’t line his sights until he had studied the diving ship ahead. When he spotted the target the ship in front of him had picked, Brett eased to the left, and lined up on a cargo boat which appeared to have escaped damage.

He glued his eye to the sight, then, and toyed with his controls until the wabbling pipper had settled on the spot he knew was right. He held it there. It wasn’t easy. Ack-ack joggled him. A Zero hurtled past—so close that it threw a rush of air which set the pipper dancing madly across the lines and circles of the sight.

THERE was a sick instant when Brett thought he’d been thrown completely off his target. But he brought it back, instinctively, with a delicacy of timing which a man can’t learn—he has to feel.

The air was screaming past him now, but Brett knew every varying cadence of the sound. His brain checked off the altitude. The boat below was big and vulnerable in his sights. His finger closed upon the button. The bomb was on its way. Brett’s lips were stretched into a grin. He knew exactly where that bomb would land.

He pulled back on the stick. The pressure hit him like a ton of pig iron, but it didn’t black him out. It never did. The plane squashed soggly through the air, in its several hundred feet of complete helplessness. The controls were useless until they could regain their grip upon the air. Brett didn’t like this period. Just now, he almost envied those men who went through it in a state of semi-consciousness.

It gave him the chance, however, to look down and watch his bomb smash through the deck below, then tear the steamer’s guts out in a violent surge of fire. It was a pleasant sight. Brett liked it.

The controls, at last, responded to his touch. He held the plane down near the water, streaking low until he had a chance to see how things were setting up about him. The dive bombers were still working, still battering their targets with destruction.

Brett felt, now, like a kid on a vacation. His job was done, done well. For a short time he would be on his own. He felt the Nips owed him something for the plastering he'd been forced to take while getting into position for his dive.

He swept the fighting area above him. An SBD was screaming downward at its target. Brett's eyes also took in a Zero, recovered from a dive, which was flashing in for an upward, slashing attack on the SBD. It looked as if the Jap could nail the bomber cold.

Brett, just off the water, had his motor open wide, his prop at full low pitch and his set-guns charged. Judging his distance to a gnat's whisker, he took a psychic chance at reading the Jap's mind.

He sent the heavy bomber roaring up into a steep chandelle. Relieved of the thousand pounds in its belly the ship handled sweetly, despite the fact that it wasn't meant for this sort of thing.

Brett, nevertheless, had it doped out neatly. At the top of the dizzy climbing turn, the Jap was exactly where Brett wanted him. The Zero was so close, in fact, that Brett could see the look of frozen terror on the Nippo's face, as he spotted Brett for the first time.

Brett calmly pressed the trigger button on his stick, and the slugs from his two big guns smashed at point-blank range into the Zero's cockpit. There was no more expression on the Nippo's face. He didn't have a face. He didn't need one any more. The Zero lunged like a bronco, then headed on its last dive toward the water. The other SBD could drop its bomb now, unimpeded.

Brett's situation, though, was not so simple. He was, as a matter of fact, in one hell of a spot. He was hanging on his ear a couple

of hundred feet off the water, without enough flying speed to keep a box kite in the air. He heard Carter accept the situation with a resigned, but unpanicky, "Well, this is it!"

It looked that way. A P-40 might have. I had a chance. But a Dauntless? It was thin—thin as a film of oil.

Except that Monty Brett refused to look at it that way. He let the big ship drop off on a wing, then handled it with the delicacy of a jeweler installing a main spring in a watch.

THERE was neither room nor time for one false move—not even for one unbalanced breath. Brett did things to the Dauntless, things which had never been incorporated in its design. He made the big ship so completely a part of him, that he seemed actually to control it with his mind.

He held it in the air with sky hooks—nothing else. He wished it into a short dive, and somehow pulled it out. There was scarcely space for a ray of light between the blur of his propeller tips and the surface of the water. It was as close as that.

Again Carter spoke involuntarily. His voice, across the phone, was dazed. "Well, I'll be absolutely damned!" he said.

Brett didn't answer. His attention had been caught by something else. A torpedo plane was making its run toward a tanker which, so far, had escaped. A battery of machine-guns on the tanker was enveloping the torpedo plane in a heavy pattern of tracer fire. It seemed incredible that the VT could drive its way through that hail of steel.

Brett came around in a flipper turn, and leveled off on a course parallel to that of the torpedo plane. The gun crews on the tanker, seeing a second plane coming at them, figured it for a second torpedo carrier. They divided their fire between the two onrushing ships. It gave the torpedo plane an infinitely better chance to get its fish away.

Brett saw the fish drop in the water, lined up for a certain hit amidships. Brett charged

the tanker, then, and wiped out a machine-gun crew with his guns. He heard the hammering of Ray Carter's guns, and saw another machine-gun on the deck become engulfed in kicking Japs.

"Nice work, Carter," grunted Brett, before he had a chance to think.

"Thank you, sir," said Carter tonelessly.

Brett zoomed the tanker. A moment later he heard the thunder of the torpedo striking home. He didn't look behind. He looked aloft instead. The Zeros were still as thick as fleas on a monkey. The ack-ack was still exploding in a smashing curtain, but most of the Yank ships, by this time, were below its range, down in the flack area.

Hal Farrel's voice came through the mike, "Farrel to Squadron Forty-three. Mission completed. Disperse to option points."

BRETT received the order with a strange reluctance. He hated to leave the scene of action, despite the fact that his squadron had done virtually all the harm it could.

Nevertheless, he took his bearings swiftly, and set a rough preliminary course toward his own point option, the assigned point to which he must first fly in order to be sure he was not trailed by enemy spotters. Once there, if there were no Jap planes in sight, he would set a new-course which would take him to the *Falcon*.

He clawed for altitude, and reached four thousand feet before a pair of Zeros marked him for their meat. Carter saw them first.

"Two Nips coming down at us!" he said.

Brett looked up, saw the wicked little wasps above, and leveled off. He kept an eye on them, trying to guess how they'd attack, as they maneuvered for position. The Japs were probably deciding that point between themselves. When they finally started their attack their strategy was obvious. One was to make a right-angled diving slash, while the other, apparently, would strike from the rear, to make a long zoom beneath the belly of the

bomber. From the looks of it their attacks would not come simultaneously, and that's the thing Brett gambled on. He said:

"Pick off the rat to starboard. I'll give you all the time I can. Be sure your belt's tight, because you're going to need it."

"Wilco," acknowledged Carter.

His guns let loose. So did the Japs. They tore more holes in Brett's greenhouse. A tracer bullet passed before his eyes so close that it blinded him an instant. But he held the bomber steady, giving Carter every chance.

Carter came through in the pinch. "Got 'im!" he barked exultantly.

"Hang on!" Brett snapped, then yanked the big ship into as tight a loop as the controls would stand.

It was a seat-plastering maneuver which a single-seater couldn't have improved on—much. As he went around, Brett grimly hoped that he had figured things out right.

He had. The Oriental one-track mind was not prepared to have a bomber stand up to him like a fighter-ship. Brett, looking down, saw the Jap staring up at him with open-mouthed bewilderment. The *Nippo* made a panicky, belated effort to jerk his crate aside—but it was too late then.

Brett got his nose down, lined his sights, and tripped his trigger. The big slugs poured into the Zero cockpit. The Jap's body, as if it were made of rubber, bounced grotesquely from the impacts. The Zero slewed off into a dizzy sideslip, a dead hand upon the stick.

For a second time that day Ray Carter lost a grip on his composure. He said again, when Brett had leveled off, "Well, I'll be absolutely damned."

Brett headed once more for his point option, but he didn't get very far. The motor coughed with a strangled, warning sound. Brett's fingers leaped swiftly to the throttle quadrant. His mixture control was in the right place, so was his supercharger handle, his throttle and the propeller pitch control. Glancing at the dials he checked his motor

heat and amperes. Everything in order. The motor coughed again. His eyes snapped to the gas gauge—almost empty. He switched to his reserve tank, but the motor didn't like that, either.

The next step in the procedure was routine—a landing place. He nursed the SBD around in a gentle bank, and glued his eyes upon the southern shore line of New Britain, about two miles away.

THE first survey brought a cold hard lump into his stomach. The jungle seemed to crowd the shore line at all points. Not until the ship limped nearer did his eyes pick up a sight which brought a rudimentary grunt of hope. A slender strip of white was traced along a shallow indentation on the shore. It was a beach, of sorts, perilously small. Maybe he could find a better one. His motor took issue on the point. It gave a violent snort, and quit.

"Bail out, Carter, if you want to," Brett said shortly. "I'm going to try to set 'er down on that sliver of sand. Better jump. You can get ashore."

"Thank you, sir," said Carter. "But I'm allergic to silk. I'll stick around."

Brett didn't argue. He had too many other things on his mind just now. He was nursing the plane in as shallow a glide as it would stand, and the closer he got to shore, the worse the chances looked.

"What we need now," he grunted, "is a helicopter."

"Or the wings of an eagle," supplemented Carter.

One chance! Just one. Muff this landing, and he'd probably never make another. All of Brett's perceptions were tuned to concert pitch. They had to be. He had to fasten every detail in his mind, rivet it in place, for he would have no second guesses.

The beach looked hard, and fairly smooth, but desperately narrow. It sloped, too, toward the water, and, toward the far end, the trunk of a fallen gum tree had toppled across the path

Brett had to take.

His concentration was intense and cold. He didn't hesitate. He measured the air-inches with the caliper of his mind, then dropped his ship into a whistling sideslip.

It was tricky to control, because his landing flaps, his diving flaps and wheels were down. Nothing but the most delicate of instinct could have held it where he wanted it.

When he leveled off, the upper branches of the trees grabbed hungrily at his undercarriage, but failed to hold. The beach came leaping at him. Brett stalled the bomber in—made a flat-top landing, hoping that his landing hook would bite into the sand, as a substitute for the *Falcon's* arresting gear. Simultaneously he must maintain a wing-tilt, to compensate for the sloping of the beach.

The landing hook took hold. The wheels hit in exact unison with a jarring impact. Brett kept the stick hauled back into his belly, but the forward speed of the big ship was still enough to chill his blood. The tree trunk loomed ahead of him—a solid barrier.

Brett waited until the final split-hair instant. Then, with ailerons and rudder, he sent the bomber slewing toward the jungle. The plane made a half turn, groaned in every joint, tipped drunkenly, but stopped—upright. The right wing rested gently on the log.

IV

BRETT slid back the hatch above his head, glad to find it wasn't jammed. He climbed to the ground, and found that his knees were not as steady as they might have been.

Carter joined him a moment later. He was slightly green. His eyes were steady, though, and they met Brett's without wavering. Carter's voice came out with an effort which left it almost toneless:

"You've shown me the greatest flying today I've ever seen—or ever hope to see."

Brett's jaw dropped in surprise. He

searched for some further sign of amnesty in Carter's eyes, but it wasn't there. The chill impersonality had closed in again like a pair of shutters. Carter had given the devil his due, and that was that.

"Thanks," Brett said briefly. Then, "It's possible they might have seen us turn back and come down. We'll camouflage the ship."

They did a hasty, but effective job, with the aid of pocket knives, cutting brush and laying it on the wings and fuselage. They had scarcely finished when a Jap scout plane came nosing about the area. He didn't hover above the spot, so it was safe enough to assume he hadn't seen the SBD.

"Sure as hell they'll send patrol boats, though," said Brett. "Let's get the gun out of the back cockpit, and mount it along the shore." Carter shot him a curious glance, and Brett explained:

"If they *do* show up, they'll expect the gun to be in the plane, and they'll keep it covered. They'll also stay behind their armor. Our best chance will be to take them from the side."

Carter nodded, and they went to work, laboring in a strange, unnatural silence. It seemed incredible to Brett that two men whose lives were dangling by the same thin thread, should be so many miles apart in other ways. Yet, that's the way it was.

When the gun was mounted and well hidden, Brett gave the motor a quick check-up. He found what he'd suspected. A Jap slug had nicked the gas line, and there was no way to repair it with the tools at hand. He shrugged, and led the way to the improvised gun nest. When the heavy silence became almost unbearable, Brett said:

"Aren't we being a bit pig-headed, Carter?"

Carter made a careful, unnecessary adjustment on the gun. "It's possible," he replied slowly, but did not turn around.

Brett said, "Let's have it out." He settled his back against a tree, and fished out a pack

of cigarettes. Carter turned, found a seat nearby, accepted a smoke and lighted it.

"There's nothing to have out," he said quietly. "Besides you have me at a disadvantage."

"Nuts!" snapped Brett. "Forget my braid, and get things off your chest. It may be your last chance."

"Yes, it may be," conceded Carter. He showed no inclination to continue.

"Let's start from the fact that you hate my guts," Brett prompted.

"Sure I do," said Carter with complete frankness. "But you already *knew* that."

"I guess I did," said Brett. "And the reason for it. You think I kept you out of a commission. Do you think I did it deliberately?"

"No," said Carter, handing Brett a big surprise. "Under the circumstances you were justified in washing me out. The point is, I believe I'd have made the grade under another instructor. I believe that another man, less hardboiled than you, could have taught me how to dive bomb. I couldn't take the sort of discipline you handed out, because I knew you'd never bombed a live target, and I couldn't accept you as the real McCoy."

"And you can't yet, huh?"

"Not yet," said Carter simply.

Brett analyzed this as if talking to himself aloud. In a way, he was, as a means toward clarifying his thoughts.

"I see," he mused. "I believe it goes like this: On my first chance, I miss the best possible target—a flat top. It was traveling at full speed. The inference was, aboard the *Falcon*, that I missed because of cold feet from ack-ack, flack and Zeros. Fair enough—but, today I scored a bull's-eye under anti-aircraft conditions which were just as bad. Of course I hit a sitting target, but it washes out the yellow-streak theory, just the same."

He took a long drag from his cigarette while Carter watched him curiously.

“And so,” Brett continued carefully, “that leaves just one more theory, namely that I have a tendency to get buck fever when I line up on a vitally important *moving* target, and when the chips are down. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” said Carter dryly.

“I thought it would,” said Brett. “And summing up, it would please you and some others on the *Falcon* if I should pan out to be just a bust. Is that correct?”

Carter nodded. “Speaking for myself, yes,” he admitted honestly. “I’m not proud of it, but that’s the way it is. If you turned out to be really hot stuff, it would make a mug of me, and of my opinion of you. I hate to make wrong guesses.”

Brett smoked awhile in thoughtful silence.

He was not the least resentful. He even admired Carter for his frankness, and wished there was some way to meet the man upon more pleasant terms. Brett also believed he knew the reason why this could never be—Jane Hall. The quick disturbing thought of her caused him to forget Carter temporarily. When he glanced in the other’s direction a few minutes later, Carter, also, was lost in his own dreams, gazing into space, probably thinking of Jane Hall.

THE meditations of both men were interrupted by the faint sound of a motorboat exhaust. They both heard it at the same time, and stiffened to attention. It grew in volume, as the patrol boat cruised the along the coast.

There was no way of knowing whether the boat was on a routine patrol, or whether it was looking for Bretts’ ship. It didn’t make much difference. The ultimate result would be the same at any rate, because the SBD could be spotted easily from the water.

This was confirmed almost at once. Hardly had the nose of the boat pushed into sight, than its motor was suddenly throttled down, and the excited jabbering of Jap voices came

to the two men where they crouched behind a screen of leaves just inside the jungle wall. The Japs were pointing toward the SBD. There were six men in the boat.

Brett made an instinctive move toward the gun, then stopped. Carter, after all, was the best man for this job. He was accustomed to the weapon. His experience with it had been recent. Brett nodded toward the twin barrel .30 caliber. He whispered:

“It’s your baby, Carter. They’ll come in to snoop, and you ought to get a broadside shot.”

Carter shot him a curious glance, as if he hadn’t expected a break of this sort. He said, “Okay,” and slid behind the gun.

The following moments proved the soundness of Brett’s, judgment in removing the gun from the rear cockpit. The Japs apparently assumed that the plane’s armament was still in place beneath the camouflage, and, that if the Yanks intended to make a fight of it, this was the gun they’d use. Accordingly the patrol boat eased in cautiously, its nose pointing toward the plane. The Japs were crouched behind the protection of the armor-plate shield at the boat’s bow. They were a perfect target for the hidden gun on shore.

“Now?” breathed Carter.

“Pour it on,” said Brett. “They’re about to plaster our ship.”

Carter checked his sights an instant longer, then his finger closed gently on the trigger. The first burst was low, in the water. He raised it calmly, and the second burst slammed solidly into the crowded knot of Japs.

A surviving Nippo, who thought faster than the rest, swung the boat’s machinegun toward the source of Carter’s tracer bullets. The Jap got in a lucky burst which chewed the leaves about the hidden nest.

Carter cursed impersonally, shifted his aim a fraction, and blew the Jap machine-gunner from the boat. He then poured a few more blazing slugs into the bloody shambles, and the job was finished.

Brett, up to now, had figured on the

capture of the Jap boat for the purpose of escape, but the idea was short-lived. The Jap pilot, before dying, had managed to slap the throttle open, and yank the wheel around. The patrol boat was now heading for the open sea, manned with a crew of corpses.

"Fun while it lasted," observed Carter, stepping from the gun. "Now what?"

"Damned if I know," admitted Brett.

A strange voice from behind them said:

"Just leave it to your Uncle Dudley."

Both men spun about—caught flatfooted. Brett rasped, "What the hell!" as his eyes, half blinded from the waters' glare, could see no source from which the voice could come.

THEN the foliage of the jungle seemed to separate. A small portion of it took on the outline of a man, clad from head to foot in spotted clothes which blended with the bush.

"Who are you?" demanded Brett.

A white grin broke through the camouflage on the man's face. "Name's Dudley," said the man. "First Lieutenant U. S. A. Intelligence. Saw you land. Just got here. Nice shootin'."

Brett let his breath out, and admitted, "You sure scared the hell out of me. I'm Brett. This is Carter. Do guys like you just sprout around here like mushrooms? Have a smoke."

Dudley reached for the cigarette with a grunt of pleasure. He lighted it, and hauled in a few deep, grateful lungfuls before answering Brett's question.

"I'm stationed here," said Dudley. "Got a lot of pals among the natives. Speak their language. Pick up a lot of good dope."

"Nice soft job," grinned Brett. "And now you've got us on your hands."

"Yep. Glad I happened to be around." He gestured toward the plane. "Will that crate fly?"

"It would if I had a new gas line for it, and could move that log out of the way to get a take-off run."

"Hum-m," mused Dudley. "Is *that* all

that's botherin' you?"

"Are you nuts?"

Dudley grinned again. "I'm pretty well set up here," he explained. "Got a shortwave radio. Have to keep movin' it around, but it keeps me in touch with the outside. Got it set up now just a couple of miles from here. As for the log, the natives will take care of that."

THINGS moved swiftly, so swiftly that Monty Brett could scarcely believe it. He kept expecting to wake up, expecting to find that the amazing Dudley had vanished like a figure in a dream.

He didn't vanish, though. He remained very much in evidence, and the guy had a knack for getting things done. He had a hundred natives on the spot a half hour later. While Brett, with the help of one of the natives who spoke understandable pidgin, superintended the removal of the log and had his plane moved to the far end of the beach, Dudley went jogging off for a session with his radio. He was back before Brett's job was finished.

"All set," reported Dudley. "A PT boat'll be here at 22 o'clock: They'll have a mechanic to patch your gas line, and also some extra gas. The rest'll be up to you. You got a flashlight?"

Brett nodded.

"Here." Dudley handed him a slip of paper. "I jotted down the recognition signal for you. Flash this code, and they'll know you're not a Jap. Their recognition signal is on there too. Well, I'll be seein' ya."

"Hold on," called Brett as Dudley started abruptly for the jungle. "You haven't given us a chance to thank you."

"No time," Dudley said across his shoulder. "Got to see a guy about a cannibal. So long. Good luck." The jungle swallowed him.

"Well I'll be damned!" Brett muttered.

"And so will I," said Carter.

DUSK was already falling. It came down, tropic style, like the swift lowering of a shade. Brett and Carter shared the SBD's emergency rations. They sat in their respective cockpits. It was the most comfortable place to wait. The dogged silence settled down once more between them. Brett fought mosquitoes, and kept his ears strained for the first sound of the PT boat.

The luminous dial of his wrist watch said nine fifty-five when the first sound came to him. The PT boat was on the dot. Brett climbed to the ground fast, and stood at the edge of the water, his flashlight in his hand. It was a nasty moment. What if the boat out there was another Jap patrol?

Brett waited tensely, scarcely aware that Carter was beside him. Finally the signal came, the one Brett had an answer for. He grunted with relief, and pressed the button of his flashlight.

Things moved methodically after that. An ensign and a mechanic rowed ashore in a rubber boat, towing gasoline drums behind them on pontoons. The mechanic fixed the plane. The ensign told Brett where to make contact with the *Falcon*.

V

BRETT flew at dawn next day. The take-off was a dangerous, tricky job, but he got the Dauntless in the air. He found the *Falcon*, too, more easily than he'd hoped. He established his identity, and the flat top nosed into the wind to let him come aboard.

His arrival caused no more than a riffle in the ship's routine. The men, more seasoned than himself to the battle cauldron of the South Pacific, were not unaccustomed to the return of fliers who had been given up for lost.

This suited Brett. It was the way he'd rather have it. He was curious, though, as he headed for the ward room after making his report. There was just a chance, a slim one, that the show he'd staged the day before had

raised his stock a notch or so. He wanted to find out. He did. Hal Farrel, stocky and direct, said:

"Well, Brett, glad to have you back."

"Glad to be back," Brett admitted guardedly.

As squadron leader Farrel seemed to it think that more was still required of him. He was not an expert in the use of words, could not control their intonations. He said:

"Good show yesterday. I saw you drop yours in the bucket."

"I can almost always hit a sitting target," Brett probed carefully.

"Well, that's *something*," blurted Farrel, then realized what the words implied. He turned a little red, and said, "I—I mean—"

"Forget it," Brett cut in. "You may be right for all I know."

"I—I'm sorry," Farrel blundered on. "But damn it, Brett we've got to feel that—"

The clamor of a gong chopped off his words. The ward room stiffened to alertness, then broke into swift motion. Battle stations! Farrel started for the door, then whirled.

"We'll probably need you, Brett," he snapped. "You'll have another plane. Come on!" Brett joined the orderly stampede for the ready room. It was a quicker break than he had hoped for.

Farrel had guessed right. They had another plane for Brett. The *Falcon* was short handed from the battle of the day before, so Monty Brett would fly again.

And so would Carter. He was waiting in his seat when Brett came out to climb aboard. Brett made a point of looking at him squarely. Carter met the look with impersonal flat eyes. Brett shrugged imperceptibly, as he straddled his long legs into the cockpit. The take-off, swift routine, got under way.

The target was a small task force about two hundred miles away, a force of three destroyers. It suited Brett, in his present frame of mind. Destroyers were moving targets, tough ones—hard to hit.

The squadron was winging above the Coral Sea. The target was still some distance off, so the planes were cruising low, five thousand feet. The wake of a steamer in the distance caught the skipper's eye. He swung over to investigate. Coming closer, Brett got a good look at the ship below, and his heart began to hammer at his ribs.

It was a hospital ship—the *Flanders*, with a convoy of two destroyers. Jane Hall would be aboard the *Flanders*. Brett wondered if she were watching the planes above, if she hoped that Monty Brett was up there. A disquieting thought hit hard. Maybe she was hoping that Ray Carter was up there, too.

The bombers were swinging away upon their course, when Carter's voice came crackling with excitement through the phone.

"I saw a sub! Just caught a glimpse of it, but I know damn well that's what it was!"

Brett's throat closed like a vise, but his brain kept clicking. He managed, too, to keep his voice distinct.

"Brett to Farrel. Brett to Farrel. We think we saw a sub. Request permission to investigate."

"Permission granted!" Farrel snapped. "Go down! We'll follow!"

Brett peeled off like a diving hawk. "Where was it?" he asked Carter.

"To the left! That's right! Now steeper! Good! That ought to be the spot!"

It was. Brett saw the shadowy, sinister outline below the surface. Its nose was pointed toward the *Flanders*. Brett lined his sights, then saw an evil streak of white. Torpedo! It was headed toward the *Flanders*—too close to miss! It was bound to hit! Unless—

Panic, chill and brutal, made a pass at Brett—but didn't reach him. At last he had his moving target, the hardest he would ever have—and the most vitally important. Jane Hall was on that ship.

The diving angle of the bomber changed, aiming at a point to intercept the foaming path of death below. Ray Carter saw what Brett

intended, and Carter's voice was harsh and wild:

"Make it good, Brett! Make it good! So help me God, I'll kill you if you don't! Nancy Blake's on board that ship!"

The words registered but vaguely as they bounced against the concentration of Brett's mind.

He snapped, "Shut up!"

And Carter grunted, "Sorry."

Brett was cool. The machinery of his mind and body were as delicately balanced as the mechanism in that deadly fish below him. His motions were controlled, well-spaced, deliberate. The eyes behind his goggles were intent, but free from strain. There was no obstruction in his thoughts, no quivering in his nerves.

His telescopic sight was useless. There was no defined target upon which he could align it. His target was an unmarked spot upon the water. There were no instruments in his cockpit to help him find that spot.

The instruments were in his senses, mounted and calibrated there by his years of vast experience. It was more than instinct, it was a definite, exact knowledge of the angles, forces, and the sciences which comprise dive bombing.

He utilized them all, moulded them into a compact unit, then released his bomb. He couldn't watch it strike. He had his pull-out to attend to. It would be dangerously close, but he knew he still had time.

He heard the explosion then—a thundering detonation—too great a roar for a single bomb, so he knew he'd hit his target.

Carter confirmed this, when the pull-out was complete. He said, "You did it, sir!"

A GAIN Brett scarcely heard him, because reaction hit him with the impact of one of his own bombs. For a minute it was touch and go. Brett thought he was going to be sick, actively and disgustingly. He never quite knew how he fought it off, but he managed

somehow.

With the safety of the *Flanders* now assured, he even brought himself to take an interest in the other things about him, the submarine, for instance, which the other planes had ripped wide open. It was a pleasing, satisfying sight which helped to bring Brett back to normalcy. He was feeling pretty good when the planes re-formed and left the scene.

His mind began to back-track then. Some thought was trying to burrow to the surface. It finally got there. He said to Carter:

"Did I hear you mention someone by the name of Nancy?"

"Yes, sir," said Carter. "I'm going to marry her."

"You—what?"

"She's a nurse I met in the hospital at Auckland. She was transferred aboard the *Flanders*."

"But—I thought—" Brett stammered.

"About Jane?" Carter helped him out. "Well, sir, Jane and I are just good pals."

"Oh," Brett answered weakly.

"And—Lieutenant Brett."

"Yes."

"I've been a damn sore-headed fool. That was the greatest bit of bombing I ever hope to see."

"Thanks," said Brett. Then, "How'd you like another crack at pilots' school. I think I could fix it up, because I believe you're ready, now."

"I'd like it," Carter answered hoarsely. "Even if I don't deserve it."

"I'll do my best," Brett promised, feeling swell.

The social hour, however, had just started. Hal Farrel's voice came back:

"Farrel to Brett. How's your head, Monty? All swelled up?"

Brett caught his breath, grinned and replied, "Brett to Farrel. Yeah. It's crowdin' the cockpit."

"How about some acey-ducey when we land?"

"Wilco," answered Brett, then added as an afterthought, "And how!"