



Jumped by a hellion flight of Hun ships, Collier dropped the leader of the Albatross flight.

# THE SOLO SKIPPER

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*His own squadron called him "Mud" because he spent his leave up front with the infantry and his air patrolling their death-infested forward zone to protect them. But to those doughboys who every day defied the enemy barrage—his name was not mud.*

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the fury of*

**C**APTAIN JIM “MUD” COLLIER hurled his Spad through the sky lanes like a demon possessed. His gas tank was about empty. He’d be lucky to make his tarmac, or even the American lines. Weary, and battle-battered, he sagged in the pit as long-range tracer hissed fiendishly past his head. He was a lone wolf, a lone tracker of Boche.

There was a time, before sky guns had distorted his handsome features into the almost ugly face he now possessed, when he had been the dapper commander of a flight of hellion Spads. That was before he had been rushed to a hospital. On his return, he had just taken up the reins where he left off, but had made the request that he be permitted to fly solo. He had a score to settle with the Huns, and he wanted to settle it in his own way. And who was there to deny him this request? He had a record that was the envy of many. He had a skill and fighting spirit that was never bettered. Headquarters allowed him his own way, since that way brought real results.

Today he had gone deep into enemy territory to smash a line of enemy kite balloons which were a thorn in the side of American infantry. He had sent three of these “eyes of the German Army” down in roaring flames. But he had been jumped by a flight of Hun ships which forced him to the utmost of his skill and nerve. He had dropped the leader of that Albatross flight—a kill which, of course, he’d never be able to claim, for the ship had smashed to atoms deep in German terrain.

There had been a deep-rooted reason why Collier had singled out those sausage balloons for attack. It was because of his regard for the Allied infantry. Many months before his country had come into the war, he had been a lieutenant with the Canadian infantry. When America entered, there came, with the doughs, a younger brother of Collier’s—a kid who, by rights, should have been back home at college. Whenever possible, whenever granted a few hours’ leave of absence, Jim Collier trekked up the communication trenches—on up to the front lines; there to spend his leave in company with his kid brother and the boys of the old life. He returned to his drome plastered with mud. Hence his *nom-de-guerre*—“Mud” Collier. But Collier took it with a grin. He was glad he liked the infantry so much. To him, they were the cream of all branches of the service—those doughs hugging the parapets amidst the fury of red hell. Mud’s associates at 48 Squadron thought he was crazy to invite further

chances of sudden death by crawling up into that death-infested forward area so often; but to him, it was an opportunity of a lifetime.

And now he was hurling his Spad’s nose down over the muck of No-Man’s-Land—tight-lipped, his slitted eyes peering through the flame-shattered gloom for some spot that was not all tangled wire and gaping craters. At his back, gaining fast, were two flame-spitting Fokkers, seeking vengeance—sky vengeance. Collier ducked as a sheet of lead screamed between his wings. He touched his stick still farther down. His badly scarred face screwed up in a grimace as he caught the uninviting terrain on which he must slam his ship.

Down! He was putting her at a patch of darkness which looked like a maze of willow scrub. At least, those willows would break the fall. His gas was done. He must make a dead-stick landing.

Now he shoved the ship over on her right wing tips and screamed down, to flatten, and then dive dead into the scrub. And when she hit, Mud Collier was ready for a headlong dive into space. His safety belt was unbuckled. But he was only dimly conscious of that solo flight through space, following the crash. A piece of snapped brace wire had twanged across his right brow. A million lights danced before his vision. He was out, a badly scratched, badly bruised piece of limp wreckage, when a patrol of bombers picked him gently up and toted him to the cover of a forward dugout.

COLLIER AWAKENED to the mad thunder of a fearful bombardment which split sky and earth in a blazing inferno of sound and lurid brilliance. Mud looked up into the drawn face of a medical officer. Men were dragging down the dugout steps—wounded men, whose muddy clothing was blood-stained.

The sky skipper raised himself to an elbow. He was back in the forward zone, back with the infantrymen. He started. He was back in the zone in which his kid brother was in action!

“Thanks, doc,” he jerked. “I’m okay now. Nothing seriously wrong, is there?”

“No. You’re mighty lucky,” jerked the M.O. “You’re Collier, aren’t you—a brother of Dan’s?”

“Yep. Is he—”

“He’s okay, or at least he was, the last heard from him. He’s out forward with a party of scouts, on patrol and outpost duty. Well, you’d better rest up a bit. I wouldn’t attempt the trip back just yet, in this strafe. We’re getting hell, Collier. The enemy seems to

have our every move taped. German sky men seem to have free range on us. First it was the balloons. We're holding the most important part of this whole line, and every move we make is blocked. What the devil's wrong with our Air Service? I—sorry, Collier, but it's been getting our goats. If something isn't done to block the work of that German baron in command of enemy sky service on this front, well—look at it. Look at these boys dragging in—a steady stream of casualties."

Collier got shakily to his feet. The doctor had opened his eyes to something. There was some deep, sinister movement at the back of the enemy work on this front. It was plain that the Germans wanted this sector at the moment, more than any other; and Mud Collier was determined to find out why. It tore into his heart to see these pain-racked doughs stumbling down the steps, or being packed down the steps for first-aid treatment. Something had slipped up, had escaped the notice of the Allied Intelligence departments.

Mud Collier began to strip off his teddy bear suit. He was going out into the blinding night, to hunt up his brother. Young Dan was a clever scout. He would know something. . . .

"Halt! Who goes there?" Mud, Collier froze in his tracks. The command, in its strange tone, had seemed to come right up through the ground at his feet. "Shoot the password, quick!"

Collier winced. That was something he didn't have—a password, the word of the night.

"Pipe down, you," he snapped. "I'm Dan Collier's brother—Lieutenant Collier's brother. I—"

"Yeah? Well, I'm his ol' man's uncle. Stick up your paws, mister. I got a dead line on your guts with this firestick."

Mud smiled a little grimly and lifted his hands, as well as he was able, above his head. It was a difficult operation, for he was flat to the battered clay of No-Man's Land, where the gods of war danced a dance of death in the rippling chains of flame. He slithered forward and dropped into an outpost.

"So you're Dan Collier's brother, eh?" snapped a stout built corporal. "Just like I thought. Figured to get back to your lines, huh, in that rigout? You think we're crazy. You've even got Jerry boots on."

"Now listen, corporal," jerked Collier. "I admire your vigilance, and will see that it's recognized. But I am Dan's brother, and these are airmen's boots, not German. Now where's the kid?"

"You mean you're Cap'n Collier of Number 48

Spad outfit?" gasped the corporal. "You got any identification? You know how it is in a spot like this—lemme have a look at some papers."

Mud fished out a card of identification, which the corporal slipped behind a ground sheet cover and read by the light of a flash lamp. Mud smiled. Had he been a spy, this was a moment when he could have done plenty of damage.

"Seems okay, cap'n," grunted the non-com. "Sorry I played you for a—"

"That's all right, son. You did the proper thing. Now, where's Dan? I've got to see him at once."

For a long moment there was no chance of hearing the corporal's reply, for a hundred new guns seemed to lash to life from beyond the enemy lines. Their H.E. and shrapnel were scouring No-Man's-Land just ahead of this lonely outpost. The non-com moved in close, so close that his lips almost touched Mud's ear.

"That's where your brother is, sir—up front there some place, with two of the scouts. He's the only Intelligence officer who seems to be on his toes. We been getting no support from any place in the last week. Jerry has had it all his own way. Look at the way those new batteries opened up. Why, I'll bet a month's pay our Air Force never locates those guns. Jerry's got some secret method of camouflage, an' that's the hell of it all. We're bein' cut to pieces, without a chance to do anythin' about it." The non-com's voice had risen to almost a scream with anger, and from necessity to shout above the thunderous roar of the bombardment.

Mud Collier was touched. "I'll bet a month's pay our Air Service never locates those guns." Those words stung him. So that was the opinion these battered infantrymen had of the Air Service! And young Dan was up near the enemy wire, trying to grab a prisoner, trying to attempt some means, in this hell, of getting information on those deadly guns which seemed to spring from nowhere, yet brought disaster.

"In a minute, that forward barrage will die down, sir," resumed the corporal. "Then you'll hear a smaller, sharper ruckus. It'll mean that the Jerries have spotted our patrol. It'll be egg bombs you'll be hearin', an' Lugers, an' the clash of steel . . . . An' I gotta stop here an' listen to it!"

Mud Collier's throat convulsed. He knew the picture the non-com had drawn was not one of bitter pessimism, but one of fact. He, Mud, didn't have to stop here and listen to it. He got to his feet, then ducked quickly as a Maxim spitefully swept a sleet of lead in low across the wretched wasteland. Collier

slipped and tripped over something. He recovered and pulled himself up on that something, then started, as the corporal clutched his elbow.

“That’s Cullum, my buddy, sir,” he bellowed. “Got a Maxim slug between the eyes about an hour ago.”

Collier’s mind seemed to run berserk. Here was something that had always touched him, the courage and loyalty of the infantry. Cullum was dead. Cullum’s rifle was about somewhere. There were bombs. Mud picked up a sack of Mills bombs and slung it across his shoulder. He then grabbed the dead man’s rifle, and before the corporal could stop him, he had hurled his big frame out into the blinding lights of that murderous strafe.

THE WAY FORWARD was blocked by crashing demons of hell. Time and again, Mud was forced down face first into a stinking morass—the slimy maw of a waterlogged crater. But he reveled in its stench and muck. This was the action he had loved in the old days, for it had brought him in closer touch with the actual terror of war, and it had brought him in closer touch with his associates, those devil-may-care doughs.

Now he got to his feet and raced for the cover of an old battered brick wall. It was at this point that the new, local barrage ceased; and then the spiteful crash of whining bombs took up the devilish concerto. He thought he heard a man yell. It might have been Dan. But no—Dan wouldn’t yell so close to the enemy lines.

Something cut the skipper across the face. He grimaced and spat blood from his lips; then he dived into the remains of an old refinery and dropped to a shell hole. He was fingering the safety pin of a Mills bomb when a dark form loomed before him. He glimpsed, silhouetted in the flame beyond, the shape of a scuttle helmet—and then another, and another. Off to the left there was some engagement, a hand-to-hand fight—Dan against a German patrol sent out to get him! Here, right before Mud, was a new patrol. The man he looked at was a burly officer, and he was leading out into No-Man’s-Land a detail of men up through some tunnel shaft.

Collier’s breathing came in sharp hisses. He had stumbled on something of value. This was an engineers’ detail. They were coming up an air hatchway, and that meant something sinister. It meant that this detail of men had finished their tamping in of explosives in a deadly mine beneath the American lines. Soon this air hatch would be battened down, and then . . . . Mud gulped hard. A sudden fury racing

through his being was restrained. He checked the mad impulse to hurl his first bomb into the midst of that detail of engineers. No! A better plan would be to stalk the outfit and then—well, he wanted a prisoner. That’s what Dan had come out for.

The German officer now turned and growled out an order to his men. The main party strode off, leaving two sappers at the shaft. These men began to work sealing up the air-shaft. It was Collier’s big moment.

He crept in closer, his finger itching on the pin of that deadly Mills; and then he lifted his big frame and tossed—but not directly at the sappers. He flung the bomb off to the right, where it crashed not twenty feet away from the air-shaft head. He dropped the bomb sack and hurled himself forward, automatic clutched tightly in his right hand. A man swung on him. His Colt spewed flame, and his one hundred and seventy pounds of weight hurled forward in a perfect flying tackle. He fell heavily, a limp shape beneath him. That shape stirred, and Mud swung.

As he trussed up the unconscious shape, Mud caught a stir at his back. He heard the clash of boot metal on the old steel at the old refinery. He swung. Two men were staggering out, dragging with them a limp, unconscious shape.

That shape was Dan Collier! In a moment the kid was in his older brother’s arms.

“Go get that Jerry prisoner, boys,” Mud jerked at the Yank bombers. “Tote him in for questioning. I’ll bring in—Dan.”

And just before dawn, Mud staggered in through a gap in the American wire, with his kid brother across his broad shoulders. But the kid was dead. Dan Collier had gone out, in the line of duty, attempting to find a solution to the enemy’s supremacy on this sector. And Mud had been on the job to carry him in.

As he questioned the young German sapper, later, there was a snarl in Mud’s voice. He was seeing red. This man before him represented the German army, that deadly instrument which had murdered his only brother, his only kin.

“We know about the mine,” snarled the skipper. “Never mind that. We want information on those new guns, and of the *Staffel* which guards them. Where are they? Speak, or I’ll have you split apart, piece by piece.” Collier had majored in German at Yale. His language was very forcible. It was taking effect. The man before him was utterly cowed. Life to him was very sweet at this moment. He cracked.

“The guns—*ach, Gott!* I should not tell you, but

they are dug in in the Valley of Z behind Montreuse. They are camouflaged, by being dug in on hinged tables. *Herr Hauptmann*, had I not a young wife, who is at this moment lying at the point of death at Dusseldorf, I should die rather than give this information to you. The *Staffel*—it is screened by the Woods of Fontaine. I know no more. I have told too much. Circumstances have forced me to become a traitor.”

Collier turned and bit hard at his lip. This war business was a terrible business. He loathed himself for having squeezed information from this youngster who had, by circumstances very close to his heart, been obliged to betray his Fatherland. It was devilish, and yet Mud Collier had just brought in his own next of kin, his last of kin, the kid brother he had almost raised from a little child. It had been Mud’s savings which had put Dan through school; Mud’s fists which had blasted Dan free from many a fracas in those school days. It was war, this state, and now the big flying skipper, mud-plastered and stained with blood, was ready to go back into the sky, into that vengeance trail which would take him, like a lone wolf, down into the Valley of Z.

“See that this boy is treated well,” he jerked at a top-sergeant standing by. “I want to know that he has the best of care. Find out at once his young wife’s address and see that she is informed of his safety. Goodnight, all. Send Dan’s body out for burial. I’ll make arrangements on the outside. I’ll send a detail up for my Spad.”

With his teddy suit over his arm, Mud lurched out into the blinding night. He must get back to his squadron, and tune up another Spad.

The American lines would be evacuated at this point, long enough for the mines to explode harmlessly. But the doughs would be waiting near by, to rush the crater, while the artillery pounded back the German attackers who wanted that crater, too. Mud Collier had saved a lot of lives tonight, but his job was only half done. And as he floundered on along the battered communication trenches leading out, his keen mind was plotting, planning. This served to free that mind from those avalanehing thoughts of young Dan . . . .

MUD! MUD! MUD! As he flew the lone dawn skies, Mud Collier grinned. They called him Mud because of his love of adventure up forward with the infantry—that mud which now covered up his brother Dan. Mud

had sent word up that Dan was to be buried as near as possible where he fell. Dan would have liked to know that they had placed him where many thousand of heroes had been placed in that last long sleep.

Mud! Collier could taste it yet, and still smell the odors of that vile, death-drenched muck of No-Man’s-Land, that place where the cream of nations’ manhood was obliged to roam, and live and kill—and die. He was proud of his *nom-de-guerre*. He had been instrumental in saving hundreds of lives. Hundreds of bodies would have skyrocketed up above the hellish blast of those twin German mines, had not the brother of Dan Collier gotten information on the time of the blast.

And now this man they called Mud was going out alone, to look for the secret German field batteries, those .77’s which were gradually pruning down the Allied troops; and those German planes which rode herd on the batteries.

Vengeance! Mud Collier knew that on the ground he could only be considered a puny unit against the colossal forces of the enemy. But skyside, with a knowledge of the whereabouts of the secret *Staffel* and batteries, he felt himself a power.

Now he gunned up his Hisso and clipped through a veil of drab, running cloud strata. He was barely clear of the cloud banks before a couple of Archies opened their demoniacal fire on him.

A burst of shrapnel rocked his Spad over on her port wing tips. He pulled her out and went screaming earthward in a mad, plummeting dive, only to rear the ship up on her tail again, in a death-inviting zoom. He scored the sky with every maneuver he knew, until at last he gained the cover of another murky bank of clouds. And now he knew he was in the vicinity of the woods at the fringes of the Valley of Z.

He cruised for nearly five minutes, touching up the edge on his nerve fibres, which had been frayed ragged in the running of that hellish gauntlet of fire thrown at him by the anti-aircraft batteries. Now his lips split in a grin. He touched down on his stick and thrilled to the scream of his rigging in the wind.

As he cut the clouds, his brows jerked up beneath his goggles. He was looking into a line of flashes that were like the leaping, darting tongues of monster vipers; and then he looked only into peaceful terrain. Those flashes had blinked out. His heart hammered hard against his ribs. There was no sign of a gun below, and yet he hadn’t been guilty of just seeing things. He had witnessed the mad splashes of flame being spewed

from the throats of those hidden guns.

Quickly he hurled his ship at the clouds again, and then, in a moment or so, tossed her down. Again those long black muzzles belched their deadly flame. Mud Collier blinked. There are times in the life of a man when, even when wide awake, he wonders at some spectacle, whether it is really so, or whether he is just dreaming. It was so with Mud. His C.O. at 48 Squadron had warned him not to take this trip, alone, in his present mood. Other members of 48 had remonstrated, but Collier had shaken them off. He was here, alone in the pre-dawn skies, almost directly above the flaming batteries of death. A cold sweat broke out over his body. Here was information that was of priceless value to Allied headquarters.

Another battery, and another, thundered into action. It was that time, one hour before dawn, when on both sides of No-Man's-Land, artillery awakened to hurl its venom across the lines, into the lines, in a deadly, harassing bombardment which lasted until the break of dawn. It was the hour when infantrymen hugged their battered firesteps, crowding against crumbling parapets, while tons of steel and H.E. plundered their positions.

Mud could see it all, could feel it all, and out of it came the vision of Dan, his kid brother, fighting out near the enemy wire, hoping to establish something definite in the interests of his buddies who were, hourly, getting blasted from this life.

Vengeance! It was naturally the dominant thought in Mud's mind, but then there was the thought of those infantrymen generally. These thoughts sprang the trip wire of all Mud's sense of regard, of loyalty. He had only one life to give. It had been a badly battered life, at that, in the past year or so. Several wounds had distorted his once handsome features. One of his shoulders was hunched up, and though he tried to hide it, there was a suggestion of a limp in his left leg. Swiftly now he pricked location of those batteries on his map. He had enough to bring about their destruction. But he had so far seen no sign of an enemy plane, no sign of the secret forward *Staffel*.

He ran his plane along the edge of the floating cloud strata, searching through the half-light for some sign which would give him a clue to the position of the *Staffel*. But below there stretched only a seemingly deserted valley land. Now he spotted a small woods, and a flaming splurge of thought struck his mind. He pushed down on his stick and roared earthward toward the woods. If he couldn't locate the *Staffel* from

the sky, he was determined to do his utmost from the ground. His move seemed mad-brained. Why didn't he get back with the information he had picked up on the location of the batteries? That in itself would have been a grand coup. But Mud had turned this matter over in his mind. Somewhere here there was a flight of enemy ships that had, up until now, turned back every attempt on the part of the Allies to get through to this point.

"You needn't kid yourself that you are being given a free pass into this sector," Mud told himself. He knew that there was something sinister, ominous, at the back of this absence of enemy planes. His tires had barely kissed the turf of the meadow beyond the woods when his conjecture was materially supported. He caught the sudden throaty roar of a sky motor—another, and another. Out from behind a fold in the land ahead there zoomed a flight of dull gray Albatrosses!

MUD gasped. He had never played that fold in the land for a piece of cleverly constructed camouflage. Actually that knoll beyond didn't exist. It was a piece of artistic cleverness on the part of the German camouflage section. It had caught Mud Collier off his guard; and now a million deaths seemed to dance before his vision. His Hisso was idling over. From above, a hailing avalanche of lead began to drench the woods area. The Mercedes motors above were growling like unleashed tigers as the flight of death roared above the meadow.

In a flash, Mud's mind was made up. He knew that to attempt to take off now would be folly. He had dropped into a cunning trap. He broke from the ship and dived for the cover of the nearest patch of scrub bush. But he was forced to move on, for those hellions above were clipping the underbrush all about him.

Collier reached the woods, blowing hard. He began to swear, cursing him self for foolhardiness. For a long period he fell victim to this bitter mood. But suddenly he snapped to life. This was no place to give up. He had a Spad on the ground close by, and her Hisso was ticking over. He had information that must be taken back to headquarters. He had chosen to run that mad gauntlet; and the running of that gauntlet was not completed. He pushed off, making a circle to the left through the woods.

Suddenly, as he reached the easterly fringes, his ears caught the raucous blast of a sky motor. He darted to the underbrush and peered out. From that phoney knoll of camouflage, he saw a miniature eruption. The

knoll seemed to split apart, as if at some explosion, and from the center of that burst emerged a plane . . .

Mud Collier gulped hard, choking a gasp of astonishment. That ship was no German Albatross. It wasn't a German ship of any type, but an Allied Spad! A look of something akin to horror distorted Mud's battered features. Here was the key to the whole sinister mystery of Allied failure on this sector. Here was a spy, a two-timer flying the pit of a Spad.

No wonder Dan Collier had been cut down in No-Man's-Land. Every bit of American information of importance had been carried to this secret *Staffel* of death by that pilot now cutting up into the western sky. Mud tried hard to determine the markings on the Spad's sides, but a film of mist blurred his vision. He was trembling in every limb from a mingled storm of inward elements—anger, sorrow for the passing of his kid brother, despair, due to his trapped situation. Every emotion and harassing element possible seemed to scourge his mind. But there was in the back of that mind a deep-rooted element of sheer pugnacity. Fighting Yank guts, it could be called. That film of mist before Mud's vision changed to a film of red. He swung, and shot a keen searching glance at the surrounding sky. The German patrol had moved off, satisfied that they had cut Collier down in the underbrush. At any rate, it was now a job for their ground forces to capture this lone *Amerikaner*.

Still keeping close to cover, Mud trotted through the timber in the direction of his ship. His Colt automatic was digging hard into his right hand. In his ears was the "thrum-m-m" of that spy Hisso. Mud wanted that man, that two-timer, more than he wanted anything in life now. Vengeance! Sky vengeance! He was thrilled with the opportunity of overtaking that scudding ship and cutting down her traitorous pilot in sky lane combat. Perhaps this would be his last fight. Who could tell? But he intended to take that man down to Valhalla with him, if there he must go.

The crash of half a dozen Mauser rifles blasted from the copse across the meadow as Mud neared his ship. One of his legs buckled under him, but he dragged himself, swearing, to the ship, emptied his automatic over the rim of the pit, then floundered aboard. Now his hunched right shoulder gave him a grim crouch above the stick. With a snarl, while lead seared sky past his head, or thumped into the Spad's hull, he rammed home the throttle and darted across the narrow neck of meadow. He slapped his rudder hard, and swung about. He touched his stick trigger

before pulling back on the stick, and a deadly spray of lead met those charging groundmen who poured volley after volley of lead at the escaping Yank's Spad.

Mud's brows jerked up. His every nerve fibre tingled now. It seemed as if he were reaching up out of hell's pit, with a host of devils clutching hard at his heels. But he was clearing, getting up. His Hisso was warm, and pulling fine. Out of range, Mud shot a glance back over his shoulder. In the dim distance, he caught the blur of Hun ships. A grin split his features. He had outguessed the members of the secret *Staffel*, and now, in anticipation, he swerved to the front. His eyes glimpsed the scudding spy ship, a mere speck ahead.

"I'll get you, blast you," he growled, "even if I have to chase you all over France!"

And now he settled down with throttle into the last notch. A faint eye of light was winking from the Spad ahead, and Mud snarled bitterly. That pilot was signaling in code to the German anti-aircraft batteries. It got under Mud's hide. Soon, he would be forced to cavort through the sky like a gambolling hawk in order to clear that hellish gauntlet of red-centered shrapnel. But he was going through, in spite of everything. He wanted to catch that running spy over Allied territory—and then, even if he crashed, his buddies would find the information the Allies required most from a search of his maps. He was utterly prepared, now, to throw all his chances of life into an effort to bring down that spy pilot. And then—he could pass along, feeling that he had squared up for Dan's death.

MUD COLLIER might never have caught that Spad ahead had it not been for the fact that it suddenly took a sharp turn left, to head into the southwest. It was not yet full dawn. There was still time left in that treacherous, ominous hour when front liners' lives were in the balance. It suddenly dawned on Collier that something ominous was in the wind, and then he had it. Those mines, beneath the American lines!

The Boche would be ready to blow, perhaps twenty-four hours ahead of time. And that two-timing Spad pilot was going to observe the shoot. He could see the ship circling now. He was right! The spy ship was covering the American sector below which the German mines were ready to be touched off. A low groan escaped the Yank sky man. He had suggested that the lines be evacuated. Had that been done? If not, the picture would be terrible . . .

Then, even if this move had been made, that spy

pilot would carry the word back to the secret *Staffel*, showing the position of American troops. The enemy engineers would hold their hands, and stall off the blowing of the mines, thus permitting the German infantry to creep forward gradually and establish themselves in the evacuated American lines. No matter from which angle Mud viewed the situation, a menace presented itself—a deadly menace, for the American troops commanded one of the most important positions on the Western Front.

“Reckon it’s up to you, Mud Collier,” Mud told himself. He watched the Spad dip in low, and scud across the frontline and outposts. Mud pulled quickly up for the shelter of a cloud bank. He wanted cover and altitude now, for just as soon as the Hun Archies spotted him, and began to plaster the sky, the spy would be warned.

Scarcely breathing, the Yank cut up into the sloppy drift cloud bank and roared his Hisso out in full blast.

Mud’s blood seemed to be racing with the force of a millstream as he cleared the end of the cloud strata. Now he must go down and chance his life against all that the German ground gunners had to offer. But he was amazed to find himself over No-Man’s-Land. It took a few seconds to pick up that spy ship again, but he found it just circling back to eastward from deep into the Yank lines.

A sudden blaze of fury fired Collier’s being. On the strength of that spy pilot’s information, many of those trusting doughs below, who exposed themselves fully to the ship, would be blasted out of this life, as Dan had been.

He touched down on his stick, and his Spad responded in a power dive which threatened to tear it apart.

Collier’s thumb tramped down hard on the stick trigger. From the cockpit of the spy ship the pilot flung out his arms, gesticulating madly. But Mud Collier’s mind was made up. He wasn’t falling for any of these attempts at friendliness. The lid was off, and a thousand eyes below wondered at the spectacle above, as that deadly Spad from the heights dived like a flaming comet on a similar type of ship. Those infantrymen imagined that some American pilot had suddenly taken leave of his senses—that he was running insanely wild. Mud was running wild, but he was entirely sane.

And now a splash of flame burst from the spy ship’s Vickers. The fight was on. No longer could the enemy agent attempt to bluff his way back to his lines with

the deadly information he possessed. He struck hard up to meet Collier’s diving bus, Vickers yammering wide open. The Yank felt a nauseating pain in his already damaged leg. A black mist enveloped him, and his ship commenced to heel into a spin. But the blast of cold air, as his head momentarily lolled overside, revived him, and that black mist vanished.

The Hun agent had come roaring up to level altitude. He was continuing up when Mud suddenly twitched back his stick, and screamed topside into a sky-splitting Immelmann. He was forced out again. A loop saved him as the spy demonstrated a super-ability at the controls. Lead was showering Collier’s Spad. It suddenly sheered off toward the German lines, floundering into a falling leaf.

At once the spy struck down, his face livid with hatred—and glee. His thumb was coiled about the stick trigger. Here was his big moment. One sharp burst and the fight would be over, and then he could tear straight across the enemy lines back to the secret *Staffel*. But that floundering ship below suddenly flattened, dipped her nose a bit, then tore skyside with throttle full in.

There was a savage grin on Mud’s face as he watched his Vickers tracer streak through the other’s wings. The spy rocked hard against the side of his pit, recovered, and pulled over in an Immelmann. He was tearing to westward now, but Mud Collier was on his tail, a swaying, ugly form above his stick. He suddenly pitched his ship down in power and smacked the stick trigger. A roaring burst of fifteen rounds belched from the muzzles of his Vickers. It was enough.

Mud sagged forward. He had instinctively cut his engine and was now only dimly conscious of direction and altitude. He seemed to be flying through a black fog, down into a fathomless pit.

But with his last spark of consciousness he backsticked and slapped his rudder. A sudden rocking jolt and grinding crash was all he remembered as his ship blasted into the willow scrub below . . .

This time Mud didn’t wake up in the forward zone, but away back of the lines in a white-roomed hospital, and he only stayed awake long enough to satisfy himself as to his whereabouts. That deep, powerful anesthesia unconsciousness was too claiming, and he slipped back easily into its waiting arms, a grim smile of satisfaction on his battered face. By now, Allied headquarters had all the information they wanted on that secret *Staffel*, and those deadly, hidden batteries.