



THE GREATER GLORY

by ACE WILLIAMS

A Gripping Yarn of Singing Steel and Valorous Action in the Battle-Scarred Blue

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THE TWO-PLACE SALMSON climbed steadily, clawing for additional ceiling in the thin, rarified air of the 20,000 foot level. Lieutenant Bert Wheeling, a replacement just up from the pilot's school at Orley, sat grim and tense in the front pit.

His fur-mittened hands trembled visibly on the control stick. His booted feet shook uncontrollably on the rudder bar and the cold clammy fingers of an inexplicable fear gnawed at the tentacles of his heart.

At 20,000 feet, he knew he was safe from the hiddenarchie gunners down below. There were no clouds above him in which a Hun patrol could hide.

But pictures of enemy positions couldn't be taken from the 20,000 foot level. Sooner or later he would have to nose down and circle at a height of 3,000 feet.

FAR below him, and a bare mile ahead, was the zig-zag line of trenches gashing erratically across the brown smear of the earth. Three miles beyond that ragged line was the enemy position which he and his observer had been ordered to photograph.

Wheeling held the Salmson steady as he scooted over the lines. It was his first flight, and he wanted to make a favorable impression on the veteran observer who rode in the pit behind. But try as he would, he couldn't control his jumping nerves. He tensed himself voluntarily to throw off the feeling, but the conscious movement turned into a fearful shudder, gripping his entire frame.

Captain Eugene Saunders, in the back seat, spoke through the intercommunicating phones.

"Better start down now, Lieutenant."

The command wasn't abrupt, but it grated on the pilot's nerves like a chant of impending doom. He tried to edge the stick forward, but the muscles of his arm refused to respond. His legs went stiff on the rudder bar.

The Salmson kited on in level flight. That feeling of fear still gripped him, held him like a vise; he was impotent, weak and abashed in plain sight of the observer behind him.

Captain Saunders had ridden out behind fresh pilots before. He usually gave them time to orient themselves, to get the rough edges off in their first flight. But this time was an important mission. He had to get down, get the pictures, and get back in a hurry.

Corps H.Q. was waiting for them before giving the order to advance. Its long-planned attack was intended to wipe out the whole St. Mihiel salient in a single

concerted smash. He waited just a short moment, then spoke again; harsher this time, more sternly than before.

"I said go down. Lieutenant. It's an order!"

He stood up in the back pit, swung the brace of Lewis guns around on the cradle and awaited developments. His dark, gleaming eyes narrowed to mere slits beneath the goggle glasses. The line of his tight lips slanted abruptly.

CAPTAIN SAUNDERS had a reputation as an observer who had never failed on a single mission. He didn't intend to have that reputation shattered now.

Lieutenant Bert Wheeling had known that reputation before he took off. He realized it very poignantly now, when the captain's stern command blasted through his phones.

He tried again to move his arm forward, but it seemed glued at the joints. He was gripped with a paralytic fear that held him immobile, stiff as a stone statue in the pilot's seat—and just as cold.

The Salmson slid past its objective, still riding the skies at the 20,000 foot level. Captain Saunders' voice thundered into the phones this time.

"Go down, damn you! *Go down, or I'll blast the back of your head off!*"

The Lewis guns swung around, twin muzzles squarely in line with the pilot's head. The captain's fingers were poised over the triggers.

Wheeling looked around over his shoulder, saw the grim muzzles of the Lewis pointed right at him. His mouth pursed, and a sick expression overspread his white face.

"I can't, Captain," he muttered. His lips pressed against the mouthpiece on his chest. "I can't move a muscle of my body. I'm stiff, stiff and—"

HIS halting reply was suddenly blotted out by the whining screech of Spandau slugs boring through the fuselage. A Hun Fokker had spewed from the belly of the blazing sun and had taken them unawares.

Captain Saunders then swung his Lewises around, trained them on the blurry black mass spouting orange flame.

"Bank! Circle swiftly!" he shouted through the phones. "Let me get my guns on him!"

Wheeling got one look at the oncoming Fokker, tensed on the controls with a fear even greater than before. The Spandau slugs were pouring through the Salmson's wings, crackling across the center section, splattering against the instrument panel.

Escape! Escape!

Wheeling became obsessed with the single idea, to flee, to run, to get away! Captain Saunders' command fell on deaf ears. The observer was almost hurled from his pit when Wheeling banged the stick forward and went into an abrupt vertical dive with all power on.

Just what the Hun attacker wanted! It rendered the observer's guns useless, for he couldn't blast back at the pursuing Hun without shooting off his own tail.

"Pull out!" Saunders shouted. He was seething with rage. "Pull out! Give me a chance!"

But Wheeling didn't even hear him. The Salmson continued to dive, streaking like an arrow for the ground below—German ground.

The Hun Fokker followed down in its wake. Two other Fokkers accompanied the leader to make sure he didn't fail.

Slugs continued to pour from the blunt nose of the following Fokker, ripping the diving Salmson from nose to tail. Captain Saunders stood pressed against the gunwales of the back pit, rendered impotent with fury. He couldn't get an answering burst in from his own guns. His own tail continually intervened.

When the ground was almost ready to reach up and smack the Salmson in the nose, Wheeling pulled out of his dive, so abruptly that the wings were almost wrenched from his crate. They groaned, stuttered, but mercifully held.

He had only a minute of respite before the three slower diving Fokkers bore down and hemmed him in. How the Salmson still held together was a mystery.

Hun bullets had sieved it through and through.

CAPTAIN SAUNDERS had slumped prone on the floor of the back pit, with a bullet through his chest. His guns swung uselessly on the Scarff mounting, whipped right and left in the howling slipstream.

Wheeling looked down at the ground, less than a hundred feet below. Bullets from machine-gun nests were up-pouring like leaden hail. Above and to either side, the Hun Fokkers hemmed him in.

There was no escape! He realized it!

He glanced back over his left shoulder, saw the rear pit vacant; the Lewis gun swayed crazily in the breeze of his prop.

But he was no longer gripped with an inexplicable fear. The hot blood pulsed through his veins in leaping torrents. His body burned as though it were on fire. His hands and feet whipped energetically on the stick and rudder, swinging the Salmson in and out, up and

down, in agile maneuver. With consummate ease, he eluded the confident Huns.

He remembered now what Captain Saunders had ordered him to do. He knew that he hadn't done it. It was due to his failure that the observer lay wounded in the rear pit.

He realized now why he hadn't been able to act, up there at the 20,000 foot level. The thin air had made him giddy. The lack of oxygen had dulled his powers of coordination and sent him awry.

The Hun leader was watching warily. When Wheeling made a feint for the front lines, he roared in with both Spandaus blazing to finish him off.

But the man he was meeting at the 100 foot level wasn't the tyro on whom he had pounced four miles up. Wheeling whipped back on his stick, jammed in full rudder, half rolled. He met the Fokker head on, with his Vickers yammering.

THE slugs ripped into the Hun's belly, punctured the gas tanks and set them aflame. A seething ball of fire, it went crashing to earth.

Wheeling had found himself now. Zooming, diving, ripping right and left, he eluded the machine-guns on the ground. He got the second Fokker to pounce in upon him, finished him, and sent the third scurrying away for reinforcements.

To an ordinary pilot, that would have been enough for one day. He would have skied home while he still had the chance to wing through in safety.

But not Wheeling. He felt his former dereliction too poignantly.

He was out on a photo mission. The whole army awaited his return, for pictures of the very position over which he was now fighting. He was going to get them, observer or no observer!

CORPS H.Q. had expected them of Captain Saunders, and Captain Saunders had supposed that his pilot would follow orders. He hadn't. But—

Whipping the belt from his flying suit he tied it around the stick, then fixed the other end to a fuselage brace. Then slipping one boot off, he jammed it under the rudder. With both boot and belt nicely adjusted, he had the Salmson flying in a slow circle, with his own hands and feet free of the controls.

Then unsnapping his safety belt, he climbed up on the gunwales. He sprawled into the back seat, landing on his head and shoulders in the pit.

He gasped a faint sigh of relief when he hurriedly

noted that Captain Saunders was still breathing. But there was no time for further examination. He scrambled to his feet and opened the lens of the fixed camera which was mounted over the opening of the pit floor.

After getting a careful focus, Wheeling snapped one film after another, until all twelve were exposed. And not at the 3,000 foot level, but at the meager height of 600 feet, while the bullets from the ground poured around him steadily.

One bullet ripped through the flesh of his forearm, and he felt a stabbing pain. Another drew blood from his chin that washed down in a crimson stream over his flying suit.

He grabbed Saunders' Lewis and with a brace of bullets put that particular machine-gun nest out of business in quick order. The gunners were mowed down like wheat stalks.

Wheeling reached down and pulled Saunders from the floor. He placed the captain on the folding seat, with his head over the coaming in the whirling air stream.

Then, through another hail of bullets from another ground nest, he threaded his way over the turtleback to the front pit. It was tough going, against the 100 mile blast of the propeller wash, but he made it finally. He whipped the controls free from their lashings just as Fokker reinforcements arrived on the scene.

The planes pounced in on him with guns blazing. But Wheeling didn't try to fight back. His mission now was more important than downing Fokkers. He had to get those pictures back to his home drome!

Down he went, until his wheels almost scraped the ground, with four Fokker scouts hugging his tail.

The machine-guns on the ground had to cease firing, for fear of hitting their own planes.

Dodging right and left, bounding up and down like a startled jack rabbit, he finally won through to his own lines.

Weak, dizzy, but smiling happily, he set down on his home airdrome. He taxied the plane to the ambulance tent where the major and the operations officer were eagerly awaiting him.

"Did you get the pictures?" the major snapped, dashing around to the observer's pit.

But Captain Saunders didn't answer. He was still unconscious. Lieutenant Wheeling answered for him.

"Yes, he got them, sir. Before he was wounded."

The major's eyes lighted.

"I knew he would," he replied. "He never fails. He's a great observer."

"Yes, sir, he is," the replacement pilot mumbled weakly, then fell in a dead faint over the rim of his pit.