

IN THE CLOUDS

by FRANKLIN M. RITCHIE

Hank Durant, flying instructor of Issoudun, A.W.O.L., was up in an unarmed observation training ship—the American battery was firing short of the Big Bertha—his radio dynamo was shot—but getting the Big Bertha meant more to him than just fighting!—There was Betty Kramer’s admiration for one thing and there was Phil Marcel to settle with for another!

LIEUTENANT HANK DURANT, A.S.(A.), —A.W.O.L. from Issoudun—leaned against the cambered entering edge of his R.E. bus and frowned at dapper Phil Marcel and pretty Betty Kramer. Durant kicked uneasily with his booted toe at the green turf in front of the stone chateau at Pierrefitte, just north of Paris, which was now a base hospital. His lips tightened as he watched the flush rising on Betty’s cheeks as she listened eagerly to Marcel’s account of his latest dogfight over the lines.

“Bunk!” Durant snapped, square face flushing. He wriggled and thrust his big hands into the pockets of his oil-stained “teddy-bear” flying suit. “I’ll soon be in a combat squadron myself.”

“Yes?” Betty’s tone was careless and she shrugged her slim shoulders, her eyes still on Marcel’s darkly handsome face.

Marcel turned slowly on Durant, thin lips curling in a sneer. “Sounds good,” he drawled, “but—” He rested his thumbs on the belt of his natty leather flying coat as he surveyed the other man.

Durant’s lean frame straightened tensely. His fists clenched and a red flush mounted slowly from his square jaw to his high forehead. He took an angry step toward Marcel—and halted, listening. A shrill screech and a roar like an express train beat upon his ears. Thunder filled the air. Concussion shook him.

At one corner of the chateau he saw stone and masonry rise upward from the building in a geyser of black smoke, and a moment later he heard the bits of debris rattle back again upon the ground. Shrill screams and cries pierced the dead silence which followed. Nurses and orderlies and pajama-clad wounded poured out in wild confusion.

Durant searched the empty sky in vain for an enemy ’plane.

“A Big Bertha!” he muttered, through clenched teeth. “The long range gun that’s been shelling Paris!”

TURNING toward the girl, his bronzed cheeks went suddenly white and his fists closed so tight that the fingernails dug into his palms. Betty Kramer, shaken and trembling, had thrown herself into Phil Marcel’s arms. She withdrew apologetically, still tremulous. Durant experienced the same sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that he always felt in a descending elevator or a stalling ’plane—but at the same time his vision was obscured by a red mist of anger at the gun which had endangered this girl.

“That gun must be strafed!” Phil Marcel declared, shaking his fist dramatically toward the north. Hank Durant, choking and inarticulate, shot the other man a venomous glance for beating him to the expression of this sentiment, but Betty Kramer laid a white hand on Marcel’s arm and stared up at him.

“It’s up to you fighting pilots to find it,” she told him, with a tiny emphasis on the “fighting”.

Durant flushed, shifting uneasily. He pulled off his helmet, wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a khaki handkerchief, and ran a firm hand through his stiff, brown hair. His eyes glowed.

“Wish I could get a chance!” he said wistfully.

Marcel, the handsome, chuckled unpleasantly.

“Don’t find many guns at Issoudun, do you, Hank?” he sneered. “Too bad!” He laughed again, a sardonic smile on his thin, dark face which had an attraction for women, although the eyes were set too close together.

“I hear you’re getting to be quite a stunt flier, though, Hank,” he added. “Made a new record for consecutive loops or barrel rolls or something, didn’t you?” Marcel shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, I suppose a bird has time for those things when he doesn’t have

to bother fighting Jerries.” The big pilot swelled out his broad chest.

Durant saw litters being borne slowly and carefully out of the ruined portion of the ward where the shell had struck and he stared hard. One of the gray blankets had fallen back, disclosing the white clad form of a nurse.

Fever racked him at once, and his mouth was hot and dry, while the palms of his hand prickled. A red fog swam before his eyes and he swayed for a moment, biting his under lip to keep control of himself. It might have been Betty Kramer!

“I’ll get that gun!” he blurted out.

Marcel laughed spitefully, taking Betty’s arm in his own.

“Got to be good enough to get up to the front first!” he smirked at the instructor from Issoudun.

Durant’s eyes gleamed wildly.

“I’ll show you if I’m good enough!” he shouted.

Without another word, he leaped to the side of Marcel’s Spad scout, which was standing near his own, and leaned inside. Running around to the front of the ship, he reached up and caught the propeller with both hands. He jerked swiftly down—and grinned as the motor caught. Laughing at Marcel who stood staring with open mouth, Durant leaped into the pilot’s seat and fastened his safety belt.

KICKING his rudder hard as he “goosed” the motor with angry snorts, he swung the little bus around and taxied out onto the broad field beside the chateau. Shoving his throttle wide open, he roared into the wind and then jerked his stick back to go into a steep climbing turn which, he decided grimly, would make Marcel and Betty follow him with bulging eyes and bated breath.

At fifteen hundred feet—which he knew was pretty low for stunting—he shoved his stick hard to the right and put the ship into a seventy-five degree bank. Then, centering his wingtip on a jutting water tank, he ran the bus through a long series of tight “figure 8’s” which made his head swim, turning the agile little Spad twice in scarcely more than double its own length.

“I could write my name with this bus!” he thought ecstatically as he roared from right bank to left and back again. To prove his mastery of the ship, he went through every stunt in his category, co-ordinating joystick and rudder bar with the delicate, sure touch of a virtuoso. Then, because it was quicker than a straight or a spiral glide, he sideslipped to within fifty feet of

the ground, ruddered surely into it at the last moment, and set the crate down lightly on three points.

“Reckon I can fly!” he said grimly to Marcel as he climbed out of the cockpit.

The pursuit pilot laughed mockingly.

“What of it?” he demanded. “You’ll find no Big Berthas at Issoudun—with the slackers!” The man’s voice grated harshly. Durant, his vision blurred by his passion, heard Betty Kramer’s tinkling laugh, and he grew instantly calm. His square face was white and deadly serious as he leaned toward Marcel.

“That’s true!” Durant snapped. “But I went A.W.O.L. anyway to come up here to see Betty.” He was silent for a moment, his lips taut, and then he continued, speaking in a slow drawl in marked contrast to his previous tumultuous speech.

“I’m going up to Soissons, where that Big Bertha’s supposed to be,” he told Marcel, staring the other man square in the eye, “and then I’m going to come back and make you eat those words!”

Hank Durant thrilled as he saw that Betty Kramer was regarding him with more interest than at any time since his arrival, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted, and her eyes glowing.

“They’ll court-martial you, Hank,” she breathed.

“Engine feathers!” he snapped, his lips meeting in a firm, hard line. “I’ll get that gun—and I’ll bust this big four-flusher here, too.” His blue eyes regarded Marcel malevolently, and Durant moved toward his own big R.E. observation crate, dragging on his helmet and his goggles.

“I’ll beat you to it!” Marcel shouted in a high voice, cracked with anger, and Durant saw the big pilot running with long strides toward his little Spad pursuit bus. Durant quickened his own movements in getting his ship ready, but it was much harder to handle than the tiny Spad.

WHEN he finally got the R.E. headed into the wind, Marcel’s Spad was already a red dot skimming rapidly away on the other side of the field. Durant clenched his teeth and drove the ship off the ground, unrolling his map on the instrument board because he didn’t know the country, while Marcel had the advantage of daily contact with the terrain.

Durant glanced out on the wing to make sure that the little dynamo—driven by a tiny propeller which the wind blast turned—was in good shape to operate his wireless sending set. He grinned, realizing that this was one advantage which his clumsy observation ship

would have over the faster and more agile Spad, which had no radio equipment. After climbing a thousand feet, he carefully uncoiled his trailing aerial.

His upper teeth bit deep into his lower lip. He had to get that gun. It was a constant threat to Betty Kramer—and somehow or other it had become the symbol of his own manhood. If he failed, Phil Marcel would doubtless cut him out with Betty! The pilot's brow was ridged and seamed with lines of determination underneath his helmet.

Meaux, with its cathedral and its railroad yards and its two branching rivers flashed beneath him—a blur of gray stone and red roofs and blue water—and he swung to the left, following the wavy line of the Ourcq.

A shattered and blackened church tower reaching up out of a mass of battered stone was visible off to the right, and Durant stared until his eyes pained him.

The Front!

His pulses pounded, a giant vise seemed to be squeezing the blood from his heart, his throat was constricted as though some foreign body were trying to force its way upward, and the blood coursed through his veins with a heady exhilaration akin to the effect of good champagne.

He was on the front at last!

Swinging over to the right, he followed the Marne until he recognized, from descriptions he had heard, broken Chateau Thierry lying in its ring of hills with the ruins of the chateau rising from the cliff to the north. Gliding down low, he saw the wrecked bridge, the broad esplanade on the north bank, and the wide square about the Hotel de Ville. He even made out the blackened front of the cinema theatre on the west side of the square.

He stared eagerly about him in search of other 'planes. His heart pounded at the thought that he might at last come face to face with real Fokker or Albatross pilots. But the sky was empty, so far as he could make out.

Swinging back toward the eastward, he swept over what was left of Essomes and Bouresches, the tortured Belleau Wood, and Torcy, which he recognized by its shattered church tower on which the clock hands, motionless now, still pointed to the hour when they had been stricken. He compressed his lips grimly. He had to make good, that was all! He headed northward over Neuilly and Oulchy-le-Chateau toward Soissons.

His heart dropped suddenly and he swore under his breath.

He had forgotten the necessity of making

connection with the artillery in case he should find the gun!

WAVY, zig-zag lines appeared suddenly on the ground below him and he stared over the side of the ship in spellbound fascination. He rubbed at his goggles with the back of his leather glove as though to improve his vision.

"Wham!" A ball of black smoke appeared suddenly under his ship, mushrooming wide beneath him. Concussion rocked the big R.E. as though it were a small boat in a heavy sea. Durant, the flying instructor from Issoudun, gripped his joy-stick until the knuckles of his left hand showed white under the tension, and he grinned in pure enjoyment.

Archies! He zig-zagged cleverly, diving and zooming to throw them off in their altitude. He ran through his bag of tricks with the gusto of a small boy entering into a new-game.

He bit his lip and swore into the din of his engine. He had first to find a battery! Cautiously he rolled in his aerial to guard against ground obstructions and then he coasted toward a spot back of the American lines. Strain as he would, though, he could see nothing. The ground seemed to be all green and brown and entirely deserted. Could it be possible that hundreds of thousands of men were hidden down there? He hedge-hopped, less than a hundred feet from the ground.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!

Four blasts in rapid succession. His nose went up and one wing canted almost straight down. He felt the wind striking the side of his face warning him of a sideslip. He fought the controls, pulling out level so close to the earth that his wheels were almost grazing. Off to one side he saw men in khaki grinning at him.

An American battery!

Durant pancaked into a field which was level, though it was pitted here and there with shell holes. He frowned as he saw a red Spad which looked strangely familiar standing close by, but he shut off his motor and climbed out to block his wheels. Then he went in search of the battery which had just fired under him.

A gruff sergeant, who seemed none too well pleased to have a strange aviator interfering with the regular routine of the battery, led Durant into a dugout which was shored up with rough timbers. The pilot, who was only of moderate height, had to duck his head as he went through the low entrance. He was temporarily blinded in the dim interior of the place.

"What do you want?" a rough voice barked at him.

As his eyes became gradually accustomed to the light, Durant saw a muddy-faced man with two days' growth of beard on his face and a dented tin hat on his head standing behind a board table. The pilot stared with fascination at a brown wart on the corner of the man's chin.

"What do you want?" the demand was repeated.

Durant saw Phil Marcel sitting in the shadows behind the artilleryman, grinning sardonically. Instantly Durant's jaw set firmly and he squared his shoulders as he faced the battery C.O.

"I want a shoot on a German Big Bertha," he said shortly.

"Where's your target?" The brown wart seemed to project aggressively at him.

"Don't know yet." Durant knew himself that he sounded foolish. The artilleryman grunted contemptuously. "But if you'll give me your call letters I'll keep in touch by radio."

"The man's crazy!"

Phil Marcel leaped to his feet, his face dark with anger, pounding on the wooden table in front of him.

"I happen to know he's A.W.O.L.—and how do you know he isn't a spy as well?"

The artilleryman stared into Durant's steady blue eyes.

"What about it?" he barked.

"It's true I'm A.W.O.L.," Durant answered, without flinching. "As for the rest—I'll take it out of that bird's yellow hide after we've smashed that gun." His freckled face was flushed and earnest as he met the Captain's glare. The artilleryman smiled grimly as he studied the pilot.

"I've got a hunch you're telling the truth," he said slowly. "It may not be regular—but I'd probably still be in Brest myself if I didn't cut red tape once in a while. Won't do any harm, anyhow. You wireless what you get, and we can tell from the map whether you're giving us a Jerry target." He thrust out a hairy paw. "Good luck, kid." Durant shook hands with a grin, but Marcel jumped forward.

"I'M GOING up too," he snapped. "I'll signal by Very pistol as I told you." The Captain nodded, but without enthusiasm, and he winked at Durant as though to signify that Marcel was none too popular around the battery. With a grin, Durant went back to his ship. Marcel, however, was off ahead of him as before. Clenching his teeth, Durant climbed doggedly after him.

He had to get that gun! He flew steadily in the direction which the artilleryman had told him to follow in hunting the Big Bertha, whose general location was known although it had not been definitely spotted.

Marcel's red Spad was a speeding blotch of color ahead of him, the only thing which moved in the blue sky with its dappling of white cumulus clouds. The scout ship grew rapidly smaller as it pulled farther ahead.

Black shrapnel bursts which blossomed suddenly around him warned Durant that he was again within range of the German archies. He grinned as he saw that Marcel was climbing higher to get away from them, but Durant's jaw tightened and he glided closer to the ground with his unwieldy R.E., dodging and zig-zagging with the skill of a veteran. The pilot stared at the earth beneath him until his eyeballs pained as he flew farther and farther behind the German lines. Marcel was still in sight, but he seemed to be wandering aimlessly about.

Durant stiffened, gripping the longeron tensely with his right hand, as his eyes spotted a spreading cloud of smoke which was rising from the center of an irregular green patch of woods. Pulses pounding, he circled over the place. He noted with a grin that the Archie fire had more than doubled, indicating that the Jerries were much interested in getting him down. The smoke floated away with the wind.

Hank Durant pounded his knee and wriggled in his seat. It was only the smoke of a battery salvo or of a big gun which was dissipated like that! Smoke from a fire would have poured forth in a continuous stream. He dived headlong at the woods.

Eyes fixed on the treetops, he saw the ground coming up at him with a rush, but he could see nothing there, and his heart sank. Perhaps he was mistaken after all. He couldn't continue his search much longer, either, for his fuel wouldn't hold out.

A chip of wood flew suddenly from a center section strut a few inches from his face, and a gaping hole appeared in the doped linen over his head. Durant glanced around him with a puzzled frown. Another rent was visible in his right wing, and he was conscious of a whining noise in the air.

He clenched his teeth in sudden understanding. Machine gun fire! There were Spandaus or Maxims hidden in the wood—in considerable numbers, too. A thrill ran up and down his spine. There must be something important there if the Jerries were going to such trouble to protect it!

HIS BUS was rocking from the effect of the bullets which were striking his wide-spreading wings. Already he could feel the controls growing sluggish and loggy from the rents which had been torn in the surfaces of ailerons and elevator and rudder. He held the nose of his crate down hard and plunged until his wheels almost skimmed the treetops. Leaden slugs tore through his fuselage and chipped the wooden framework of the bus.

Close down, now, he could see that there was a clearing in the wood. It was covered with a canvas camouflage net—painted like the surrounding trees. A veritable inferno of fire was coming up at him now, but he skimmed the net, dragging his wheels. He clenched his teeth and held his breath. If he caught in it, the jig would be up. His ship would be hurled down into the clearing. He heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed his tense grip on the longeron as the ship tore free, dragging away a portion of the net.

The long, black barrel of a huge gun set into a massive concrete emplacement was visible. The Big Bertha!

Durant banked swiftly around, jerked back on his stick, and shoved the nose of his ship skyward, climbing as fast as he could. Eyes staring through his goggles, face rigid, scarcely breathing, he paid no attention to the machine gun volleys which swept after him. Now he had to find his battery.

A red flash up above him swung suddenly toward the American lines. Deep seams in his face, Hank Durant glanced up and recognized it as Phil Marcel's Spad. He watched the little ship pulling swiftly away from him.

Damn! Unable to find the gun himself, Marcel must have seen that Durant had run into something—and now he was rushing back to give the target to the battery before Durant could get there. The observation pilot tapped nervously at the key of his wireless sending set, giving the battery's call letters. He scanned his map with frantic haste, comparing it with the ground below him to get the proper map square and co-ordinates. If he could only get them to the battery! He glanced out at the tiny radio dynamo on his wing.

He felt suddenly as though he had received a blow between the eyes. His heart seemed to rise up into his throat and then drop back again into the pit of his stomach with startling suddenness. He felt weak and giddy, and his grasp on the joy-stick loosened so that the bus rolled and pitched. His eyes burned and his goggles were obscured by a fine mist.

The Jerry machine gun fire had smashed the miniature propeller which operated the dynamo. He had no way of communicating with the American battery! A groan escaped his tense lips.

Through his misted goggles at which he brushed vainly with the back of his glove, he saw the red blur of Marcel's Spad hovering above the position of the American battery. Even as he watched, Durant saw the flash of a Very pistol from the plane. Three green balls—two red—evidently Marcel had arranged a set system of signals to give the position of the target.

Smoke burst through the treetops of the wood in which the American guns were hidden. The battery was firing in answer to Marcel's call. The shoot was on—and Hank Durant was out of it! A sob struggled to escape his constricted throat. Marcel would get all the glory—and the favor of Betty Kramer.

DURANT banked sluggishly around and headed back toward the German gun position. At least, he might as well hang around to see what happened. He was probably in for a court-martial when he landed, so he might better get some satisfaction while he still had the opportunity.

Lining up the emplacement of the Big Bertha by a jutting ridge and a shattered, red-roofed village which he had noted before he started back, he stared down at the blurred earth. Both the American artillery position and its target were visible to him. He waited tensely for the shoot to continue.

Puffs of smoke rose out of the woods—one, two, three, four, as the guns of the battery fired in order. Durant watched the vicinity of the Big Bertha for the bursting shells. Flame belched up from the ground, followed by white smoke bursts—the battery must be using H.E. shell. Black earth vomited upward.

Durant bit into his lower lip until the red blood ran down his chin in a warm trickle.

They were shooting short!

Durant stared around him in the sky to see if Phil Marcel were sticking around to correct the fire of the guns in the shoot on the Big Bertha. The observation pilot's eyes narrowed and he gripped the joy stick as though to crush the wood in his big hand. He shouted curses into the thunder of the motor.

Marcel's red Spad was fleeing ignominiously, pursued by a pair of green-painted ships of a queer design. Durant, the flying instructor from Issoudun, wrinkled his brows in puzzlement. Pictures which he had studied painstakingly came back to his memory

and he nodded grimly. Two Albatross scouts—dangerous fighting ships.

He stared agonizingly about him. Wasn't there some way he could communicate with the American battery? While he watched, another salvo was hurled at the Big Bertha. Again the shells fell short, a good three hundred yards. The line seemed to be straight, but the distance was all wrong. The fire of the American battery was merely churning up an unoccupied field. Durant loosened the buckle of his safety belt and leaned over the side of his R.E. bus as though that might help him to communicate with the Yankee gunners.

Marcel was almost out of sight—a red speck on the horizon still pursued by the green Albatross 'planes.

A third salvo from the American battery fell short of the Big Bertha.

Tak! Tak! Tak! A purple blur flashed down past Durant's ship and rolled over for a moment, revealing a big black cross painted under its lower wing. *Tak! Tak! Tak!* The sharp crackle of a Spandau gun was plainly audible through the thunder of the straining engine of the R.E.

The longeron on which he was resting his right elbow vibrated under the shock of a bullet so that it stung his arm. A chip was torn from a center section strut. As it flew through the air it grazed Durant's face just under his goggles, and he felt a warm, sticky stream of blood trickling down his cheek.

The flying instructor grinned a little and his eyes hardened. He was quite calm and deadly serious in this baptism of fire, and he noted every detail of his enemy. A Fokker, he decided. Durant stalled, went over on his right wing, changing direction in a swift Immelmann turn and zoomed up over the Jerry. Even though he hadn't had battle experience, he smiled grimly as he realized that his old skill of maneuver was with him. He handled his bus with the touch of a master. The ship responded instantly to every idea in his mind.

His stomach leaped and twisted within him and he was sick and dizzy for a moment. He realized for the first time that he had no gun! Running up from Issoudun to Pierrefitte to see Betty Kramer, he had taken an unarmed observation training ship. Glancing down, he saw the shells of the American battery still falling short, and Durant's lean jaw tightened.

THE FOKKER thundered around in a sizzling loop, and Durant, handling his crate like a master pilot, sideslipped out of the way and zoomed back to

a level with his enemy. His head whirled with the swift motion of the 'plane and the Fokker was a giddy blur of purple on the opposite side of a circle around which the American roared in an eighty degree bank.

His ears were filled with the pounding of the motors, the wild screech of wind in wires, the staccato hammering of the Spandau gun on the enemy ship.

Taut and tense and desperate, he managed to right his ship for the fraction of a moment, just long enough to get his bearings in the whirling kaleidoscope of color below him which was the earth, and he saw the smoke of another salvo rising from the empty field in front of the Big Bertha's concealed concrete emplacement. The Yankee battery was still maintaining its fire, but since it had received no correction on its range the guns had not been elevated.

Shoving his stick hard over and kicking the rudder with all his strength, Hank Durant resumed the mad whirl which was the only thing that could save him from the barking Spandau gun in the purple Fokker. It was only his skill with the controls of his clumsy, unwieldy R.E. observation ship which had enabled him, unarmed as he was, to hold his own with the lithe and agile little Fokker scout which was pursuing him.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, under his leather helmet, and ran down his cheeks. They got under his goggles and formed a mist on the glass which obscured his vision, since he couldn't get at the inside of the goggles. In desperation, he shoved them back on the top of his helmet so that the rushing windstream beat at his unprotected eyes. Durant blinked and gasped, but he held his place and stared down along the banked wing at the bursting shells of the American battery.

They were still short!

The purple Fokker was pressing him closer, its greater speed telling at last in this prolonged race.

Durant shook an impotent fist at the pilot in the Jerry 'plane. He screamed curses at his pursuer under cover of the engine's roar.

THERE was a bare chance to escape if he turned tail and fled—but the shells were still falling short and he wouldn't quit. Durant's face was gray and drawn and ridged with anxiety, but it was worry over the failure of the shoot against the Big Bertha rather than fear for himself.

Bullets ripped through the instrument board in front of him. The glass of his altimeter was smashed, and one of the tiny fragments landed in his unprotected eye,

causing him acute anguish. There was a gaping hole on one side of the fuselage through which the air rushed against him in a steady torrent. The Jerry was closing steadily in, and he could hear the inexorable bark of its Spandau gun. The enemy pilot was firing short bursts.

Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause—Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause.

Each burst lodged at least one leaden pellet somewhere in the frame of the big ship. A veritable web of the gray-green smoke of tracer trails wound itself around his bus as he whirled in his narrow circle. They came steadily closer.

Below him he could still see the steady flashes and smoke puffs as the guns of the battery fired—and the answering bursts as the shells landed. They could probably see his plight, but they couldn't do anything about it, he decided, so they were probably sticking to their own work. Anyway, they probably wouldn't be much concerned with him, since it had been Phil Marcel who had reported the target to them.

Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause—Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause.

Durant clenched big teeth to stifle the groan which sought to escape his throat. The thing seemed inhuman.

Betty Kramer! Betty! Betty!

Durant smiled grimly. Marcel had been right. It was one thing to be a crack instructor at Issoudun but quite another to be of any use on the front. He'd failed to smash the Big Bertha.

New energy pulsed through his aching, throbbing muscles at the thought. Taut nerves relaxed and he grew calmer. A red mist of anger blurred his vision. That Big Bertha might be turned on Betty Kramer again! There must be some way to stop it!

Glancing down, he saw the shell bursts still falling short.

Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause—Tak! Tak! Tak!—Pause.

He felt his bus rock and shudder under a new shock. He stared at a gaping hole on the end of his wing. His hair prickled under his helmet, seeming to rise up against the leather. His mouth was dry, as if it were filled with cotton, and his throat seemed to be choked up with some foreign body. The palms of his hands prickled and were hot.

Fire was licking along the wing, consuming the inflammable, dope-covered linen surface. Smoke was trailing out behind him in a black cloud. Afire in the air! His stomach tied itself into a knot and then emptied itself with startling suddenness. Durant pounded his knee with all his strength in an effort to regain his self-control.

The bursts of another salvo were rising beneath him—still short of the target. He saw white strips laid out on the ground alongside the American battery—probably a request to him to correct the range, since they didn't know that his wireless was out of commission. He had no time to decipher the message.

BLACK smoke trailed out behind him from the fire on his wing. Durant rose suddenly to his feet, clinging to the joy-stick with one hand but leaning far overside to watch the bursts from the American salvo. Frantically he tried to estimate the distance by which they were falling short of the German gun emplacement. He screamed his delight into the thunder of his motor.

The line was right—directly short of the target. The distance, he judged, was about three hundred yards less than it should be. He frowned, biting his lip, trying to recall the clock code signal for such a report.

“Consider the target the center of a clock face. Short is six o'clock. Over is twelve o'clock. Imagine concentric circles on the clock face, the first fifty yards away, the second one hundred, the third two hundred.” The words of his training work burned themselves into his mind.

D6! That was it!

Paying no attention to the hammering of the Spandau behind him, Hank Durant, grinning as he saw the black smoke that now was pouring from his wing, shoved his stick hard left and kicked with his left foot on the rudder bar. He felt the ship swing in a big half-circle, smoke trailing behind. Opposite his beginning point, on the other side of the circle, he straightened up, levelled off, and thundered down to the spot from which he started, closing up the line of black smoke.

He grinned again. That would make a D! He sideslipped out of the way and formed a 6. He sideslipped again and then stared up into the sky.

D6! It was engraved against the azure heaven in a thick black cloud of smoke—a cloud which would be a bloody omen for the Jerries around the Big Bertha if the Yankee battery officers would only have the wit to read it.

Durant could feel the heat of the flames. They were scorching his face and blistering his side, but he stared down. There was a pause in the firing of the American salvos. He swore and shouted and prayed and screamed as he watched.

Flames belched from the mouths of the guns.

Smoke floated out of the woods. He strained his eyes to watch the copse where the Big Bertha was hidden. There was a sudden commotion of the trees. Smoke and fire spurted upward.

The battery had raised its elevation—had scored a direct hit! At that rate, the Big Bertha would soon be wiped out. Hank Durant sideslipped to throw the flames away from his body. In a long target he headed toward the battery position. Wind screamed in his ears. He saw the ground shooting toward him in a blur. There was a crash, a rending—and then silence.

When he came to—broken and battered and bloody, but alive—the grim-faced Battery commander was bending over him, the brown wart working up and down on the unshaven face.

“We got your message, boy!”

Hank Durant rolled over peacefully and closed his eyes. This red-leg was a white man. He’d fix it up—with the authorities at Issoudun—and with Betty Kramer!