



THE DOOMED SQUADRON

by E.W. CHES

*Thirty-four pilots gone—one by one they screamed to their death, and not a Hun in the sky!
And each one that was found had bitten off the end of his tongue . . . What was
the terrible force operating on the Doomed Squadron?*

IT WAS FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH that a plane made a gentle turn over the field of the doom squadron of the thirty-second, straightened out, and slid in for a landing. The ship taxied over to Number One hangar, the gun was cut, and it stopped. A thin but ruddy faced pilot crawled slowly out of the pit and without the slightest hesitation leaped to the ground.

At the same moment, Carry, Commander of the

squadron, cast a dull emotionless eye toward the face of the man who just landed.

“Where is the O.C., Captain?”

“Here, Lieutenant,” said Carry.

The lieutenant stretched out his hand.

“Hawkins is my name, Sir. Sent over from Issoudun.”

“Hell of a day for you to come, Hawkins, and a hell of a squadron for you to come to.” mumbled Carry.

Hawkins looked up from the two oil covered gloves which he was in the act of removing. A grin passed over his face.

"Why, Sir?" he asked.

"Hawkins, do you know what sort of an outfit they've sent you to?"

"No, Sir." he said.

"I don't know what they said to you before they sent you here, and I don't give a damn." Carry paused, took a step forward, and continued. "Look here, Hawkins, did you know that this squadron has had two hundred percent casualties in the last six weeks?"

"No, Sir. I didn't."

"Do you know how many ships we've got on the line? And do you know how many men we've got to fly them?"

"I don't, Sir."

"We've got one plane on the line, and we've got one pilot to fly it. That's the plane there," and he pointed toward the plane that Hawkins had flown in, "and the one pilot that we've got to fly it is you, Hawkins!"

Hawkins glared at the man before him. He'd heard of Carry at Issoudun. They'd started talking about him three weeks back. Called him the Commander of the Doom Squadron. Other than that he knew nothing.

"What happened to your men, Captain?"

"Happened? I don't know what happened. They're gone, that's all."

Corporal Himple, a strange heavy-eyed little man, walked out of the mess, and approached them, "You're wanted on the phone, Captain Carry," said the orderly.

"Right, Himple, tell them I'll be right along." Then he turned to Hawkins "Come along. Hawkins, we can sit down at the mess. Himple, there will show you your quarters later. You can have your pick of twenty."

ONCE inside the mess, Carry picked up the receiver.

"Carry speaking, O.C. of the thirty-second."

"Harold of the fourth Division," said the voice.

"Listen, old top, they're shelling bloody blades out of the Fourth Division. Been forced to pick up and leave. The Old Man is a-raring mad. and he asks why in hell some of you flying marvels haven't picked these Hun batteries up. They're too far back for the balloons. Can't see them."

"Wait, wait, Harold, what the devil are you talking about? Say it slowly." hollered Carry into the mouthpiece.

"They're shelling hell out of us, here. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"General Bates wants to know why you can't send a man over to find out where the Hun batteries are. Must have a hundred of them. Want to give them some of their own medicine."

"Tell the General to go to—" Carry was in no mood to speak rationally. He didn't care what he said to them. He didn't care what they thought. Yet he hesitated. His eyes moved over to Hawkins, paused a moment undecided.

"Hold on a minute," he shouted through the wire.

"Hawkins, how's your ship?"

"Fine," said Hawkins.

"How would you like to make your first reconnaissance trip?"

The enthusiasm of the beginner spurred Hawkins to action.

"Sure," he said.

"Ever been over the lines?"

"No, but I may as well make it today as any."

Carry turned back to the wire.

"Where do you think the batteries are?"

"About square thirty-two, map C, or vicinity. You can't miss them. They've eased up a bit now, but there must be a million of them."

"All right, Harold. I'm sending a man over right now. You'll get a report as soon as he returns—if he does."

Carry replaced the receiver. He turned to Himple.

"Have Sergeant Mason fill Lieutenant Hawkins' ship with gas and oil. He's taking off." He turned to Hawkins, motioned him over to the large squared map that covered half of the side wall of the mess.

"There's Square thirty-two in Map C. About thirty kilometers away. That's the square where you will find the dozen batteries that have been shooting the devil out of the Headquarters of the Fourth Division. You'll find them not far from one of the small roads, or close to the narrow gauge railroad there.

"Yes, Sir," said Hawkins.

Himple returned. He reported a leaky gas lead. The line would have to be changed. It would take fifteen minutes.

"Better sit down, Hawkins, and rest a bit. It's a damn shame to send you out on a job like this the minute you've come."

"That's all right, Captain, I don't mind it."

"Not the usual sort of thing to send a man over by himself for the first time."

Captain Carry sat down at the table. The mess orderly passed by. Carry looked up.

"Sorry. Hawkins, that I didn't think that you'd like a bit to eat before making the trip. Do you want something?"

"I think not, Captain Carry. A cup of coffee if they have it, Sir."

"Bring me some coffee, Myers," muttered the Captain. The mess orderly nodded, and passed into the kitchen.

HAWKINS sat down. He sought for some reason to speak to his newly-found commander. He could think of but a single thing.

"How many men have you lost, Captain?"

Carry rose slowly, stared dully before him.

"My God!"

He fell again into his chair, his head dropped between his hands and sunk lower and lower toward the table.

Myers came in then, and set a cup before the confused Hawkins.

"Captain," he said in a manner that bordered upon childishness, "a cup of coffee might make you feel better."

"No. None of that." His head raised again, "I never touch the damn stuff." He looked dully at Hawkins. "Don't mind me, Hawkins. Don't mind me. I've been through an impossible six weeks. At times, I think that I'm insane! Drink, old man, don't mind me." Hawkins raised the cup to his lips, drank slowly. A strange and inutterable feeling of fear was coming over him. He started to question Carry but his words would not come.

Himple came in then, to inform them of the ship's readiness. Carry rose slowly as if wavering at the edge of some great decision.

"I am tempted to order you to stay on the ground. No. No, No. Go ahead, Hawkins, and may God be with you! . . . Wait . . ." He was hesitating again in that strange manner. "The gunnery Sergeant will give you the maps. . ."

Hours had passed.

Corporal Himple brushed through the open door of the mess. Carry stood before him.

"Two hours and forty minutes he's been gone. Sir. The Sergeant says that he thinks that Lieutenant Hawkins might have had some trouble with his gas line, Sir. Thinks that he might have landed someplace."

"Landed. Hell! He's dead."

"But his reserve tank. Sir. He might even be coming back now. Spads have been known to—"

"Himple, the Spads in this squadron have only been known to do one thing, and that's to crash!"

The telephone rang. Himple moved toward it, pulled off the receiver.

"The Thirty-Second, Sir. Corporal Himple speaking . . . Captain Carry? . . . Just a minute, sir."

He turned to Carry.

"Captain Harold of the Fourth Division on the line, Sir."

Carry took the receiver.

"Harold speaking . . . Say where the devil is that man of yours? They're unloading tons of the stuff on us. The General is . . ." The voice was interrupted by a dull thud that came over the wire. It was followed by a silence.

"Hello!! Hello!" Carry shook the hook. There was no answer. . . He knew that another tragedy had occurred through the inability of the Thirty-Second to ward off their doom of death.

AS CARRY stood there, his eye-cast toward the floor, he heard the purr of a motor as it passed above him and swished down to a landing. He dashed to the door. A sudden hope. Hawkins might have come back. A moment his eyes sought the machine. A two-seater Brequet.

He walked across the field as two men climbed out of the cockpit.

The first to approach him of the two was a young man. Thin, he was, with an ease in his walk. He stretched out his hand.

"I'm Clayton, Intelligence Service. Hear you've been having rotten luck down here."

Carry looked at the man before him. Young, he thought, to be a Major.

"Glad you've come, Major Clayton. Got word you were coming yesterday."

Clayton turned to the man who had come with him.

"This is Hamden," he said. "A good man but a rotten pilot."

Carry, Clayton and Hamden sat at one of the tables in the squadron office to the rear of the mess.

"Come now, Carry," said Clayton, "out with it. What has happened to your men?"

"My God, Major," he said, "I don't know!"

"Now, wait a minute. I came here for the purpose of finding out and I am going to. I want you to tell the story in as rational way as possible."

"I tell you. Major, I don't know!"

"When was the first of these strange losses in your squadron?" asked Clayton.

"About six weeks ago."

"Well, what happened, and why did you think that it came about in other than a natural sort of way?"

"Case, leader of a flight, went over the lines with five men. He was gone half an hour. When he came back he had three."

"But Captain Carry, there is nothing extraordinary about losing two men in a flight of five."

Carry looked up.

"Major Clayton, listen. When Case came back he said that there hadn't been a Hun in the skies. They passed over the lines too high for the machine-guns and too low for Archie. It had been damp all day long, there were no bumps in the air—yet those two men, within two minutes of each other, spun out of flight, crashed into the ground, and burned!"

"Bad rigging, perhaps?"

"Impossible!" shouted Carry. "From that day until this I have tested every ship before it took off!"

"How many, all told?"

"Thirty-five, Sir."

"And all in the same manner?"

"All but two, Case and another man. Both of them were shot down. I got the information from the balloons, and each of them crashed on this side."

"Then you have lost thirty-three in this singular manner?"

"Yes."

"Do you suspect any one. Clayton stopped abruptly.

"Of what?" queried Carry.

"Of having anything to do with it."

"How? In what manner?" questioned Carry.

"Carry," it was Hamden speaking the first word he had said since the beginning of the inquiry. "I've been flying since 1916. There's damned little about machines that I don't know, and I'll say that there is no possible manipulation of controls or rigging that could knock down thirty-three men in six weeks without the O.C. of the outfit finding some trace of the thing."

Carry turned quickly. His eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Oh, I meant no reflection upon you, Carry. I meant that there must be something else."

The conversation was interrupted by a knock upon the door. Himple entered.

"The central wireless station has just reported sir, that a Nieuport 27 crashed inside the lines.

It was Hawkins, sir. They found his name on the identification tag."

Carry paused a moment, staring wildly at the man before him.

"For God's Sake!" Is this thing never going to stop?"

"What is that?" asked Clayton.

"Thirty-four," Carry's head sank between his hands.

"Look, Himple. go hack to the 'phone. Find out the position of the crash from C.W.S.," commanded Clayton.

"Very good. Sir." Himple turned upon his heel and left.

TWENTY MINUTES later, a car drew along the side of the mangled remains of a ship, three miles and to the south and west of Ypres. It drew to a sudden stop, and Clayton, Hamden and Carry jumped to the ground. A pace forward, and they paused. Wide-eyed they looked at it.

A grotesque thing of broken longerons and spars. Its terrific contact with the earth had forced the nose of the plane deep into the loose soil. The wings had left the body in their effort to continue along in the direct course of their line of flight. They seemed to clutch the ground as though they had grabbed at the thing which had given death. Of the tail there was little left. It, too, was flattened against the surface of the earth beneath it.

Hunched up in the center was what remained of a man. His feet were bent backward, his knees under his chin, his torso, covering all. Midway between his shoulders, was a head that seemed to roll from side to side, as though it were hung from a thread. Directly downward stretched the two arms. They were stiff. They were clutched tightly. They were of a bloodless white.

Carry moved his hands up to his eyes, and staggered backward a pace.

"What a crash!" came from the lips of Clayton.

Hamden looked more coldly. He moved forward, stopped and picked up a portion of the wing. The rest fell away as he became erect.

"I have seen crashes—Many of them, but never have I seen any the likes of this. Never . . . The man must have been going three hundred when he hit!"

"Is this the first one of these crashed you have seen, Carry?" Carry made no answer. Clayton repeated his question.

His hands passed from his eyes, and his gaze lingered again upon that pitiful object before him.

He had heard the question, but for a moment he had made no effort to answer.

“Carry!” shouted Clayton.

“Yes . . . No, this is the first I’ve seen. Most of them went down on the other side. Only one on this. It burned”

Hamden started a methodical inspection of the rigging. Turn-bolts and wires passed through his hands. Cotterpin after cotterpin he drew from its position. Slowly he worked with persistence. Control wires, fittings—one by one he went over the lot of them.

Clayton had taken a few paces forward; stood beside the body. His hands went to the head, pulled it backward. Carry watched him as his hand passed over the mouth, drew it backward so that the teeth might be seen.

“Ah!” passed through the lips of Carry, and Clayton withdrew from his position.

They retraced their steps to the car. They spoke no word, but sat there side by side, watching the methodical Hamden as he fulfilled his task.

“Well,” said Hamden. “I’m through.”

He turned, walked silently to the car, scribbled a hurried note, gave it to the guard and Clayton murmured something about sending the body to the Hospital of the Fourth Division. Then the car moved away.

THE THREE of them sat at their evening meal. It had been a silent one, and not a single word had been spoken.

“The face of the man—you saw it?” asked Clayton.

“Yes,” said Carry, “Horrible! The agony he must have suffered before the end. . . .”

Again they dropped into their torpor. Half of the dishes had been cleared away untouched when the coffee was served. Clayton had retained his thoughtful silence, but now, while pulling at his cigarette and sipping slowly of his coffee, he spoke.

“Yes, that face. You saw how taut the muscles were?” he asked.

Carry looked up.

“Yes,” he said.

“And those hands,” he paused and continued, “those hands were clutched with all of the strength that he had . . . But there was one strange thing—you didn’t know, but I tried to open his mouth. It was closed as tightly as a vise, and between his teeth there was a tip of his tongue. That tongue was almost bitten through.”

Hamden ignored the revelation. “There was nothing wrong with that bus. I went over every wire. I tell you. nothing could have gone wrong with it.”

Carry broke out again.

“Dammit, man, I tell you there was nothing wrong with that machine, or any other one that has left the field!”

Carry had risen to his feet.

“Stop this!” ordered Clayton. “Sit down, Captain, and drink your coffee.”

“I don’t drink the damn stuff!”

Carry had been strained to a limit. Thirty-four men! If was more than a sane and rational mind could stand.

“Sit down, old man, it’s a rotten deal you’ve had. Hamden meant nothing.”

Carry dropped into his chair.

“That tongue,” murmured Clayton, “it was strange about that tongue.”

“Why?” asked Hamden.

“Hamden,” said Clayton, “just before I got into the Air Service, I was in my senior year in medical college. I had a roommate, a German fellow with a very morbid disposition. A decent sort, but he studied too much. Spent too much time with his books. Just before the finals that year he killed himself.

Clayton paused a moment.

Carry looked up.

“What had that to do with this?”

“He was a suicide.”

“But, Major, it’s impossible to think that such a thing should happen to . . .”

Clayton raised his hand. Carry became silent.

“No, No. I didn’t say that, but there was a strange similarity between the two. That German had his mouth set as tight as a vice, and his hands were clutched as tightly as they were capable.

“I can see no parallel,” ventured Hamden.

“And each of them had this tongue between his teeth,” said Clayton, dully.

A STILL. and unmolested dying field spread itself between the officer’s mess and the vacant hangars. It was at dinner, that evening, that the three silent officers were interrupted by the constant ringing of the telephone.

Carry answered it, paused a moment, then turned to Clayton.

“It’s for you, sir. The Hospital of the Fourth Division.”

“Clayton speaking . . . Yes . . . I thought as much . . . thank you.”

He replaced the receiver upon the hook, walked the length of the mess and back again. Then he stopped.

"Carry," he said quietly, "did this man Case, this man who was shot down in flames, drink coffee?"

"Clayton, I toil you that you are on the wrong trail—there was nothing the matter with any of those men when they went to their machines. Whatever happened, happened after they got in the air."

"Carry, answer my question!" demanded Clayton.

"Case?" Carry paused. "No, he hated the stuff as much as I do."

"Mh," muttered Clayton. "And this man, Hawkins?"

"Yes, Major." Carry had become calm again. He was perplexed by the Major's questioning.

"Carry, Hawkins never got to the lines. He fell before he got there. He could not have been five minutes from the field when he dropped. Another five minutes, and he would have been over, and we never would have seen pilot or ship."

"Yes, that's right," added Hamden.

"Carry," continued Clayton, "what held up Hawkins before his take-off?"

Carry thought for a moment. It seemed difficult for him to remember.

"Why I—yes, yes, it was a broken feed line."

"And how long did it hold him up?"

"About ten minutes, I think."

"Ah!" said Clayton. He walked the length of the room, and as he turned Himple passed the window. Clayton hesitated for a space, then he rushed to the door, and was out.

At that moment Myers entered to clear the table. As he passed the squadron cat took advantage of the opportunity of entering the room occupied by two amazed officers. He walked gently across the floor, and lay in a secluded corner.

SUDDENLY the outer door of the mess was thrown open, and Clayton pulled himself in. Held between strong arms, his feet dragging behind him, was the agonized and convulsive figure of Himple. His pitiful groans struck deadly against the silence of the mess. Carry and Hamden rushed to his aid. Myers stood erect.

"Himple has poisoned himself!" screamed Clayton. Myers drew nearer. He saw Clayton leaning over the convulsive form, saw him force Himple to the table.

"Good God!" screeched Carry.

Clayton had his hands upon the shoulders of Himple.

"What was it, Himple—by God, Himple, tell me what it was!"

Himple squirmed, tried to press the arms of the Major away from him, but he was forced further and further backward.

"Tell me—tell me, Himple!"

Himple fell backward. He seemed exhausted. Terrifying moans came from between his teeth.

"Carbolic!" he gasped.

"Carbolic?" repeated Carry.

Clayton raised himself.

"He's dying. We've got to do something. My God, I've forgotten the thing to give him! There's something, Carry, you should know!"

Carry turned from the man squirming before him. "I don't know. My God, how should I know!"

"But the man's dying!" shouted Clayton. "He's dying! I tell you that there is something!"

"I tell you I don't know!"

"Whiskey, Sir," came a voice. It was Myers. "That is the only antidote." The words came from him like a vicious condemnation of the ignorance of the three officers

"You acted well," Clayton said to Himple.

A strained and ominous silence filled the air for the fleeting of a second. Clayton turned slowly. His eyes found those of Myers. Slowly the assurance of the orderly of the mess withered. Something, some overpowering force of circumstance had found him. He backed one, two paces away, the points of his shoulders sloped forward.

"Myers," said Clayton. There was something almost sinister in the intonations of his voice. "Myers, you know much of medicine."

A wildness crept into the eyes of Myers. His head sank lower and lower, his knees bent slowly. Like a wild beast he wavered before an accuser and an accusation which he alone understood. The short fingers of his hand opened wide for a moment. He wavered, the silence and the eyes bearing heavily down upon him. The innate treachery of him passed over his face as if a mask had been dropped.

He sprang, clutched madly at the man before him. The great impact of the body forced Clayton to the floor, two hands clutched his throat. His breath came to a maddening halt. The room whirred, there was a moment of blackness . . . then came the light.

Clayton leaped to his feet. He was alone in the mess.

Outside he could hear cries. Men moved, ran past their quarters. Shouts of "There! There he is!" Like wildfire the knowledge of the murderer had run over the field. At the door he stumbled into Himple.

"He got away, sir! He's hid in the hangar, there, where the men are."

Clayton turned without a word, and raced across the field. He moved through the men before the open doors. A dozen flashlights played upon the great opening within, and as he walked forward he saw the half dark silhouettes of three men. As they approached him he recognized the limp figure that was dragged to the entrance by two men. Following in behind were an excited Carry and Hamden.

Carry was shaking his head as he came forward.

"My God, Major, how did you know it was this man, Myers?"

"A chance, Carry; I'll talk to you at the mess," he said.

IT WAS at the mess, fifteen minutes later, that the Major of the Intelligence once again spoke of what he called a "case." Carry and Hamden sat before him. Himple stood at his side. The cat was again reclining in the corner.

"Bring me that cat, Himple."

"Yes, sir."

The unsuspecting cat was placed upon the table.

"And, now, Himple, go over to the squadron office and get me the bottle of strychnine—if there is any left."

"Yes, Sir," said Himple, and he turned upon his heel and left the mess.

"Carry, the men who were killed in your squadron were brought down by a grain tablet of strychnine. The medical officer of the Divisional Hospital found a solution of it and coffee in the stomach of Hawkins. It was placed there by this man Myers who gave it to every man you lost before he went over. You are living because you never drank the stuff. Neither did Case, nor the other man who was shot down, drink it—that was the reason they lived to be shot down. I knew it was strychnine the moment I saw Hawkins. The man who killed himself in Medical College had taken the stuff.

"You see, Carry, I also have some knowledge of medicine. I was in my senior year before I got into this little game . . ."

Himple came in at that moment.

"There isn't much left, Sir," he said as he passed the

bottle over to the Major, and took his position at his side.

"You ought know too, Carry, that Himple is one of my men. I sent him over the day after your first strange casualty. When I got here he said that either you or Myers was somehow the murderer."

Carry eyed the man, but Himple kept his eyes toward the ceiling, and his hands crossed behind his back.

"Himple has been watching this bottle since he found it, two days ago," said Clayton as he extracted a single white tablet from the few that were left. Then his eyes lifted to Carry.

"Do you care much for this cat?"

"Well, no. Like to get rid of him," muttered Carry.

Clayton broke a small bit from the tablet, opened the mouth of the cat, and placed a portion of the white substance upon his tongue. A single gulp and it was gone. He continued to lay quietly upon the table, his eyes closed, while the hand of Clayton passed soothingly over his back.

"You must know—you saw—that there was nothing the matter with Himple here when he came in with his poison act." Carry nodded "The reason for that was to find out if Myers did have some knowledge of medicine. You know now that whiskey is an antidote for carbolic poisoning. You didn't know it before. Only men well versed in medicine know that. When he said to use whiskey I knew he was my man. Not positive, of course, but he gave himself away. You saw that didn't you?" . . . Carry nodded again.

The cat lay still, and for a second time Clayton glanced at his watch.

"Strychnine is bitter when taken alone, but in coffee the taste is almost lost. Sugar will kill it. Now, note the effect it has—look at this cat. He is peaceful. He feels as he always has. No reactions yet. The heart is moving a little faster than usual, but nothing more. . . . But wait. At this point a man might be climbing into his ship. He feels nothing. He does not know that he has taken a deadly poison. He gives the gas to the ship, zooms over the hangars, and is away from the lines. . . . He moves on. He sees our batteries, our balloons. He plays for height. By this time he is crossing. He has reached ten thousand. German Archie starts shooting the devil out of him."

The cat moved, his head came up.

"Suddenly a strange feeling comes over him. The burst in the air become blurred. A fatal sickness fills his heart and soul.

Again the cat turned slightly.

“He feels a ghastly gnawing at his stomach—”

The cat leaped madly into the air. A terrorizing scream and a pitiful groan escaped through his mouth. It was a moment of horrifying agony, another screech, it clawed one last sweeping second at the vacant air and fell hack on the table—dead!

“That’s what has happened to your pilots, Carry. Hawkins stopped to have his oil line fixed—he didn’t have time to reach the lines. That’s the reason we found him.”

Clayton took the head of the dead animal between his hands. He pulled back the lips—and there, clutched hard between the teeth, was a tongue that was all but bitten in two.

“That is caused by the convulsion, Carry. It comes at the time of the second scream.”

Just then there was a low moan that came over the great expanse of the field. It was followed by a second—like the death wail of the cat that was gone. The three men looked at each other strangely.

“That sounds like the end of Myers.” said Clayton quietly.