

DECOYS OF DOOM

by ALFRED HALL STARK

Every day the patrol went over the lines, and came back minus one plane and one man. Only the missing flyers could tell how they had mysteriously vanished—and the dead were turning in no reports at H.Q.

SPAD 112, *escadrille de chasse par excellence*, with the proudest of records to boast of, had its wind up. From the most grizzled, hard-eyed veteran down to the youngest recruit with his brevet still crinkling fresh in his pocket they felt it, every last man of them.

No longer did the tarmac of the combat squadron at Chateau-sur-Marne ring to the tune of shouts, laughter and the latest cabaret hits from Paris when its pilots foregathered in the den to crack a bottle and spin yarns of the day's high adventure. French gaiety and French recklessness dies hard even in those grim days of conflict but the faces of those stricken cloud riders were drawn and bitter as they groused over their morning coffee.

Bill Riordan felt it most. He hadn't missed the cold glances his French brother officers had shot his way in the last few days. He looked down the silent row of white faces at the mess table. Anxiously he sought their eyes. Surely they knew he would give his heart's blood for any one of them. Had they forgotten?

How many grisly dog fights, how many desperate raids over in Hunland had they fought through together to cement their boon companionship? And now that friendship, forged in fire, seemed to have vanished like the phantom Gothas that roared overhead in the dead of night and then were gone. Their harassed eyes avoided his.

Down at the other end of the long table Rod Sutton, the only other American in the outfit, met his gaze squarely. But Rod's face flushed crimson. So even old Rod felt queer about him, did he?

Bill bit his lip. He could hardly blame them, poor fellows, for Bill had brought the hoodoo to Spad 112.

The French had showered him with every honor. They had made him flight leader—and then it began.

For the past week every time Bill's flight had gone

over the lines on patrol it had come back minus one plane, and one man. Seven men in seven days—and each one had vanished mysteriously, unaccountably. No one but the missing flyers themselves knew how it happened, and the dead were turning in no reports at headquarters.

Not a man there but could and would face death without flinching but the strangeness of these sudden disappearances unnerved them. Suddenly, just as the flight crossed the lines, one of the men was gone. In each case the infantry had been able to confirm the fact that they were shot down but there were no details of the sky battles that had sent them crashing to their doom.

Out of the leaden masses of clouds that shrouded No-Man's-Land a Spad had fallen like a broken thing that is tossed from a window, flaming—that was all the infantry could tell.

Rod Sutton rose from his place at the table and moved around to where Bill sat, morose and scowling. Without turning, Bill knew he stood behind him. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I—I know just how you feel about it, old sky-hooter. The whole bunch is leery of you—scared stiff, and it ain't your fault. Damn airmen's superstitions, anyway! Listen, Bill," Rod's face was flushed, "why don't you turn 'er over?"

Bill rose slowly to his feet, unbelief written all over his frank face.

"Turn 'er over! What do you mean, turn 'er over?"

"Why, that damned hoodoo patrol, of course! You don't have to take it out, you know. Just a word to the old man—"

"Hey, there, buddy, not so fast!" Bill snapped. "What do you take me for, a quitter?"

"It isn't a question of that. Bill," Rod argued, plainly not liking his job. "Not one of these chaps could call you yellow in the face of those."

HE NODDED at the row of ribbons on Bill's tunic. The Médaille Militaire reposed there, the Ordre de L'Armee, the Croix de Guerre. Bill flushed.

"They don't mean anything. The French are big-hearted to us foreign ginks that are damn fools enough to risk our necks for France, that's all," he said deprecatingly.

"I know what they mean. I've been in this *escadrille* almost as long as you have. But there's such a thing as knowing when to lay off. Why don't you ask the old man for permission? A week in gay Paree would put you on your feet—"

"Say!" Bill's eyes blazed. "What's the idea? Some of these Frog buddies of ours put you up to this? I'll take permission when it comes or not at all!"

Rod's eyes fell. When he raised them again they met Bill's hard stare squarely.

"It's for your own good, Bill. Look. Yesterday Rene de Hauteville flew that tail position in your formation. He didn't show up at evening *popote*. You know how the bunch felt about old Rene. You know how you felt. I don't think your own brother meant any more to you. Day before yesterday Jacques Biveau flew up rear. He never came back. Day before that it was Jules. It's been like that for a week. All good fellows—all good pals."

It was Bill's turn to lower his eyes. His chest heaved.

"The gang's on the ragged edge, Bill," Rod went on. "And who wouldn't be? Your nerves are all shot to hell, yourself. It's got to the point where nobody wants to fly that hoodoo position in your flight. It's too much like having something hit at you out of the dark where you can't hit back. And no man wants to write himself off at the take-off."

"Just turn the flight over to one of the other boys, Bill, and it'll save our stand-in with the gang and with the old man. We Americans used to be the big shots around this tarmac. Now we're like mangy curs being kicked around from pillar to post. These boys are beginning to think all Americans are jinxes."

Bill smiled grimly in spite of himself. Rod's eloquence had carried him a bit too far. Bill had a life-size picture of any Frenchman kicking either himself, or his big buddy, around!

"You've got to do something, Bill!" Rod was insisting. "What'll it be, then?"

Bill's clenched fists shook with emotion.

"I'm going after that lousy, sneaking Hun that brought down Rene and the rest, Rod," he declared hoarsely. "And when I lay my sights on him—"

"Don't be too sure. He isn't a mere Hun. He's some

kind of damned phantom. Remember, no one has seen him. He's invisible—and deadly.

"Hun or devil—whatever he is—I get him today or he gets me!"

"Listen, Rod," he said softly, "if I don't show up to *popote* tonight, you'll take care of my stuff—send it to the folks like you promised?"

"Why, sure, Bill, but—"

"Nuff said. Don't forget the medals. My old man's a collector." The flintiness of his eyes belied Bill's grin. "I'm setting a little fly-trap for that hoodoo today. Flying tail position myself!"

"Don't be a damn fool, Bill. It's not your war!"

BILL SCARCELY heard Rod's exclamation as he turned on his heel and strode out onto the tarmac. His eyes lifted skyward.

Blackish clouds in ominous banks and bunches hovered over No-Man's-Land, as they had for days past. It was into that murky bit of sky that Rene and the rest had winged their way to a mysterious end.

"He'll be there," Bill murmured through clenched teeth. "He'll be there!"

Six bright little Spads were already drawn up outside the hangars, getting a last hurried inspection from the mechanics. Bill strode over to his own machine.

"Put the streamers on Andre's bus," he directed one of the mechanics sharply. "I'm not leading the patrol today."

He started mechanically to go over the plane. Appraising eyes and fingers skimmed over the tail assembly, control wires, struts and landing gear.

"Today's the day when I need you at your best, baby," he whispered as he gave the prop a tentative tug to see that the compression was tight.

Standing back, he let his eyes rove admiringly over the sleek body of her, the smart streamlining of fuselage and empenages, the trim lines that seemed to murmur "power—power, and to spare." She was like a live thing, always poised for a sudden leap into her element, the limitless uncharted air.

"Maybe it's the last good look I'll get at you," was the thought that ran through Bill's mind. "There's something waitin' up there yonder with a brace of tracer bullets marked for us. If we only knew just what it was, eh, baby?"

The little Spad was Bill's only love. Born with a passion for anything with an engine in it, he saw perfection in the little combat plane, and worshipped it.

In the air and over the lines long before America had joined in, he would have gone over to the Pershing forces

later if he could have gone on Spads. But the French, in spite of their promises, supplied the American combat units with old Nieuport 28's. Bill had stayed put.

Now he heard that at last they had Spads over on the Luneville sector. He had put his application in for a transfer, eager to step in beside his own countrymen so long as he could fly the little machine that had become as much a part of him as his own right hand.

As he feasted his eyes now on the sweet little ship of spruce and doped fabric that had carried him so often to hair-breadth victory and brought him safely home he wondered whether he would live to wear the khaki of the A.E.F.

The thought brought him back to the present and he shook himself out of his daydream.

"Hey!" he yelled at his mechanic, who understood English, "Bring me a case of buckingham and a case of plain. Quick! On the double!"

GRIMLY HE began to load his Vickers gun belts with a round of tracer, a round of plain, and a round of incendiary bullets in rotation. Methodically he rearranged them all.

"There," he grunted, "You damned hoodoo, that ought to take care of you—whatever you are!"

The other pilots were spilling out of the mess hall now. Half a dozen of them crowded around the sweater-clad figure of Rod Sutton for a moment, then began to move over toward the planes, and Bill. The old admiration for their reckless American buddy showed plain in their eyes once more. Andre LaRue stepped forward from the group.

"Andre," Bill laid his hand on the little Frenchman's shoulder, "I want you to lead the outfit today. I'm flying above and behind."

The other said nothing but his eyes glowed appreciation. He put out his hand and grasped Bill's warmly. One by one, silently, the others followed suit. With that typical French impulse to make the most of every occasion one of them started a speech in Bill's honor.

"Comrades," he began, "our American brother in arms is once more proving himself to be a real hero, worthy of the honors which France has bestowed—"

"Can the obituary stuff!" Bill snapped, glancing at his wrist-watch. "Let's get going!"

An orderly came running up from the direction of squadron headquarters.

"Same orders, fella?"

The orderly nodded.

"You are to fly the same route as before," he panted.

"Hear that, Andre? Hear that, bunch? The same route. You know it blindfold. Fly it as usual, and don't look back. Whatever happens to me, carry on!"

Bill's foot was already in the stirrup. He stepped lightly into the cockpit and pulled his goggles over his eyes. The mechanics stood by for his signal. He waved them to their places at the blunt nose of the Spad.

At his signal, one of them tested the prop for engine compression. O.K.! Bill held up his hand in warning as he switched on the ignition. A mechanic tugged downward on one of the propeller blades, stepping back as the 220 horsepower Hispano-Suiza motor coughed, took hold, and roared into its even rhythm.

Bill watched his tachometer tensely as he gave her the gun.

"Don't go back on me today, baby!" he breathed as he revved her up.

The motor seemed to respond to his whispered prayer. There was not a miss, not a hint of suspicious vibration as the needle of the instrument crawled around the little dial and hovered, around 1800 revolutions.

"Atta baby!" Bill crowed. "You've never failed me yet, and you won't now!"

HE LOOKED about at the other planes drawn up beside his own. Each of the other five pilots nodded their helmeted heads as Bill's eyes met theirs. Andre waved.

Chocks were jerked out from under the landing wheels and the six little planes rolled up to the take-off line. Another wave from Andre as the tail of his plane came up and it went racing down the tarmac into the wind.

There was something like the old snap about it as the six planes took wing. French spirits had a way of dropping into the dumps and jumping back to dizzy heights like an altimeter in spotty air. The gang seemed to feel that today the hoodoo Hun would meet his match.

Bill cheered Andre inwardly. He'd do a good job as leader. As good a pilot as the French *chasse* could boast, just needed a bit of steadying at a time like this.

A cold drizzle of rain drove down at them as they climbed. Another of those dirty, dark spring days with clouds and mist so thick the patrol could not keep one another in sight more than half the time. They'd probably break up, Bill thought, and come drifting back to the field one by one.

As the rest flattened out at two thousand meters Bill kept his stick back and held her in a climb for his

position a thousand feet above and a thousand behind the rest. That was his job today. That was where the hoodoo always struck.

Already the earth could be seen only in patches, through holes where tricky air currents had parted the clouds for a moment. More blackish clouds above, shutting out the sun. It was eternal twilight between those choking strata of mist, a twilight haunted by the thing that every day for a week now had taken its toll of death.

His altimeter read twenty-four hundred meters. Bill levelled off. His goggles fogged by the stream of moisture that poured back in the propeller drift, he leaned over the cowling and strained his eyes to peer ahead and below.

The rest of the formation was almost hidden by the rolling, ever-shifting cloud banks. Here he caught the dull gleam of an empenage. There he faintly glimpsed a whirling prop that thrust itself out of a concealing cloud into one of the lighter air spots. Never at any time was the whole "V" visible.

No wonder if poor Rene and the rest had lost the formation!

Bill knew Andre would be flying chiefly by instruments since the visibility was almost nil. They were to proceed—as they had for seven fatal days—to the point on the front lines where a mangled head of ruins, steaming now in the spring drizzle, marked the site of what was once a French village, Petit Souilly. At that point they crossed the lines, flew on to a point two kilometers inside the German lines, turned south and kept that direction for thirty five minutes at full throttle, returning over the same course.

BILL WONDERED whether Andre could see any better down there than he could, up here. As they approached the lines the clouds seemed even thicker. His face was stung by the drops of moisture whipped back at terrific speed by the prop.

Wiping the mist from his goggles he peered below. In a rift in the clouds he caught the hazy outlines of Petit Souilly and the vague shapes of covered trucks splashing toward it over the shell-torn road. A moment more, and—there! They must be over the lines now.

On for a few minutes more through the drifting, ever changing mist forms. The little Spad's wings gleamed dully wet in the half light.

Crash! Bill's plane bucked like a broncho and shook like a dog coming out of the water. Archie!

An enemy anti-aircraft battery must have caught a glimpse of him through a rift in the clouds. Bill held

his stick in neutral and the little plane steadied.

"Hey there Fritz!" he called derisively, "You're pretty good, but you'll have to do better than that!"

Bang—bang—bang! Bill grinned. The explosions were well behind him now. He leaned overside. The rift had closed. He was as effectually hidden from them as they were from him.

He could just barely make out one other plane in the formation now. Evidently they were making the turn. He banked the Spad around to the south.

As he did so he plunged into a cloud denser than any of those through which he had come. It seemed literally to swallow the little plane into its black midst. Bill leaned overside. He could see nothing. Where were the other planes? There was nothing above, below, anywhere, but grayish thick vapor. Already his motor was beginning to cough.

"If she conks out on me now, good night!" he muttered.

With incendiary bullets in his gun belts, if he came down behind the German lines, there'd be no prison camp for him. He'd be shot right then and there.

Bending close to his compass, by constant hair breadth pressures—right, left, left, right—on the rudder bars he kept the plane headed due south.

"Ought to pick up the rest of the bunch eventually," he ruminated. "Due south; same speed; practically same altitude; can't go wrong."

A light began to glow through the mist ahead. Brighter and brighter it glared as the Spad roared bravely on. Now it became a ball of livid flame, searing Bill's eyes. To be shot out of darkness straight into the flaming sun itself would be something like this, he thought.

Suddenly the mist was gone. Bill was out in the clear, blinding sunlight. He rubbed his eyes.

"Phew!" he whistled. "It's a bright world after all! Come on you hoodoo! I feel like I could lick the devil in a Zep now."

The wonder of it held him for a moment. He was in a long canyon of sunlight between steep walls of clouds, tinged red and purple by the brilliant slanting rays. Grasping the cowling with one hand he pulled himself up and looked below. He should be able to see the rest of the outfit now.

AGAINST the rolling, shifting floor of the cloud canyon no shape of any plane appeared. He was alone in that valley of light among the storm clouds.

Lost! For a moment he felt the dismay that Rene, and Jaques, and the others must have felt before the

end. He clenched his teeth on the insane impulse to cry the names of his companions aloud into the empty air.

There was something eerie about it. A moment before he had felt sure of the whereabouts of the rest of his flight. Not in plain sight yet he had known that at any moment he chose he could dive the Spad and a few short seconds would have brought him down to where they were. They were probably very close still, he reflected. Yet had they been a thousand miles away they could not have been more hopelessly lost to him.

"Well, you asked for it," he told himself grimly. "You asked for what Rene de Hauteville and the others got. What's the matter now—turning yellow?"

Every muscle tensed, he stormed down the lane of light.

"Come on you hoodoo," he called to the cottony grim cloud walls. "Just give us a look at you, once!"

A rift opened beneath him suddenly. Leaning over the edge of the cockpit Bill stared down, eyes wide with surprise.

"I'll be damned!"

There below him was a Spad—one of his own outfit, most likely—in desperate combat with two deadly Pfalz scouts.

The Hun machines were giving her hell and then some. Already the little French plane wobbled badly and seemed loggy in maneuver, unable to get out of the way of the vicious streams of tracers that those Huns must be pouring into her. Bill could not see the death-dealing tracer lines in that deceptive light but he knew they must be there.

Which of the boys was it? Had he too lost the patrol? Where were the others? A thousand unspoken questions flashed through Bill's mind in the first split second.

Even as he pushed the stick forward to go down in a full-powered dive he saw the other Spad wobble into a falling leaf—slip over on one wing then the other. Then its nose dropped sharply and it headed earthward in a loose spin.

Bill mouthed bitter curses, cried aloud to the gods of the air for vengeance. Another of his pals gone into his last, death-dive on that damned hoodoo patrol! He spat livid oaths between his set teeth as he roared down on the two Pfalzes.

His eyes held fast in the fascination of horror, he just caught a glimpse of black smoke pouring from the fuselage of the falling Spad when the spiteful whine of tracer from Spandau guns told him he had overhauled the enemy.

His own guns were cold. Would they answer to the triggers? As his two hundred mile an hour dive brought his sights fleetingly over the rounded fuselage of the nearer Pfalz he clamped down on his Bowden triggers with a vengeance.

With a roar like that of a couple of pneumatic hammers on a boiler his two Vickers guns spewed forth their streams of phosphorus, blue steel and white tracer. Damn! Light as a humming bird the little Pfalz sideslipped out of that flaming pathway of death.

BILL HAULED back hard on his stick. With a shudder of straining spruce and tautened fabric the Spad flattened out of its dive. Miraculously the wings stayed on.

"Thanks baby," Bill murmured through set lips. "That was a tough one on you."

Tracer bullets whistling past his ears and plunking into the fabric of his wings warned Bill the Hun planes were above him, on his tail. Without looking around he jerked the stick back into a corner and threw her into a tight chandelle. The Spad climbed like a cat.

Bill held her to it in desperate disregard of the tracer that whizzed and spattered round him. A bullet seared his cheek, carrying away one side of his goggles. A burst of tracer crashing through the floor of the cockpit between his spread legs was grisly bearer of the news that he had gained altitude over the two Pfalzes. He levelled off.

One of the Huns was coming up in a climbing turn, the other flying straight up at the Spad's unprotected belly. Bill side-slipped out of the second and hurled his gallant little machine headlong at the first.

The Hun pilot, seeing Bill roaring down on him, threw his ship into a steep, straight climb. But he misjudged the terrific speed of the little Spad. Bill was within fifty yards before the other could level off.

Rat-tat-tat-a-tat! Bill saw his tracer rip squarely through the cockpit of the other machine. The pilot threw up a hand weakly and slumped down out of sight.

"One!" Bill counted, grimly.

The stricken Pfalz nosed straight up, flopped into a whip-stall and slipped into a spin, a spear point of flame leaping up and backward from the region of her petrol tank.

Then came the high pitched roar of a Mercedes motor behind Bill. Again the little Spad was showered with deadly tracer. A sudden throbbing pain in his left shoulder stung Bill into lightning action. He jerked the stick over and put the Spad in a barrel roll.

THE OTHER pilot evidently rolled with him but the maneuver ruined his aim for that all-important split second. A few stray bullets spanked into the wing-tips of the French machine but most of them went wide. As his roll brought him over head down Bill stretched his neck to look below. What he saw almost made him burst his safety belt with excitement. He shouted for joy.

The Spad that the Huns had brought down a few minutes before had not crashed! Instead, it had righted itself and was climbing.

Bill's joy turned to bewilderment as he went over again and got another look at her. His eyes narrowed. That plane was not climbing like a cripple. She was roaring upward at a dizzy rate that bespoke perfect condition.

"That is funny," Bill muttered. "First I see you go down smoking like you were on fire and now I see you sky-hootin' it up like a bus just fresh from the factory."

With his Spad flying on its back he drew the stick toward him and went into a powered dive.

"You're not actin' according to the book exactly, fella," he addressed the other Spad that shot upward to meet him, "but I guess we'd better get together. Maybe we can give this Fritzie Pfalz what for. Here goes!"

But the pilot of the other Spad showed no intention of pitching into the German. Machine guns fairly vomiting tracer he came straight at Bill!

For a moment his heart stopped beating. His usual supply of facetious sallies was frozen on his lips. His eyes stared, unwilling to believe.

That Spad bore the red, white and blue cocarde of the French service. One of his own flight! It could be no other! Yet patently the pilot meant business so far as Bill was concerned; meant to wipe him clean off the sky.

He felt his little machine shiver under the impact of a hundred deadly rounds of tracer before he recovered from his first shock of surprise.

Rage fairly blinded him and he cursed bitterly. A stream of tracer from the Pfalz whistled past his head, smashing his instrument board to splinters. Splinters of glass lodged themselves unnoticed in his cheeks.

A voice within seemed to be trying to tell him that this was the end. Stunned by the strangeness of what was occurring, he was for a moment a pitiful target for those two planes of doom. "The end—the end—" the words drummed in his ears. No! His stupefied brain leapt into action.

Cutting his engine sharply he slowed down and lost altitude. The pursuing Pfalz roared by overhead. As

he did so Bill gave his machine the gun and drew back the stick, clamping down on both triggers in the same instant. His tracer raked the Pfalz from stem to stern.

He laughed harshly as he saw the Hun scout slow down. Dead engine! The pilot stood up in his cockpit and shook his fist at Bill as the Pfalz limped off toward Berlin, out of the fight.

"That's number two! And now for you, you hell's spawn!" Bill gritted.

Kicking on rudder, he hurled the nose of his plane straight at the traitor Spad.

STEADY, Bill held her head on as if determined to crash his plane into the other. Their tracer streams converged and became one gleaming two-way trail of destruction. Then Bill shoved his stick forward and shot beneath the other.

As they passed, Bill stared hard at the other plane. She was a funny kind of a Spad after all. Her wings looked different, and those machine guns looked like Spandaus—Boche guns.

Bill banked around to get position on the other's tail. The other pilot put his machine into a climb.

"Like to get above me, eh? Good!" Bill climbed along, keeping just enough below so that the other dared not level off. Up, up soared the two planes.

Pressing first one pearl trigger button then the other, Bill wrung a ragtime death chant from his spitting guns.

"Just to remind you that your little buddy's right here with you," he grinned up at the tail of the other plane.

Still they climbed. His instruments were shattered but Bill thought they must be getting up pretty close to twenty thousand. Already the blood sang dizzily in his ears and the pain in his wounds throbbed fiercely.

"Now let's see what kind of a Spad you've got, you damned Hun murderer!"

He gave her the gun and his own plane shot upward, passing the other like a streak. Two hundred feet above the other he stalled and dived back on the other plane.

The pilot, surprised by the maneuver, hurried frantically into a roll, then dove his machine, with Bill close on his heels pouring the deadly contents of two Vickers down his exposed back.

Jockeying throttle and controls madly, Bill kept his plane close on the tail of the other as they roared earthward. A hundred and seventy-five—two hundred. Faster and faster they shrieked down the sky lanes, the prop of Bill's plane almost touching the tail of the other. A rift opened up in the clouds below them.

The fleeting pilot, frantic, tried to straighten his machine out.

"Oh no, you don't!" Bill laughed as he bore down on the fleeing plane.

He could see the other's death-white face twisted back to stare up at him. The fellow knew he was doomed. As surely as he straightened out of the dive Bill's machine would crash him.

"And I'm game to do it," Bill grunted, guessing at what the other must be thinking.

The earth was rushing up to meet them like a huge projectile fired from a cannon. Bill was wondering whether his own riddled machine would stand the strain. The ground was not a thousand feet away now.

EVEN as Bill stared, the other pilot jerked convulsively at his stick. The diving plane did not level off. Instead, there was a shrill shriek of wrenched steel fittings and her wings, torn from their braces by the sudden increase in resistance, folded double. Held only by flying wires they crashed loosely back against the fuselage.

Like the aerial bomb her body now resembled, the plane crashed to earth. Bill averted his eyes from the hideous wreck.

"A fine Spad you turned out to be!" he jeered derisively, "Why you had 'Made in Germany' written all over you!"

He jerked back on the control stick. His own Spad—a real one, glory be—levelled off with a faint groan of strained wings and longerons and held together, not a hundred feet from the ground. He put her in a climb.

Archie burst all about the little plane as he headed her back toward the concealing blanket of clouds, Machine gun bullets once more whistled past his ears as the Hun ground batteries got into action. But the little machine climbed bravely and in a few seconds the formerly hated wisps of gray vapor swallowed it and hid it from view.

"Phew!" Bill whistled. "Well that's one Hun that won't 'hoodoo' anybody again. Gosh, I sure caught a swarm of hornets in that little flytrap of mine!"

The Huns' game had been simple, after all. They rigged out a plane that looked enough like a Spad to fool anybody. Evidently they had known the course and schedule of the morning patrol from Chateau-sur-Marne.

The pilot of the imitation Spad probably got that effect of falling in flames by thickening his petrol mixture. That would cause black smoke to pour from the falling machine, Bill knew.

Rene and the others, lost in the clouds, had blundered onto the three Huns' fake dog fight just as he had.

Probably that paralyzing instant when they had seen the decoy plane turn its spitting Spandaus on them had done for those poor boys.

"Well Fritz," he admitted, "It was a good game while it lasted."

"Baby mine," he added to the 220 horsepower of throbbing energy under him, "you sure pulled your daddy through that time."

The roar of airplane engines overhead. More Huns out for cold meat? Bill gazed upward. Through the shifting clouds he made out the tiny shapes of five planes and on the wings of each gleamed the cocarde of the French Aviation. Spads—no fake this time—his own outfit. Throttle full on, Bill urged his bullet-ridden machine after the others.

ON THE little field at Chateau-sur-Marne the hulking figure of Rod Sutton came running toward Bill as he lowered himself gingerly from the stirrup.

He saw Rod shoulder his way through a mob of laughing, weeping, hysterically happy Frenchmen.

"*Vive l'Americaine! Vive Bill Riordan!*"

But Rod's hoarse shout of welcome sounded above the noise of cheers. Before Bill's feet touched the ground his buddy's arms were around his shoulders in a bear hug.

"Hot damn, boy. You're here—alive!" Rod yelled happily.

Then his face went grave with concern as he saw his pal was weak from loss of blood.

"We thought you were down. Infantry reported a Spad brought down behind the Hun lines, pilot killed."

"That's just another time the infantry's cockeyed," Bill retorted.

Limping toward headquarters, he gave Rod the whole story. The others stared in amazement.

"Say boy, the old man'll get you the Legion of Honor for this, I'll bet! And listen. Our transfers have just come through. Just as soon as you're out of the hospital we'll be flying for the good old U.S.A.!"

Bill's eyes narrowed.

"On Spads?" he asked wearily.

"On Spads, surest thing you know!"

"Then t'hell with the hospital. Let's go!"