

A
YANKEE FLIER
in **ITALY**



ALL
AVENUE

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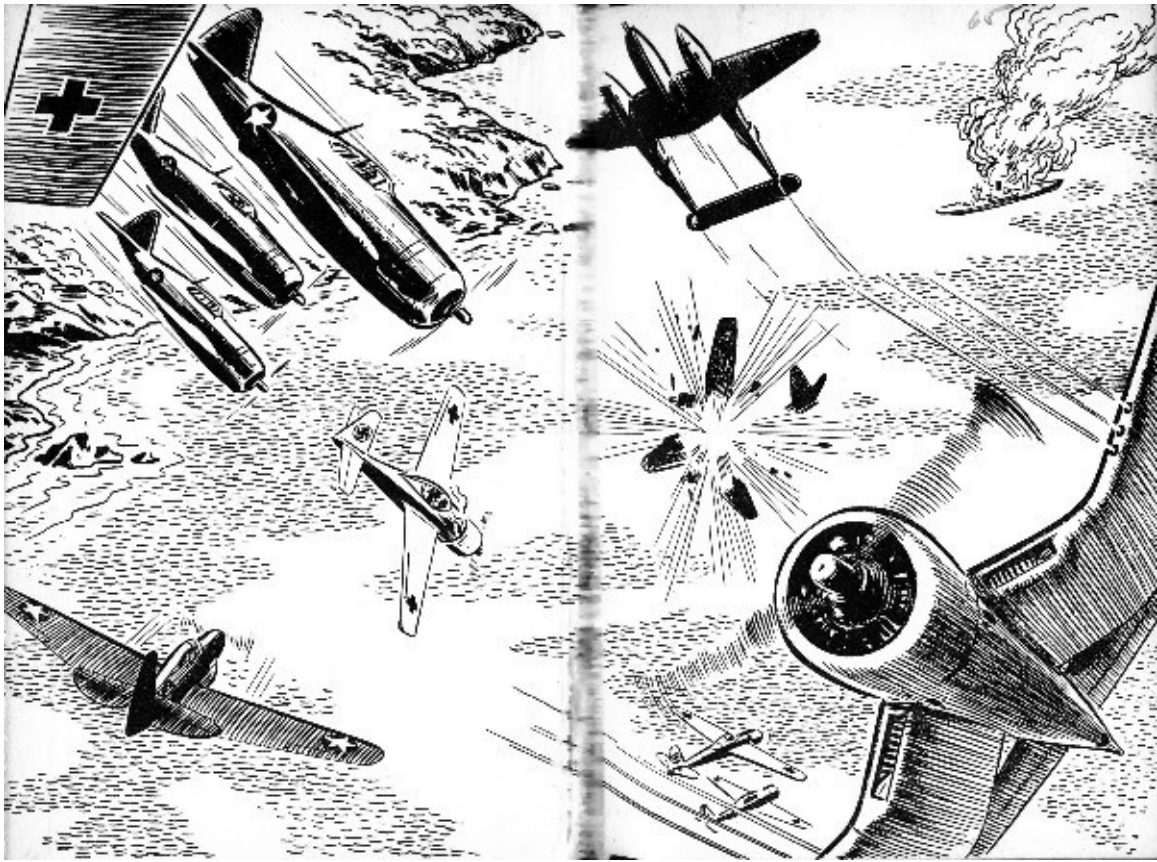
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A YANKEE FLIER

IN ITALY

"WE'LL TAKE OVER NOW," STAN SNAPPED. A Yankee Flier in Italy
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A Yankee Flier in Italy

A YANKEE FLIER

IN ITALY

BY

AL AVERY

ILLUSTRATED BY

PAUL LAUNE

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For

AVON KIRKS

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A YANKEE FLIER

IN ITALY



CHAPTER I

FAREWELL PARTY

The party was about to break up. It had not been very successful. Lieutenant O'Malley had devoured only one blueberry pie. This meant he was feeling far from par. He sat sprawled in a big chair that once had belonged to a Moslem prince, his skinny legs elevated to the top of the mess table.

"Sure, an' you fellows are skunks, beatin' it off to do a soft stretch in Alexandria," he growled.

Lieutenant Stan Wilson, United States Army Air Corps, grinned at his Irish pal.

"They need brains in Alexandria to tell them what to do." Stan sipped his coffee and continued to grin.

March Allison leaned across the table. Allison was British, slight and neatly dressed. There was always a mocking smile lurking at the corners of his mouth.

"I say, old fellow, you should be crowing. You are now a flight commander and I understand you are to rate nothing less than a major."

"'Tis not the stripes I want," O'Malley muttered. "Sure, an' I'm told this Colonel Benson who is to be in command is a spalpeen of the worst sort. Niver did I care fer brass hats an' now I am to be near one all the time."

"I understand Colonel Benson holds to a strict diet, no coffee, tobacco, or pie," Stan said gravely. "He expects his men to follow his example."

O'Malley snorted. "Sure, an' I'll be after eatin' pie right off the top o' his desk."

"He is said to be the best-dressed officer in the Army." Allison had his gaze fixed upon O'Malley's sloppy uniform. The shirt was open at the neck to allow O'Malley's huge Adam's apple to roll up and down, free and unencumbered. O'Malley's cap was wrinkled and sagging as it attempted to cover his shock of wild hair.

"I'm a fightin' man," O'Malley said gravely. "As such I waste no time on trifles."

His big mouth was tightly clamped shut and a frown wrinkled his homely face.

Stan and Allison broke out laughing. Colonel Benson would have to take O'Malley as he was, that they well knew. They had fought side by side with him in the Battle of Britain, in the Far East, and now in Africa. O'Malley was known as the wildest pilot in the service and one of the best.

"We better get going," Stan said as he rose to his feet. He held out a hand to O'Malley. "Hold off the invasion of Sicily and Italy until we get back, pal."

"I'll be startin' it tomorrow," O'Malley said sourly.

"Cheerio," Allison added as he shook hands with his pal.

O'Malley watched them walk out of the mess. He had to admit, as the door closed after them, that his gloom was due entirely to parting with the two men he had fought beside for so long. Such things as colonels who were tough did not bother O'Malley. Having Stan and Allison walk out on him was the thing that hurt. It was his own fault that he was not going with them. He had refused to quit the front for a month or so of ease and rest.

Gazing out through an open window, he watched a group of natives herd a flock of donkeys down toward the main part of the city of Bizerte. He certainly would kick himself if no invasion came off for a month. Lowering his feet from the top of the table, he strolled out into the sunshine. Colonel Benson was due to arrive that morning and he had orders to be on hand, along with other flight commanders, to meet his superior. O'Malley yawned. Meeting brass hats always bored him. He was not sure that he was going to like being one of them. O'Malley considered even a flight commander a brass hat.

Colonel Benson was late in arriving. He was exactly three hours late and that made O'Malley exactly two hours late for his dinner. Dinner was a very important item in O'Malley's day, and he was in a very dour mood when an orderly called the boys in to meet the new commander.

The commander's room once had been a lounge and music room. It was part of a huge old mansion located on an estate. An Italian political boss had taken it over from a native prince. O'Malley crowded in behind the first man entering the room. At once the man ahead of O'Malley clicked his heels and snapped a smart salute. O'Malley looked the colonel over, then dabbed at the front of his cap with a big hand.

Colonel Benson was a big, rawboned man, standing six feet two inches and weighing two hundred and ten pounds. His red face looked as though it had just been scrubbed with soap and water. It had a pink and white smoothness under the sunburn which reddened it. The eyes of the colonel took away the softness of his smooth face. They were green and hard as agate. At the moment they were looking Lieutenant O'Malley over with a decidedly unfavorable glint.

The other boys shoved in and lined up. There was no mistaking the atmosphere in the room. It fairly vibrated with military correctness. The colonel's uniform, his carefully parted hair, his smooth, freshly scraped chin, all added to the feeling of tightness.

Most of the boys in the room were used to dirt and dust and bearded faces. They recently had come through a dusty, dirty, and bloody battle. During those months on the desert they had forgotten all about military correctness. The colonel's expression plainly indicated that he thought them a sloppy outfit. He remained standing as he talked, and the men remained at attention.

"I have been sent here to teach you men some of the combat tricks developed recently." His eyes roved over the men and stopped upon O'Malley.

"I am not going to insist upon strict military observance, but there are a few details I will insist upon." The colonel's voice was rising and his face was getting a bit redder.

"You." He stabbed a finger toward O'Malley.

"Lieutenant O'Malley," O'Malley informed him.

"Lieutenant O'Malley, nothing can excuse the sloppiness of your attire. In the future you will give more attention to your uniform."

"Yes, sor," O'Malley said and grinned.

The grin made Colonel Benson rise up on his heels. He came down with a thud, but he said no more. His eyes moved from O'Malley.

"We will soon be invading Italy." The Colonel paused to let this sink in. It was exactly what the boys had been expecting, and therefore they showed no sudden interest.

"How about Sicily, sor?" O'Malley asked. He had been flying missions all over

the proposed routes and knew something would have to be done about Sicily.

"That will be merely a step in taking Italy, Lieutenant," the colonel explained. He looked about the room. There were plenty of chairs. "You may be at ease, gentlemen. Seat yourselves and we will proceed with our conference."

O'Malley grunted. Dinner hour was long past and here they were settling down for a conference. He picked the chair nearest the door and slumped down into it. The colonel seated himself and launched into a lengthy and detailed talk upon tactics and plans. O'Malley listened for a time, then stretched out his legs and made himself comfortable. His mind wandered far from the droning voice of the colonel.

An hour passed and Colonel Benson was still outlining plans and driving home things he felt were very important. O'Malley had not exactly been asleep, but he had failed to hear more than just a small part of what was said. Suddenly he roused himself. Colonel Benson had just made a remark that brought him up sharply.

"Gentlemen, I will now outline the procedure we will follow in handling the various flights assigned to my sector. This will not take longer than one hour. Give me your close attention."

O'Malley looked about as though seeking a way to escape. He saw an orderly standing at the door. Nodding to the corporal, he leaned forward and whispered a command. The orderly disappeared.

Ten minutes later the corporal returned. He was carrying a tin plate with half of a blueberry pie on it.

"Thank you, son," O'Malley said as he slid the pie into his lap. He scooped out a quarter of the pie and opened his mouth. As he bit down upon the pie he began to grin. He gave his attention to the colonel with the first real show of interest he had given during the afternoon. The quarter of pie disappeared quickly. O'Malley slid the remaining quarter into his hand and opened his mouth.

"The close co-ordination between our fighter units and the low-level bombers will be secured by a system of code signals." Colonel Benson's voice snapped off suddenly. His green eyes were on O'Malley and sparks flashed in their depths. The other boys turned and looked at O'Malley.

"You are hungry, Lieutenant O'Malley?" Colonel Benson asked coldly.

"Yes, sor. 'Tis three hours an' more past dinnertime," O'Malley answered calmly as he shoved half of the pie into his mouth.

"Stop! Stop—swilling that pie!" the colonel roared.

O'Malley got rid of the pie in a simple manner. He shoved what was left into his mouth and munched upon it.

For a full minute the colonel could not think of anything to say. But his face got deeper red and his eyes blazed. Finally he rapped on his desk and said:

"Gentlemen, I will not tolerate eating during a conference. Any sort of eating. I will not tolerate eating pie while I am giving instructions. Lieutenant O'Malley, you will retire. I will consider your case later."

O'Malley got to his feet. He handed the pie plate to the embarrassed corporal. "Thank you, sor," he drawled as he made off.

The colonel snorted and went back to his lecture. O'Malley headed for the mess hall. The half pie had whetted his appetite. Locating a comfortable place near a window he ordered a big dinner, with a whole blueberry pie for dessert. In a leisurely manner he began devouring his meal.

He had spent most of an hour enjoying his dinner and was ready to eat his pie, when the fliers began drifting in from the conference. Several of them headed toward O'Malley's table. O'Malley was the most famous pilot in their outfit. The stories about him amounted almost to legend. The boys admired his disregard for military usage. All of them had been working according to the colonel's carefully explained plans for months and knew them better than the colonel did. They had been bored by the long session but had not had the nerve to show their feelings.

But none of them reached O'Malley. Colonel Benson came in and strode over to O'Malley's table.

Nodding to O'Malley, he said, "Mind if I join you?" His voice did not sound so stiff outside his office.

"Sure, an' I'm glad to have you," O'Malley said, but there was a gleam of suspicion in his eye.

Colonel Benson seated himself. He watched O'Malley attack the pie. His interest amounted to fascination and he did not speak until O'Malley had finished three

fourths of the pie. He ordered coffee and leaned back.

"I have heard a great deal about you, Lieutenant," he began.

O'Malley did not think this remark called for an answer, so he went on eating his pie.

"I know you are an excellent pilot, though I understand you are a bit reckless." There was a gleam that might have been humor in the colonel's eye.

O'Malley leaned back. He pushed the pie plate away from him and uttered a contented sigh.

"However, I'm afraid you are not the type of man I want working beside me. With your permission, I will find you another assignment." The colonel watched O'Malley as he spoke.

"What sort o' work?" O'Malley asked.

"Flying a fighter plane, of course." Colonel Benson smiled.

"'Twill suit me foine," O'Malley said. "I'm not likin' the idea o' bein' a brass hat."

"I don't think you would make a very good one," the colonel said. "There will be no further mention of your pie-eating exhibition of this afternoon. You will report to operations for your new assignment."

"Thank you, sor."

The colonel drank his coffee and arose. O'Malley got to his feet and managed a snappy salute. The colonel moved off and the boys closed in to find out what had happened.



CHAPTER II

SPECIAL TASK

The sympathy of the boys in the officers' mess was wasted upon O'Malley. He was not impressed by the advanced rating he had missed, nor was he jealous of the new and shining bars and oak leaves his pals were wearing. He had checked in and been assigned flight leader of a flight of three planes whose task was special work. All that interested O'Malley was that he was due to head out over the Mediterranean Sea with the nose of his Lightning pointed toward Italy.

"Sure, an' I'll have Benito captured by the time you birds go into action," he told the gang.

O'Malley's exact duties were not very clear, nor was his crew a reality. No men had been assigned to him and he had no flight orders, but he had the assurance of the captain at operations that he would be on his way in a short time. If O'Malley had any suspicions as to the sort of work Colonel Benson had laid out for him, he did not show them. He was in exceptional good humor.

When he was called in by Captain Marks at headquarters, he dashed to the operations room as fast as he could. The captain smiled as O'Malley sprawled into a chair.

"I understand we are about to start an invasion of Italy," the captain began. "The details are a military secret, but it's coming and right away. There's some spade work to be done and you are to handle a hot assignment."

O'Malley's big mouth spread in an eager grin.

"The commander has assigned you to this job because he feels you are specially fitted for the work." The captain beamed, but there was a look in his eye that made O'Malley sit up and wipe the grin off his face.

"And what may it be?" he demanded.

"You are to ferry Lightnings to Malta." The captain lifted a hand as O'Malley came out of his chair like a cork out of a bottle of Algerian wine. "This is dangerous business. You may have to fight your way through. This will be day

flying."

O'Malley snorted. "Fight! Sure, an' ferryin' to Malta is no work for a fighter pilot. 'Tis a job for these new colleens you got in the ferry service."

"Colonel's orders," the captain said curtly. "And the planes are to be landed in Malta in fighting trim. As soon as I round up a couple of men to work with you, I'll give you a call. Get set, because I'll need you any hour now."

O'Malley leaned forward and there was a dark gleam in his eyes. "Did you say fight our way through?" he asked.

"If necessary, but I understand you are a stunting fool. You shouldn't have to fire a shot on any trip. The planes are not to be shot up. They are for combat use in the invasion."

O'Malley was on his feet. "Foine," he said sweetly. "'Tis a nice job, sor, an' I'm appreciatin' it."

The captain fixed him with a suspicious eye. This ferry job had been tough to fill. It was vitally important and demanded experienced fighter pilots, but none of the men wanted it. Captain Marks had not been able to get a single man to accept the job. He was relieved when the colonel had sent over word that O'Malley would serve as flight leader. But he still had to locate two men to work with the Irishman. O'Malley was taking the whole thing too nicely. Captain Marks was worried. He knew O'Malley's reputation and he had picked up a few hints of how O'Malley had been assigned to the job.

"I'll give you the names of your crew as soon as I get them lined up," the captain said gruffly.

"Shanghaied you mean," O'Malley said in a honeyed tone.

"The colonel will locate a couple for me," the captain answered with a grin.

O'Malley grinned back at him. "I know a couple I wish you could get hold of," he said. He turned around and walked out of the office.

For a full five minutes O'Malley stood outside the office looking out toward the blue Mediterranean. There was a deep scowl on his face. Finally he sauntered into the mess and seated himself near a window. Elevating his feet, he closed his eyes and took a nap.

He was awakened by an orderly. The soldier saluted smartly and said:

"You are wanted at operations, sir."

O'Malley got to his feet and walked into the briefing shack, which was a shed hastily erected outside the mess. Captain Marks was waiting for him. He shoved a sheaf of flight orders at O'Malley.

"You are to deliver three Lightning fighters to Malta. In case you meet enemy planes, you are to take proper evasive measures. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sor," O'Malley said and added, "If we be attacked we fight?"

"Certainly, we don't want these new planes shot down."

Glancing at his flight orders, O'Malley moved leisurely out to the flight strip designated. Three Lightnings stood there with their props spinning. A ground crew was just leaving them. O'Malley nodded toward the chief mechanic who swung down out of the cockpit.

"Is this bag o' bolts ready to fly?" he asked with a grin.

"She's clicking fine, sir," the sergeant answered.

O'Malley glanced at his orders. The two men under him were Ted Wilks and Pete Liske. He wondered what they had done to call down the colonel's displeasure. Swinging up into the greenhouse, he palmed the hatch cover and got set.

"Wilks and Liske," he called lazily. "This is your skipper, Mrs. O'Malley's son. Get your crates hot."

"Temperatures check," Liske called back. His voice sounded sour.

"Which one of the Auld Man's corns did you step on, Liske?" O'Malley asked.

"Same one I did," Wilks called in.

"Can the chatter and get going," snapped a voice from operations. "Lieutenant O'Malley, report out at once," another voice cut in.

"Up to five thousand and then tuck in close to me," O'Malley ordered.

"Read your flight sheets!" The voice from operations was sharp and snappy.

O'Malley laughed. "Shove off, me hearties," he called.

Wilks went zooming off and Liske followed closely. O'Malley watched their take-off with a critical eye. He saw at once that he had been given two fledglings to nurse safely through. Like an old hen, he was expected to see them through by proper evasive tactics. O'Malley began whistling a bit of an Irish tune. He'd protect those kids, just let any Italian or German fighter show up.

Kicking down on one brake, he spun the Lightning around and sent her zooming off the field, hanging her on her prop at once, and surging over the hatch covers of his charges like a crazy angel heading for the sun. His boys dropped in behind him and soon had snuggled in, wing to wing, one on each side.

"So you birds were bad boys," O'Malley called across to his men.

"So what? We hear you were supposed to be a major," Liske answered insolently.

"We didn't read the rule book careful," Wilks confessed with a laugh.

"From now on you won't be after needin' a rule book," O'Malley assured them. He was scanning the blue sky eagerly. A pile of clouds, off to the east, looked promising. He swung over that way. If there was a Jerry in the whole area, he'd be hiding up in that cloud.

The three Lightnings zoomed low under the cloud but nothing happened. The sky was as serene and calm as the sky over a Kansas wheat field or a kirk in Kerry County, Ireland. O'Malley scowled and eased back against the shock pad.

They roared over Pantelleria Island which had been occupied by the British and Yanks. Sicily lay ahead and O'Malley knew evasive tactics called for a wide sweep to the east and south. He had already flown miles north in his hopeful quest of trouble. Easing down to two thousand feet, they swept around in a circle that carried them within sight of the coast of Sicily. But there was no enemy craft in sight in the air and very few on the water along the coast. With a sigh O'Malley straightened their course and headed in to Malta. They had flown a half circle deep into enemy territory but nothing exciting had happened. O'Malley was beginning to worry. If all of their ferry flights were going to be like this, he would have to do something about it.

Picking up the radio signals from the Malta field, they slid in, spotted the Yank landing strip, and set down. Ground crews rushed out to take over. They

swarmed around the Lightnings and had them moving off almost before their pilots were out of the cockpits. O'Malley scowled. The boys had no more respect for a ferry pilot than they did an M.P.

O'Malley obtained his release and acceptance of the planes from a captain who rode out in a motorcycle. The captain seemed irritated.

"Your flight time is double what it should be. Get over to Number Three Field and get your transportation back to Africa."

"Yes, sor," O'Malley said. "We drifted a bit off course."

The captain looked at him sharply. He was very busy and delays did not improve his ragged temper.

"Don't let it happen again," he snapped.

O'Malley smiled at his two fliers. "Sure, an' 'tis very ungrateful some people are. We risk our necks to deliver these crates an' get a sour welcome." He turned and walked away. The captain stood staring after him. He had not met a man like O'Malley before. Usually ferry pilots were not given to back talk.

The transport was waiting. O'Malley and his pals climbed in among an assortment of equipment and supplies being returned to base. In a short time they were back at their own briefing room. Three planes were ready and they took off again.

All day they ferried Lightnings across to Malta and not once did they sight enemy craft. O'Malley was wild when they checked in for the evening. He glared at the grinning Captain Marks.

"Sure, an' something better bust loose tomorrow," he cried.

"Probably will," Marks answered.

O'Malley stomped away to quarters. Wilks and Liske dashed off to put in for an immediate transfer to more active duty. O'Malley hoped they got the transfer. He knew there was not much chance of him getting shifted, not as long as Colonel Benson was in command.

CHAPTER III

REUNION

Stan and Allison sat in the big Lockheed transport and looked down upon the shores of Africa. A coastal road wound along the beach. It was war-scarred and still littered with broken tanks and shattered trucks. This was the route Rommel had taken in his flight across Libya.

"Wonder what O'Malley's doing about this time?" Stan asked. He was beginning to be sorry he had accepted the offer to return to Alexandria. O'Malley likely was leading a flight over the shores of Italy.

"I'll bet he is seeing action," Allison said. "But I'm satisfied to be riding in peace with a pip of a vacation ahead. You're not beginning to get the bug to fight so soon, old man?"

"No," Stan answered with a grin. "I aim to have a swell time and be ready for the big push into Europe."

The trained ears of the two pilots caught a warning signal from one of the plane's radial motors. The motor complained for a few minutes, then coughed and conked out completely.

"Looks like we might be due for a forced landing," Stan said.

"That would be our luck," Allison answered. "Where are we, anyway?"

"We must be near Bengazi." Stan peered down at the coast line.

A few minutes later their fears were realized. The transport began circling for a landing. They sighted the ruins of a town and were soon over it. Ten minutes later they were standing on a sand dune along with the pilot and copilot. A group of higher-ranking officers, including a general, stood a little way from them.

"We'll not be here very long," the pilot said, jerking his head toward his other passengers. "Not with the big boy along. He's on an urgent mission. We've already radioed for a pick-up plane."

"He's hurrying in the wrong direction," Allison said.

Stan walked away and down the slope a bit. One of the Navy's NATS amphibian freight planes was down at the dock. Stan had learned to respect the Navy Air Transport Service. Those boys flew freight and mail from the United States to every part of the world where the Yanks were fighting, and they flew it on schedule. This plane probably was headed back to Tunis or Bizerte.

He passed the high officers at some little distance. The wind was blowing away from them and he caught the irritated voice of the general.

"With this delay I'll have to go back. Action against Italy starts at dawn tomorrow." The wind whipped away the general's words and Stan did not hear any more, but what he had heard made him halt.

Invasion. The boys were going in for the kill and he was heading for a rest in Alexandria. Turning, he walked up the hill. Allison was chatting with the pilot. Stan motioned to him and they strolled down the slope. When they were out of hearing of the crew, Stan said:

"I just overheard something."

Allison gave him a quick look. "Been eavesdropping?"

"An ill wind brought me a word from that general. We're hitting it back to Bizerte."

"I say, old chap, you know I'm going where I can have two hot baths a day. I'll have a barber shave me and I'll have breakfast served in bed. You run along back to Bizerte, but I'm going on to Alexandria."

"The attack on Italy is set for tomorrow morning. The general is going back and I'm going with him. O'Malley isn't going to hog this show."

Allison halted and stared at Stan. Suddenly his twisted smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "If you put it that way, I guess I'm going back to Bizerte, too."

"The general has radioed for a plane to take him back. This delay has upset his schedule and he won't go on. We'll go back with him. Let's collar the old boy."

"We are under orders to report to Alexandria," Allison reminded him.

"The general doesn't know what our orders are. We can worry about little things like that after we get back," Stan said impatiently.

They walked across the slope to where the general was standing. There were four officers with him, three colonels and a major.

"Could we have a word with you, sir?" Stan asked as he snapped a salute.

"Certainly," General Miller said.

"We have decided to return to Bizerte and wondered if you could say a word for us if a westbound plane stops here. This delay will upset our plans and we might as well go back."

The general looked at Stan sharply. "What made you change your plans, besides this accident?"

Stan grinned. He did not dare admit that he had overheard the general talking.

"The farther we get from the base of action, the more jittery we get," he replied.

"You fellows have to be ordered to take leave," General Miller said and smiled. "Do your orders allow you such freedom of action?"

"We feel that they do," Stan said.

"I'm sorry I can't take you. I'm afraid I'd be called to account for helping you disobey orders." The general's smile had spread into a grin. "You will go on as you should."

"Thank you, sir," Stan said. They both saluted and walked away.

"Guess we're sunk," Allison said sourly. "O'Malley will certainly rub it in when he sees us again. He'll be right in the middle of the big fight."

Stan was looking at the NATS amphibian and smiling. "We might be able to thumb a ride with the Navy."

Allison looked down toward the sea. The Navy boys were getting the big freighter set to take off.

"Worth a try, let's go down there."

They hurried down to the beach. An ensign was handling the shifting of supplies

from the flying boat to a truck. He greeted Stan and Allison in a friendly manner after glancing at their service stripes.

"You boys are a bit off your reservation, aren't you?" he asked.

"We sure are and we want to get back. How about a ride to Bizerte?"

"We're not hauling passengers, but if you piled in nobody would throw you off. We're supposed to cooperate with the Army in every way we can." The ensign laughed.

"Great stuff," Allison said. "I'm March Allison and he's Stan Wilson."

"I'm Bert Thomas," the ensign said. "If you have bags you better get them aboard. We're about to shove off."

"We're not taking any bags back," Stan said hurriedly. He did not want to risk having the general order them to go on into Alexandria. In fact, he did not want the general to know they were going out with the amphibian.

"O.K. Just get aboard and find a place to sit down."

Stan and Allison climbed aboard the freighter. The crew paid no attention to them but went on lashing cargo into place, cramming all sorts of odd repair parts into every corner.

Ensign Thomas came aboard and took his place beside his copilot. Stan and Allison sat on the only two vacant seats along the arching ribs of the ship. They were careful not to take the space reserved for the crew.

The freighter slid out into the bay and soon she was slapping the step of the lazy waves. A few seconds later she lifted and was off, rising slowly, roaring along like a gorged pelican. She did not have a machine gun or a cannon aboard and she was going it alone. The two fighter pilots, used to a bank of Brownings in front of them, felt uneasy. If a Heinkel or an Me 110 showed up, the old girl would be a dead duck.

No enemy planes showed up, however, and the freighter bored along. Ahead of them the sun was settling down into the sea, filling the air with golden haze and making the water glow like sapphire. Just at sunset the freighter swung inshore and eased down over the harbor at Bizerte. Two fighter planes from a carrier lying offshore zoomed around her as she came in. She hit the water and glided in

to a mooring.

"Passengers ashore!" Bert Thomas called back.

As they piled out Stan and Allison saluted the skipper. "Thanks a million," Stan said.

"Right fine of you, old man," Allison chimed in.

"Glad to give you a hand," Thomas said as he turned to the job of unloading.

Stan and Allison shoved through the crowds along the docks. They were eager to get in touch with Colonel Benson and get back on the job. Everywhere they could see signs of the coming invasion attempt. Thousands of ships and barges and warcraft lay in the harbor or offshore. Men swarmed everywhere, while tanks and trucks and mobile guns rattled down to the water front.

The boys caught a ride with an air force truck headed toward their field. The truck took them to within a few blocks of headquarters. When they hopped out, Stan said:

"Here goes nothing. Wonder what the Old Man will say?"

"We'll be lucky to be able to see him at all. He'll be very busy," Allison drawled.

Reaching headquarters they spoke to an orderly. The soldier regarded them closely.

"Yes, Colonel Benson is in his office."

"Tell him Lieutenants Wilson and Allison wish to see him." Stan gave the soldier a look that made him snap to attention.

"I'll report, sir," he said and made off.

"He acted as though we were not welcome," Allison remarked.

"The Old Man probably told him to shoo all pilots away," Stan said. "Now we better make our story good."

The orderly returned and nodded toward the fliers. "Colonel Benson will see you, sir," he said to Stan.

They moved into the room and found Colonel Benson sitting behind his desk. He

had a pot of coffee, a bowl of soup, and a plate of sandwiches before him. His green eyes lifted and swept over the two officers. They saluted and Stan said:

"Lieutenants Wilson and Allison reporting for duty, sir."

The colonel dipped up a spoon of soup and ate it. He selected a sandwich, lifted the lid and looked at the filling, then took a bite.

"I believe you gentlemen are under orders to report to Alexandria. I take it you have made some changes on your own account." The colonel paused and waited for a reply. His face was expressionless, but his eyes bored into Stan and Allison.

"We hoped you would allow us to join Lieutenant O'Malley's command. We got the idea there might be action on this front soon." Stan stood very straight and looked the colonel in the eye.

"What gave you the idea there would be action?" the colonel asked.

"We got it quite by accident," Stan answered.

"I see. So you canceled the orders of the area commander and returned. Who brought you back?"

"The Navy, sir." Allison smiled as he said it.

The colonel grunted. He finished his sandwich and helped himself to more soup. Finally he spoke.

"There will be action very soon and we do need pilots," he said blandly. His eyes dropped to a pad of reports. They were urgent requests from Wilks and Liske asking to be transferred from O'Malley's ferry flight. "I have two places I find very difficult to fill, and they happen to be in Commander O'Malley's flight. I'll assign you men to those places." His eyes lifted and there was a glint of hardness in them. "For the duration of the present action," he added grimly.

"Thank you, sir," Stan said. "We will not take up more of your time."

"One more thing," the colonel said. "I will cancel your leave to Alexandria. But your new assignment will not free you from any measures I decide to take later as punishment for your breach of orders. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," both officers answered. They saluted and about-faced.

Outside the door Stan turned to Allison. "The Old Boy isn't such a tough cookie

after all."

"Don't be so sure about that. You know I had a hunch he was spoofing us all the time." Allison scowled. "I'm sure he was."

"You smelled a mouse?" Stan grinned.

"I smelled a very dead one," Allison answered. "Let's locate O'Malley. He should be over in the quarters reserved for flight commanders."

They barged into the quarters of the flight officers and looked around. O'Malley was not present but several men sat at a table playing chess. They moved over and stood beside the table.

"We're looking for Commander O'Malley," Stan said.

One of the boys looked up. He was wearing new and shiny insignia of a major. He grinned up at Stan and Allison, his eyes taking in their service stripes.

"I guess you mean Flight Leader O'Malley," he said. "You should be able to find him over at Mess Three."

"So, he's already gotten himself shifted to flight leader," Stan said, matching the major's grin. "How'd he manage it?"

"By eating a pie while Colonel Benson was delivering a lecture on how to capture Italy," the major chuckled.

"So he's back on the firing line. I say, that's just where he wanted to be," Allison said.

"No, he didn't rate that well," the major explained. "The Old Man chucked him into a job of ferrying planes to Malta so we'd have some reserves in close to Sicily. Less than an hour ago O'Malley told me it was a quiet and peaceful job, but one he didn't like."

Stan looked at Allison. "You were right, there was a mouse, a big, dead one." He nodded to the major. "Thanks, Major," he said.

They turned away and walked out of the room. Allison laid a hand on Stan's arm as they turned toward the door of Mess Three.

"Suppose we surprise O'Malley," he suggested.

"He'll be in no mood for surprises," Stan answered. "He'll be a wild man. With the whole Army and Navy getting set to force a beach-head and him on ferry duty, he'll be red-hot."

"We are to fill in on his flight. We might work it so that he wouldn't know until we take off. We could be a bit late in showing up." There was a twinkle in Allison's eyes.

Stan began to grin. "I like the idea," he said. "We're stuck the same as he is and might as well cheer him up."

They went to the operations room and located Captain Marks who regarded them with unbelieving eyes.

"You mean to say you gave up a vacation trip to Alexandria to take this ferry job with that wild Irishman, O'Malley?"

"Sure," Stan said with a grin. "We like ferrying. It's the sort of life for any ambitious officer."

Captain Marks regarded them intently. "I have your assignments here, but I haven't seen anything of O'Malley."

"Suppose you shove them at him the last thing before the flight takes off. We'd like to surprise him, having been a pal of his for a long time."

The captain grinned. "It will be a surprise," he said. "I know about you three and I'm looking for trouble. O'Malley never looks at assignment or flight orders. And there will be only the three of you." His grin faded and he scowled at the two pilots. "We'll only lose three ships and I guess we can afford that."

"Thanks, Captain," Stan said. "Mum's the word. We'll see you before dawn tomorrow morning."

They moved out and did not go to Mess Three. They headed out to locate a spot where they could hide out until flight time.



CHAPTER IV

BEACH-HEAD

O'Malley grabbed his flight orders. He scowled at Captain Marks. For once the captain did not insist that he read his orders. O'Malley turned upon his heel and strode out of the briefing room. He was met in the darkness outside the office by an officer.

"You will fly a course over Tunis and approach Malta from due south, Lieutenant. Colonel Benson's orders. You are to make as many flights as possible today. There will be heavy action in the straits and you are to avoid that area." The officer saluted and moved on into the briefing room.

"Sure, an' I'll do me own settin' o' the course," O'Malley bellowed.

He was met at his plane by his master mechanic. "You have two new men today, sir. I have given them a few details of your course."

"An' I'll be givin' them some more," O'Malley growled as he climbed into the cockpit.

He settled down and listened for a few minutes to the excited orders jamming the air. Flights were heading out, bomber squadrons were calling in or taking orders. O'Malley set his phones on the beam and bent forward.

"Get ready, you birds of Ferry Flight," he called in.

"All set," came back a reply in muffled tones.

O'Malley wondered who the unlucky fliers were. Some poor saps who had gotten in bad with Benson, he guessed. He bent down and shouted to the sergeant.

"How much ammunition have we?"

"From now on the ferry ships will be fully loaded. You may run into trouble, sir."

O'Malley pulled in his head and kicked on the power. He snapped a release to his mates and waited for them to get off. He had not taken the trouble to get their

names, so he could not order them off one at a time. They did not seem to need any instruction. One Lightning wheeled around and roared away, followed closely by the other. O'Malley grunted his approval. The two relief men could fly.

Opening up his engines, O'Malley roared after his flight. He tried to cut across above them but had all he could do to catch up with them. In the gray dawn he saw that the two new men understood how to get speed out of a Lockheed P-38. Finally his two men eased over and let him slide in between them. They closed in, snuggling dangerously close.

"I'd thank ye for a bit more air," O'Malley growled.

"Are we crowding you, Commander?" a high-pitched voice asked.

"'Tis not crowdin' me, but I don't trust yer flyin' ability," O'Malley shot back.

"You're a bit off course," an unusually gruff voice broke in.

"Sure, an' I'm flyin' this outfit," O'Malley snapped.

They were swinging east by north, which headed them for Sicily. O'Malley scanned the skies as light began to break. Below him the strait was alive with barges and transports. A British monitor wallowed on its way, rolling and plunging. Flight after flight of medium bombers fanned out at low level. High above, the fighter patrols were roaring toward Sicily. O'Malley scowled as he scanned the scene hopefully. Not a German or an Italian plane in sight. It appeared that the best O'Malley would get for setting his own course was a good view of the invasion fleet and the opening wedge of the air forces.

Suddenly the shores of Sicily appeared below, and almost at once O'Malley was jerked out of his sour mood by a shout from one of his pilots.

"Me 110's coming down at four o'clock!"

"Protect yerselves!" O'Malley shouted eagerly. "Run fer it!"

"Shall we follow your example?" came in a mocking voice.

O'Malley started and his mouth popped open. He knew that voice! Then in came the voice of his other pilot.

"We'll do as you do, Commander. Lead on!"

"You spalpeens!" O'Malley bellowed. Then he broke out in a loud laugh. "Sure, an' the Auld Man made monkeys out of you two."

There was no more time for happy reunion. Seven Messerschmitts were coming down after the bombers. They were not interested in the three Lightnings and hoped that the Yanks flying them had not noticed any Jerries near by. In this they were very much disappointed.

Stan peeled off and banked steeply. Laying over he rolled into position and cut out an Me. As the Jerry flashed past his sights, he opened up and his Brownings sawed a wing off the fighter. He was over and the Jerry was gone before he was able to see what had happened to the enemy ship. As he came up he saw that O'Malley was celebrating. He was doing mad loops and dives that threatened to drive the six Me's out of the sky before Allison could tangle with one of them. Allison's voice came in, crisp and exasperated.

"I say, you Irisher. Lay off and let me have a chance!"

"Come on in!" O'Malley yelled back and he stalled and dived after an Me.

The three ferry pilots were finishing off the Jerries when a flight of six Lightnings and three Airacobras slid down from upstairs and joined in. There was only one luckless Me left. Three had been shot down and two had fled. The outnumbered Jerry dived and headed for home.

Allison and Stan closed in beside O'Malley. Their leader called over to them.

"There's a big fight on down there on that beach. Looks like the boys needed some help to keep the Stukas away."

"We're under your orders, Commander," Stan answered.

"Sure, an' you birds stand trial right alongside o' me when we get back," O'Malley shouted back. He dived and his pals went with him.

Down they went over the invasion beach-head where sky battles raged as German and Italian fighter bombers tried to strafe or bomb Yank and British landing craft.

Stan leaned over and looked down. The scene below was a stirring one. Three battlewagons of the cruiser class lay offshore. In closer, a line of destroyers was blazing fire and smoke as they blasted the shore batteries of the enemy. A group

of torpedo boats darted in and out, tormenting an enemy ship. Toward the shore and moving from four big transports came the landing barges: the personnel barges, the tank carriers, the mechanized armament barges. In swarms they were pouring toward the shore. In the air above, Yank and R.A.F. fighter pilots struggled to keep the dive bombers and the torpedo planes from getting at the ships. This was the zero hour for the boys in the barges. Either they established a beach-head or they failed at terrible cost.

Stan forgot that he was supposed to be a ferry pilot. He spotted a Stuka slipping in behind a screen of smoke rising from a burning freighter. Nosing down, he went after the Stuka. He caught a flash of O'Malley and Allison going in, too. They were needed, there was no doubt about that. The German planes were getting through.

Coming down on the bandit, Stan eased over a bit and flattened out to come in on the bomber's tail. The Stuka was sloping down toward one of the transport ships. Stan kicked his throttle on full and raised his nose until he had the bandit in his sights. His thumb pressed the gun button and he felt the terrific kick-back from his bank of guns. He saw the tail and a large part of the rear compartment of the Stuka wobble and then sheer away. Whirling crazily, smoke billowing up from its torn body, the Stuka went down, landing with a splash close alongside the transport. Stan went over the deck of the ship so low, he could see the grateful Navy boys waving at him.

Swinging inshore, Stan knifed after a Focke-Wulf 190 which was strafing the barges. He sent the 190 kiting along the tops of the waves and away inland. Stan was hot on the tail of the Focke-Wulf. He was sure he would get in a burst, when suddenly a burst of flak from a ground battery enveloped him. He felt the steel ripping through his wings. One motor began to stutter badly. It was then that Stan remembered he was supposed to deliver his plane to Malta in good condition.

Easing around, he climbed upward at a slow rate. He was looking for O'Malley and Allison. He spotted O'Malley by the crazy manner of his attack against an Me 110 which had closed in upon him. Stan grinned in spite of the seriousness of their predicament. Half the tail had been shot off O'Malley's Lightning. She was not handling very well. The Me had a big edge. Stan went up as fast as his one crippled motor would take him.

The Me pitted against O'Malley had the Irishman in a spot. He had doubled

inside O'Malley's loop and was now on his tail. Stan tried hard to power dive but got only feeble results. He waited grimly, expecting O'Malley to go down under a hail of Nazi lead. But O'Malley did not go down. Another Lightning came roaring down and cut the Me almost in half. Allison had been looking for O'Malley, too.

"How about hitting it for Malta, Commander?" Stan called.

"I say, old man, we better be getting out of here. The boys have everything under control in this sector," Allison added.

"Sure, an' we're headed for home, tuck in close an' follow me," O'Malley called cheerfully.

"We better cook up a good report," Stan said grimly.

"Sure, an' we got waylaid. 'Tis something could happen to anyone flying ferry planes," O'Malley answered. "Wasn't that the way it happened?"

"That is a bit of the truth, you know," Allison agreed.

"I don't know how I'll explain the flak holes I picked up. No Jerry or Italian plane ever carried five-inch guns," Stan answered.

"We met a enemy battleship," O'Malley said, unconcerned.

Stan snorted. "The Italian Navy hasn't poked its nose out of a home base in over a year. We were supposed to be flying in close to Allied shores."

"Sure, an' you're right," O'Malley answered cheerfully. "But I'll be thinkin' o' something, niver fear."

Stan looked down and then up. They had plunged into very soupy weather with low clouds and some wind. His ship was not taking it very well. Then it began to rain.

"You better be thinking of getting us in, one of my engines is about to conk out on me," he called across.

"I'm doing foine," O'Malley said. "Hear them signals coming in? That's the boys on Malta giving us the old signal. We'll ride right in."

They changed course, heading north. Stan began to frown. It did not seem right to be heading in that direction. Suddenly they sighted a field through the rain.

O'Malley dived for the field and Stan followed with Allison close behind. They hit the runway in a drenching rain and rolled in wing to wing.

Suddenly they were confronted by four trucks. The trucks rolled out and halted across their paths, pulling in close before them so that the Lightnings could not turn around. Stan stared at the trucks. They certainly were not Yank or British. Then he saw squads of grinning Italian soldiers poking machine guns over the sides of the trucks. Ground men began swarming out. Everyone was smiling.

"You sure let them call you in," Stan shouted to O'Malley.

"'Twas a dirty trick, them using our signals to call us in here," O'Malley fumed.

"Malta is just across the strait, I'll bet," Allison said. "I've heard that the Italians use this trick, but I never thought they'd fool the Irish." There was a mocking note in Allison's voice. "We may as well climb down like good little boys. They have us covered with a hundred machine guns."

"I'm getting out very carefully," Stan said. O'Malley said nothing at all, but he climbed out and joined Stan and Allison.

A group of Italian officers crowded around them. All were smiling and bowing as though welcoming the Yanks. O'Malley scowled at them, but Stan grinned back and Allison lifted a hand.

One of the Italian officers stepped forward. He spoke good English.

"You are prisoners of war, gentlemen. Come with us." He waved a hand toward the dim outline of a building.

The three Yanks were willing to move in out of the rain. They were drenched to the skin. Before they had reached the place where they were to be questioned the rain had ceased falling, and the sun had burst through the clouds. O'Malley was completely disgusted.

"Sure, an' I calls that a dirty trick. The weather is against us as well as iverything else."

"Please be seated," the Italian officer said as they entered a large room.

The three Yanks sat down and waited gloomily. Three high-ranking Italian officers entered. They spoke swiftly in their native tongue to the officer who had escorted the boys to the room. Their words were excited and they made many

motions with their hands. O'Malley stared at them sourly. Finally the junior officer turned to the boys.

"General Bolero wishes to ask you some questions."

The general smiled as he put the questions. "We wish to know how many planes and how many ships you are using. Also we wish to know at what places your forces plan to land."

Stan spoke up. He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands wide.

"No one can answer those questions but our high command. We are only ferry pilots as you will see if you examine the flight orders of our leader." He nodded toward O'Malley.

The general turned and spoke quickly to the other officers in Italian. They looked at O'Malley and talked some more, then the general turned to O'Malley. Before he could speak, O'Malley cut in:

"What I want to know is who's responsible for the trick that was pulled on us?"

The general smiled and his medal-covered chest expanded at O'Malley's question.

"I am honored that you appreciate my clever trick," he said affably.

O'Malley scowled at the general. "'Tis a foul trick," he said. "I have been insulted an' I'll get even with you."

Stan broke in to avoid O'Malley's getting into real action against the general.

"What are you going to do with us?"

"You will be flown to one of our prison camps on the mainland. You will be treated strictly according to International Law," the general answered.

"How soon?" Stan asked. He was thinking the paratroopers might take over this airfield very soon. He knew they would be hitting the coastal fields in order to give the boys spots to work from that were closer to Italy than the African coast.

"At once, at once," the general said and he seemed suddenly nervous.

"We are in no hurry, old man," Allison said and grinned.

"Ah, but we are in a very great hurry," put in the junior officer. "General Bolero is leaving at once. You will be flown out in, say, twenty minutes. I am so sorry there will be no time for dry clothes." He bowed and nodded to four soldiers armed with rifles who had appeared through a side door. "You will go with the guards."



CHAPTER V

PRISON SHIP

The three Yanks were rushed out upon the parade ground at the Italian base. Two squads of shouting Italian soldiers escorted them. They burst upon a scene of confusion and excitement. Stan looked across the grounds toward the runways. Suddenly he burst out laughing and poked Allison in the ribs.

"Look! His Nibs is deserting us!"

General Bolero was leading his staff toward a parked plane. For a big fat man he was making fast time. His cape floated out behind him and he had lost his jaunty cap. His officers were loaded down with brief cases, files, and bundles of papers. The general was a full ten paces ahead of them.

"I'd call that a rout," Allison shouted.

"I think our outfits must be closing in. We'll have to do some stalling," Stan shouted.

O'Malley was already stalling. Four men were pushing him along, and he was beginning to show signs of temper. Stan tried to get close enough to shout a warning to him. He did not want O'Malley to start a riot at that moment.

The Italians were evacuating the base in every sort of machine they had. Cars roared across the field, men pedaled by on bicycles, trucks lumbered past, and a whippet tank snorted as it rolled past dragging a field gun. Men on foot rushed in every direction.

Stan stumbled and went down, managing to trip two soldiers. Instantly a dozen Italians were upon him, tugging at him, waving their rifles and shouting. O'Malley took this as a signal to go into action. He swung hard on the chin of an officer standing beside him. The surprised officer went down like a felled beef. With a yell O'Malley waded in, swinging at soldiers as they piled in on him. Many bloody noses and black eyes developed in a hurry, but O'Malley was swarmed under by the weight of sheer numbers. He went down yelling like a Comanche Indian and swinging like Joe Louis.

Stan struggled to his feet and held up his hands. He realized the uselessness of fighting against such odds. The melee O'Malley had caused had drawn almost a company of Italians to the spot. Allison had managed to stay on his feet, but he had suffered from rough handling along with Stan and O'Malley. His uniform, which was wet and sagging, had been torn in a dozen places.

"Go quietly!" an Italian officer bellowed. He had just arrived on the scene. "Go quietly or you will be sorry!"

"We're going, call off your dogs!" Stan shouted.

The officer shouted orders in Italian and soon restored a semblance of order. Allison called across to Stan.

"Have a look above, and you'll see what all the excitement is about."

Stan looked into the sky and caught his breath. The paratroopers were coming. Low over the hilly country a fleet of transports and gliders swept in from the sea. They swept along in perfect formation like giant birds seeking a tree to light upon. Above them fighter planes wove in and out, while on either side fighter-bombers roared along. It was a beautiful sight.

Suddenly the Yank air soldiers began to pile out. The sky blossomed with colored parachutes until the blue was thickly dotted with them like a field crowded with spring flowers. They came floating down with machine guns and supply hassocks dangling from their chutes. On a slope above the field a glider nosed in. It slid to a halt and a jeep bounded out of its fat, rounded snout. Another glider slid in and a tank rolled out of it almost before it had slid to a halt. The slope above them was already swarming with Yanks, and machine guns were rattling.

Stan looked around desperately. They were being rushed toward a big truck. He made one last attempt to slow down their retreat. Shaking off the men who held him, he ducked his head and hit the line of soldiers like a blocking back clearing a path for a ball carrier. Two Italians went down, one under a straight, stiff arm and the other from a solid body-block. Then a soldier clipped Stan across the head with the butt of his rifle. Stan went down on his face and lay still.

O'Malley had started his fight again, but this time the Italians were not wasting precious minutes. O'Malley got a rap such as the one that had felled Stan. Allison went down under a pile of soldiers. Two minutes later the three Yanks,

out cold, were dumped into the truck and it was rumbling away along a paved road.

A few minutes later Stan groaned and opened his eyes. The truck was so packed with soldiers that he was forced to sit up, even though he had been out limp and cold. His head throbbed and felt twice its normal size. Turning it a little he could look out over the side of the truck. They were rolling along a winding road, climbing in low gear. Looking back Stan saw the battlefield they had just left.

The Yank airborne troops had swarmed onto the airfield. Already two big Yank planes had landed and men were spilling out to take over the field. With a groan Stan looked up. Twisting his head caused pains to shoot up and down his neck. He saw that the paratroopers were still coming in. A field of white chutes filled the air, while behind them dropped the varicolored chutes carrying equipment and ammunition. Gliders were casting off their toggle hooks and swooping earthward. Equipped with tommy-guns, folding rifles, mortars, folding bicycles, bazookas and light artillery, the air soldiers swarmed down.

Suddenly excited shouts from the Italians in the truck made Stan look up again. A fighter-bomber was roaring down toward the truck. Stan saw that there were three trucks in the group and that they were closely bunched, an ideal target for the diving Yank. Grimly he watched the hundred-pound egg slide free as the bomber lifted and zoomed upward. The deadly missile seemed to hang in the air for a moment, though it grew bigger and bigger every second. It appeared to be aimed straight at the last truck in line, which was their transport. Stan looked about for Allison and O'Malley.

His pals were standing against the side of the truck, wedged in by soldiers. They both looked weak and shaken. O'Malley was almost without clothes. Then the bomb hit. It landed in a bank just behind the truck. A great upheaval of earth and rocks lifted into the air and showered over the truck. One rear tire exploded with a bang and the truck began to wobble and jolt as it swayed along.

Then they broke over the top of the ridge and went careening down a steep slope. Five minutes later they had reached cover in an avenue of trees. But the Italians did not halt for repairs. They wanted to put as many miles as possible between them and the Yank air army before their gas ran out.

An hour later the truck limped into another airfield which had not been attacked. It was tucked away in a circle of hills with wooded slopes reaching down to a little valley. Here they found they had overtaken General Bolero. He was out on

the field rushing about, shouting orders and apparently getting ready to take off again. His staff was trailing him about, with their bundles and brief cases and files.

Stan and his pals were rushed into a small barracks room. The junior officer who spoke English had charge of them, backed by a dozen guards.

"We will supply you with clothing," he said, casting his eye over their ragged uniforms.

The clothing turned out to be blue shirts and bright green dungaree overalls. O'Malley glared at the officer. Stan grinned as he slipped into his outfit.

"It would save you a lot of trouble if you just turned us loose," he suggested.

"You will not escape. You will be sent to Italy." The officer matched O'Malley's glare. "Sicily can never be taken. Our infallible leader Mussolini has said Sicily can never be taken." He waved his hands excitedly. "Your forces will be driven into the sea."

"I'll bet you a bottle of your finest wine that half of the island is already taken," Stan answered.

"I say, why don't you kick the Germans out and help us along?" Allison asked. He felt he might touch a sore spot in mentioning the Germans.

The shot hit home. A flush spread over the face of the officer. "The Nazi dogs," he snapped. "We will deal with them after we have used them to help us."

"Sure, an' they'll treat you like they did the Poles," O'Malley said. "An' it will serve you right well, you spalpeens."

"We'd like to stop over here and rest a bit," Stan cut in. "We realize you treated us roughly because we made you a lot of trouble. We'll give you our parole. There'll be no more rough stuff."

"You talkin' fer me?" O'Malley growled.

"I am," Stan said and gave O'Malley a hard look. "We'll see that you're a nice, well-behaved boy."

"Agreed," Allison said, catching Stan's idea that he was playing for time. Even if they gave their parole it would not prevent their being captured by the Yanks.

The officer smiled knowingly. "You would like to stay here. You think your air troops will take over this field. No, we will not be so foolish. You leave for Italy in one hour." He turned and marched out, after giving orders to the guards.

"That's that," Stan said. "But we still have a chance. He didn't accept our parole."

"They ought to be usin' their men to fight an' not be after keepin' a whole company here as guards," O'Malley grumbled.

"After the show you put on, they need a company," Stan snapped. "If we'd been good boys, they might have left us with a couple of guards."

"Who started the fuss?" O'Malley demanded.

"I stumbled, but that was just to slow down the procession," Stan answered. "I'll admit it was a mistake."

"We'd better be doing some heavy thinking," Allison warned. "If we don't we'll spend the rest of this campaign in a prison camp."

There was no time for thinking and very little chance to talk. The Yanks were hustled out to the runways and loaded into a shaky and battered Fiat 20, two-engine bomber. They were escorted by the two squads of guards who stood around with rifles at ready until the plane started down the runway.

Stan was squeezed in between O'Malley and Allison. The space inside the bomber was very limited, for it was not intended as a passenger plane. Besides the pilot and copilot, two men armed with pistols sat in the cramped quarters. The Italians had very thoughtfully provided their prisoners with parachutes. One of the guards spoke English and was not unwilling to talk. Stan singled him out at once.

"I have been in America," the guard said in a friendly fashion.

"What city?" Stan asked.

"New York. I stay one year."

"Didn't you like it?" Stan asked with a grin.

"Sure, it was much good. I come back for my brother and then there is war. I must stay." The soldier shook his head sadly.

"After the war you'll be going back?" Stan asked.

"Sure. It is a fine place to live, New York. I make plenty money, got friends." The soldier smiled. "I will see you then."

Stan laughed. "You sure will." His eyes were on the back of the pilot's neck. If O'Malley reached out he could touch the man flying the plane. Stan bent forward, at the same time signaling O'Malley with his knee in short and long taps. O'Malley finally woke up and answered the Morse SOS. As Stan talked to the soldier he also telegraphed to O'Malley and later to Allison.

What Stan suggested was that they get control of the two pistols. The friendly soldier was bending closer. Stan would offer to show him some pictures from America that he had in his wallet. He would get the man off guard and when he had a chance would grab his pistol and push him over into the cramped back part of the ship. O'Malley and Allison would have to get the other pistol.

"I think I have some pictures you may recognize," Stan said. He fished out a wallet which the Italians had not taken from him. Opening it he pulled out several snapshots of planes he had piloted at one time or another, but he held them so that the soldier had to bend forward. The guard leaned over almost against Stan.

Like a flash Stan's hand shot out and he had the pistol. He lunged forward at the same instant, planting his head in the guard's chest. The soldier went over his stool and landed in a cramped position in the narrow waist of the plane.

O'Malley had leaped the instant Stan's hand shot out. Allison did a good imitation of an American tackle. The second guard lost his gun but put up a tussle. Stan wedged past the struggling men and jammed the pistol barrel into the neck of the pilot.

"We'll take over now," he snapped.

The pilot cringed forward while the copilot turned about. Stan circled his neck with an arm and cinched down tight. Before the copilot could wiggle free, O'Malley was up forward with the other pistol. The copilot lifted his hands. His face was white and he seemed scared.

"Drag him back and tuck him away with the guards," Stan ordered.

O'Malley and Allison dragged the copilot back and crowded him into the narrow rear compartment with the others. Allison stood guard over them, while

O'Malley and Stan took over from the pilot. The pilot was not afraid of the Yanks. He did signals of distress with his wings and put the ship into a dive before Stan laid him out with a rap over the head. Sliding into the seat Stan began to fight the old Fiat to get her out of a spin.

She was going down, twisting and shuddering in every rivet and stay. O'Malley finally climbed up front and grabbed the free set of controls. They heaved her out of her spin just in time. Their wings fanned the tops of a grove of trees and they had to lay over to miss the spire of a church.

"I can handle her now," Stan called across. "I'll go up a bit and then you get back there and have the Italians bail out. We won't need any prisoners. If they kick about it, tell them we'll be setting this ship down on a Malta air strip. That ought to make them bail out." Stan grinned at O'Malley.

"Sure, an' it ought to," O'Malley agreed. "No Fiat iver got to land on Malta under her own power. We'll be shot to kindlin' wood."

"Maybe we won't go to Malta, but that's where we're headed until they bail out," Stan laughed.

O'Malley went back and within a few minutes the Italian crew was unloading. O'Malley had convinced them the plane was headed for Malta and they wanted none of the reception they knew an Italian plane would get over that base.

Stan watched them sail down, one after another. As the last parachute blossomed out, Allison and O'Malley crowded forward. Stan had swung due south, and was holding that course.

"Suppose you see what you can do with the radio," Stan said.

Allison laughed. "There isn't any radio and there isn't a gun aboard this ship, except our two pistols."

"Fine," Stan said and opened the old Fiat up a bit more. "In that case we better get in before dark."

"You better be after rememberin' that I'm commander o' this outfit," O'Malley broke in.

"All right, Commander, the ship is yours." Stan eased over a bit. With a grin O'Malley squeezed into the pilot's seat.

"Now you can be after givin' the orders," he said. "Where in blazes are we?"

"We're over Italy," Stan said. "I think the town we just flew over was Cosenza, up the coast from Reggio."

"Do you be after thinkin' that's water ahead?" O'Malley asked.

They looked ahead and saw a strip of water and a long beach. Stan frowned. "Must be the Gulf of Taranto. I guess I'm a bit mixed up."

"I say, old man, we better swing around and head southwest," Allison said.

"We could fly to Africa," O'Malley remarked.

"Not on our gas supply. The Italians must be short of gas. They certainly didn't fill this crate up." Allison's mocking grin appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"How much? Don't be holdin' out secrets on us," O'Malley growled.

"It's only a wild guess, but I'd say about forty minutes."

O'Malley gave a startled yelp and spun the ship around to a south by west course. "Sure, an' we're gettin' out o' here," he said.

Allison slipped into the copilot's seat while Stan sat on a folding stool behind him. O'Malley gave all his attention to nursing speed out of the old ship. He got her air-speed indicator up to two hundred and fifty miles per hour, but the indicator needle was bent, so there was no sure way of knowing how fast they were going. They left the expanse of water behind and headed over a rugged country. Stan felt certain they were flying down the toe of the Italian boot.

Everything was going fine when Stan spotted fighter planes above them and to the west. He did not say anything until the craft were near enough to be identified.

"Nine Airacobras off your port wing at two o'clock, Commander," he shouted.

O'Malley craned his neck and squinted, then he began to grin. "Sure, an' there is," he said. "It's an escort we've been needin'. Likely the boys will know the way home."

"Certainly they will," Allison said. "And they'll know a Fiat BR 20, also. This crate looks like a bomber."

"We better duck and go downstairs for a bit of hedge-hopping," Stan advised. The Airacobras had spotted the lone bomber and were peeling off like hounds scenting a buck.

O'Malley did not need any suggestions as to what to do. He nosed the Fiat over and sent her down the chute in a screaming dive that threatened to pull the wings off her. Stan glanced at his chute harness to make sure everything was in order. He figured O'Malley would fold up the Fiat like an old accordion when he started to pull her out of the dive.

The Airacobras rapidly overtook the bomber, even though she was power-diving far beyond her limit of stability. Stan saw one of the boys flash in on their tail.

"Kite her!" he bellowed. "Stinger on your tail!"

O'Malley and Allison both hauled back and the Fiat wobbled and staggered as she started to lift. Stan could hear her joints giving way, then she bounced. Lead whistled below them, while the Airacobra roared down the trail of its own bullets.

"Close," Allison muttered.

Stan squinted up and back. Two more fighters were lining up. It seemed plain that they were surprised at the antics of the Fiat. They had never seen one do stunts like that before. The two came raking in, blasting from longer range. Stan felt the lead rip through the Fiat's wings and body. One bullet plunked through close to his head, ripping a big hole, another exploded back in the tail compartment and half of the peninsula could be seen through the hole.

"Sure, an' they need shootin' practice!" O'Malley bellowed as he slipped off on one wing, did a stall, and laid over for another dive. They were now close to the treetops. Another Airacobra dived in and when it zoomed away, they were minus one wing tip and their port engine was stuttering. But they were down among the treetops and O'Malley was hedge-hopping like a wild man. They missed an ancient castle set on a cliff. How O'Malley managed it he himself did not know. One wing lifted and the turrets of the old castle slipped under. Down they went into a little valley, fanning the treetops. One motor was dead and the other was not putting out much power.

Suddenly they realized that they were being covered by flak fired from a field ahead of them. The barrage was fierce and concentrated. It sent the Yank fighters

kiting up to a safer level. The boys felt sure of their kill anyway. The Fiat had started to billow smoke out of the tail compartment where an incendiary shell had lodged.

"I'd rather bail out than land in this thing!" Allison shouted.

O'Malley shook his head and grinned. "Not one chance, she won't lift a foot. Here goes for a belly landing!"

They skimmed over a row of trees and headed for an open field surrounded by woods. The Fiat gave up the ghost halfway across the field. She just settled down and hit the earth in a cloud of smoke and dust. Twisting and turning she plowed her way toward the far tree line. Finally she whirled around and piled up. The dust and smoke was so thick the three Yanks could see nothing. Pawing and struggling they fought their way out of the mass of wreckage. They heard men shouting all around them. Bursting out of the smoke and dust, they found themselves surrounded by fifty or more German soldiers.

For a moment the Germans were as surprised as the three Yanks. They had expected to rescue a crew of Italian fliers. The men before them were dressed in the garb of Italian civilians. An officer bellowed an order and the Germans charged in.

There was no place to run, except out on the open field, and that would have been suicide because a half dozen of the Germans were armed with tommy-guns. The Yanks just stood waiting for the Germans to reach them. The officer in command of the rescue group, a tall fellow with a saber scar on his cheek, halted before them and regarded them critically. Slowly a sarcastic smile formed on his lips. He spoke to them sharply in Italian.

Stan answered in English. "We are officers of the United States Army."

The officer looked blank but another officer who had come up broke in, speaking clipped but perfect English.

"American fliers dressed as Italian civilians." He raised his eyebrows. "We can thank your fighters for shooting you down. Your spy system is very dumb, indeed. Your fighter planes should have known better."

"We were Italian prisoners of war. Our uniforms were ruined. As a matter of courtesy the Italians furnished us what clothing they had." Stan spoke stiffly. "We demand the rights of prisoners of war."

"We will decide what rights you have, but I believe you will be shot as spies." The officer turned to his superior and spoke in rapid German.

Allison had said nothing at all. O'Malley just glared at his captors, his big hands balled into fists. Stan moved close to him.

"Keep your shirt on. We're in a tight spot," he said in a low voice.

"Quiet, you!" bellowed the officer. "Do not talk to each other."

The ranking officer shouted a command and three German soldiers with machine guns closed in behind the boys.

"March!" the younger officer snapped.

They marched toward the woods. The officer moved stiffly ahead. The boys realized that escape from two squads of Italians would have been much easier than escape from the three Germans. They seemed eager to use their deadly tommy-guns.

"I understand German, you know," Allison murmured as he bumped against Stan. Stan moved closer to his pal and Allison went on.

"The commander is very angry because they were forced to open up on our fighters. Now the location of their guns is known. He is also eager to learn something about the strength of our air forces attacking Sicily and heading for Italy. He hinted we would be baited on by a promise of being treated as prisoners of war if we talked."

"We won't talk," Stan muttered. "Anyway, we don't know anything."

Entering the woods they found themselves in a cleverly hidden camp. The boys were lodged in a barracks room with barred windows. Two other prisoners, both Italians, were in the room. A guard stood at the door, while several others paced up and down outside.

"Looks snug and tight," Stan said.

"Sure, an' we'll soon find out," O'Malley growled.

"We'll go into a huddle and cook up something," Stan said. "We're not in the hands of Italians now, and I don't feel up to facing a firing squad."



CHAPTER VI

FIRING SQUAD

The three Yanks seated themselves on a rough bench in their cell. The two Italian prisoners looked them over without interest, then went back to their own talk, which they were carrying on in whispers. Every once in a while they shot glances at the boys as though fearing they were trying to hear what was being said.

"Suspicious chaps, what?" Allison said, amused.

"Wonder what they were thrown in for?" Stan mused.

"Sure, an' it matters very little. What happens to Mrs. O'Malley's boy is what's worryin' me," O'Malley broke in. "Ivery window is fastened as tight as the purse o' a Scotsman an' the door is well guarded."

"They'll be coming after us very soon," Stan said. "They'll question us one at a time."

"You'd best act as commander," O'Malley said. "I might plant a fist on the nose o' one o' their generals."

"I say, that's a fine idea," Allison agreed. "Stan, you are in command."

It was natural for them to turn to Stan. He had always been the most level-headed of the three in tight spots. He grinned at them.

"We'll see who they pick," he answered. "But we don't talk."

A few minutes later the junior officer who spoke English appeared. He shoved past the guard and stood at the barred door. The two Italian prisoners stopped talking at once. The boys did not get up from their bench. They returned the stare of the officer. His eyes moved over them and paused on Stan.

"Are you in command?"

"I am in command," Stan answered.

"Come with me. The colonel is very reasonable. If you are not pig-headed you may be treated as prisoners of war."

Stan got to his feet. One of the Italians had risen. He looked at Stan closely. Suddenly Stan turned back to his pals and bent close to them. In a whisper he said:

"Be careful. I just got the idea those Italians may be planted in here to listen to what we say."

"Come on, you," the officer snapped.

Stan moved to the iron grating. Pulling a bunch of keys out of the side pocket of his tunic, the guard unlocked the door. Stan stepped out on a narrow walk which led to a row of doors. The officer marched stiffly at his side. At a glance Stan saw that the place was well guarded. Not less than a dozen men with rifles were spotted within sight of the guardhouse and of the buildings grouped around it.

"You will do well to answer all questions truthfully and in detail. Colonel Kittle is a man of action." The officer gave decided emphasis to the last words.

Stan did not reply. They were entering a big room with wall cabinets and a desk. Chairs ringed the desk on which lay various trophies and gadgets such as might have decorated the room of any flight lieutenant. Stan spotted a piece out of a Hurricane fighter. There was an American Colt forty-five automatic and a Russian helmet.

Behind the desk sat the tall officer with the saber scar across his cheek. Stan sized him up as a Prussian military man of the old school. Now that he had a good chance to look at the colonel he saw that the man was hollow-eyed, his skin was drawn tightly over his cheekbones, and his short, cropped hair was streaked with gray. Stan snapped a salute, not knowing exactly why he did it.

The colonel returned the salute and waved a bony hand toward a chair. Stan seated himself. The officer went on regarding him intently. The junior officer seated himself beside Stan and waited. Finally the colonel spoke in German. The young officer frowned, then began translating.

"The colonel wishes to compliment you. The Americans have done very well in Africa."

"Thanks," Stan answered warily.

"He sees no reason why you should not be classed as a prisoner of war." The young officer's lip curled. He turned to the colonel and waited.

The colonel spoke for some little time. When he stopped talking the young lieutenant faced Stan.

"We wish to know the approximate number of fighter and bomber craft based upon Africa. It would be helpful if you could add information regarding additional troops moved in to assist in the action against Italy."

Stan smiled. "My compliments to the colonel. Tell him I am not at liberty to give such information."

The officer scowled. He translated and the colonel smiled back at Stan.

"That will be all," the young officer snapped. It was plain the young officer did not like the way his commander was handling matters.

Stan was marched back to his cell. The young officer hurried away. When he was out of hearing, Stan spoke in low tones to his pals. He now noticed that the Italians seemed interested and were trying to listen.

"The old boy with the scar is commander. He's a Prussian officer of the old school and does not think much of the Nazi methods. He seems to have convinced himself that we are really officers and told the truth about our clothes."

"I'll get more dope," Allison said. "I can understand their talk."

A few minutes later the young officer returned and took Allison to the office. O'Malley and Stan sat waiting for his return. The Italians sat with their backs against the wall in silence. Fifteen minutes passed and then Allison returned. The boys went into a huddle.

"The colonel is not in favor of using the third degree on us. He says he has reports on us from the Italians and knows we are prisoners of war. He said all this in German. The young lieutenant seems to be in with the Gestapo. I gathered that they hate each other." Allison paused and grinned. "The old boy told him off plenty, but the kid is stubborn. He's going over the head of the colonel, so we may have trouble."

"Sure, an' I'll bet the colonel can get tough, just the same," O'Malley cut in.

"Yes, he's as hard as nails but he has the old rules well trained into him. He'll do whatever the big shots order. Guess who the big boy in Italy is."

"Couldn't make a stab," Stan said.

"Rommel himself. He's to keep us from breaching the continent. Remember how Herr Goebbels has been shouting that the Allies could never break into the European fortress? Well Rommel is going to see that we don't crack through." Allison laughed softly.

"Sure, an' we'll give 'em the same pastin' we gave him in Africa," O'Malley growled.

An hour passed and O'Malley was not called in. Supper of bread and thin soup arrived and with it came the Gestapo officer. He seated himself on a stool outside the bars and talked while the boys ate. O'Malley looked at the food, then turned to the officer.

"'Tis not fit for a hog, this food."

"That's why you are getting it," the officer said and laughed loudly.

"We are entitled to decent rations," Stan said.

"What does it matter about the rations? I have just talked by radio to headquarters. Unless you give us the information we want, you will be shot. I have the order with me." He leered at the boys triumphantly.

"Pleasant sort of folks, you Nazis," Allison drawled.

"I will attend to the execution myself, tomorrow morning. You will have tonight to think things over." He got to his feet and kicked aside the stool.

Stan finished his tin of soup and stood up. He walked to the barred door. The guard swung around and made a menacing motion with his rifle. Stan grinned at him and stepped back. He was convinced the Gestapo officer had told the guards to shoot on the least provocation, he could read it in the man's eyes.

"Be careful," he said as he seated himself again. "The guards have been told to get rid of us if they can find any excuse."

"I'd as soon be shot by a guard as a firing squad," Allison said.

"We might get the fellow up near the bars and get his keys," Stan said.

"Good idea," O'Malley agreed. "But how?"

"We'll get over near the door and start to whisper with our backs to him. See if we can tease him up close," Stan suggested.

They moved over near the grating and began whispering. The guard stood watching them. He was a full ten feet from the door and did not move. His expressionless, beefy face showed not a flicker of interest. Finally the boys gave it up.

"He has about as much curiosity as a turtle," Stan said sourly.

"Sure, an' they may put on a guard with a brain," O'Malley said hopefully.

They sat down and tried to think up another scheme. At midnight the guard was changed and they tried their trick on the new man. He was less interested than the first one. He turned his back on them and let them whisper. The boys gave it up and sat down to wait.

They dozed off after a time. O'Malley stretched out on the floor and went to sleep. Stan and Allison remained on the bench, leaning back against the wall. The clatter of trucks and shouting of soldiers wakened them. Daylight was breaking and the camp seemed to be getting set for some sort of action. Presently the young officer appeared. He glared at the three Yanks.

"Are you ready to talk?" he demanded.

"No," Stan answered. The others shook their heads.

"In that case I will waste no time. You will be shot within the hour." He turned to the Italian prisoners and spoke in German to one of them. His words were harsh and his attitude showed he had no respect for the men.

One of the prisoners answered in German. His words were angry and he was defiant. Suddenly Allison stepped forward.

"I say, old man," he addressed the officer. "I've changed my mind. There is some information I could give the colonel."

"Come along then," the officer snapped. He shot a few words at the Italians as he motioned for the guard to open the door.

Stan grabbed Allison's arm. "You can't do it, fellow," he said.

Allison turned on him. "You may want to die and become a hero, but I'd rather be a live war prisoner. I say, get your hands off me."

Stan started to pull Allison back. With a quick movement Allison planted a fist on Stan's jaw. It was a hard right cross and set Stan back on his heels.

The officer laughed loudly. "Now you are acting quite as you should, you swine."

"Let me get a crack at him," O'Malley howled. "The traitor!"

He was blocked by the bayonet of the guard. Allison walked out of the cell. He paused and looked back. There was a mocking leer on his lips.

"Good-by, saps," he said.

Stan slumped down on the bench. O'Malley marched up and down fuming and ranting. Twenty minutes passed and a soldier came to the cell. He escorted the Italians out of the room. Stan got to his feet and walked to the door. He was attracted by marching feet on the gravel outside.

Looking out he saw a squad of men with rifles. The squad leader halted them and faced them toward a wall. Their rifle butts hit the gravel and they stood rigid, with their backs to the cell door. Stan noticed that mortar had been knocked from the surface of the wall. He could see many splattered places and many bullet holes in that wall. Turning around he looked at O'Malley, who had seated himself.

"The reception committee has arrived," he said calmly.

O'Malley got to his feet and walked to the door. In silence they stood looking out at their executioners. The squad leader was looking their way. He seemed eager to get at the business he had to perform.

Two officers appeared and halted before the squad leader. He saluted and the three talked briefly. The officers turned toward the guardhouse. They spoke to the guard and he produced his keys. The door was opened and one of the officers spoke in broken English.

"Come now."

Stan and O'Malley walked out of the room. One of the officers produced two

strips of cloth and held them out. Stan shook his head.

"No blindfold for me," he said evenly.

"Get them rags away," O'Malley growled. "I'll be lookin' ye in the eye, ye spalpeens."

Walking between the two officers, they marched out across the grounds toward the wall. Reaching it, they faced the men with rifles at rest.

"Get it over with," Stan snapped.

"Sure, an' I'll bet Allison will be sorry he isn't here," O'Malley said gloomily.

The officers moved back and took up positions beside the firing squad. Suddenly a jangle of angry and excited voices broke loose from the direction of the colonel's quarters. A door burst open and a big fat man plunged out upon the parade ground.

"General Bolero!" Stan gasped.

It was General Bolero and he was red-faced with anger. Behind him came Colonel Kittle, the Gestapo officer, the two Italian prisoners, and Allison. The general charged across the grounds and halted before the two officers in charge of the firing squad. He jumped up and down and shouted, waving his arms wildly all the time. Colonel Kittle came up and halted. He snapped an order to the officers.

The Gestapo officer was shouting loudly, but he was no match for the general, who bellowed so loudly that the medals on his chest danced up and down.

The firing squad suddenly came to life. They shouldered their rifles, about-faced, and marched away. Stan and O'Malley walked over to the group.

The general ceased shouting and looked at the two Yank airmen. He puffed out his cheeks and said:

"A thousand apologies, gentlemen. I am ashamed. Italy is shamed. This could not be." He faced the colonel. "These are my prisoners, Colonel. I am taking them with me."

Colonel Kittle saluted and nodded. The Gestapo officer whirled and raced away.

"We will go quickly," the general said to the boys, "before the suckling pig

receives more orders from his superiors." He bowed deeply to the colonel and faced about.

"I have given our promise to go with him," Allison said. "It was the only way to save your necks."

They marched away beside the general. Beyond the buildings they came to a big car with an army driver. General Bolero himself opened the door, and the boys seated themselves in the rear seat. The general climbed in the front seat with his driver. He sat very stiffly but every once in a while he sputtered like the fuse on a firecracker.

The car rolled up a shady road, past many guards, and on into a wide highway. Stan turned to Allison.

"How did you work it?" he asked.

"I heard one of those Italian prisoners say he demanded to see General Bolero. The officer told him Bolero was in Colonel Kittle's office. I thought there might be a slim chance if I could get to the general, so I pretended to be ready to turn traitor." Allison chuckled. "You should have seen the general," he lowered his voice, "when I told him we were to be shot as spies."

"He's a good egg, but for how long did you give our parole?" Stan asked. He was worried because a military parole is something a soldier does not break.

"Thirty days," Allison replied. "It was the best deal I could make."

"Thirty days!" Stan repeated. "Italy will be captured by that time and we'll miss the show."

Allison grinned. "You know, I got the idea the general figured Italy would be out of the war by then."

"'Tis the first time I iver promised to stay in jail," O'Malley said sadly. "But after lookin' down the barrels o' them Nazi rifles, I'm not kickin' on the bargain."

"Yes, we'd have missed all of the show if Allison hadn't outsmarted that Gestapo officer," Stan agreed.

CHAPTER VII

REST CURE

General Bolero took his prisoners to a villa a few miles from Naples. Here they had comfortable quarters and good food. They saw little of the general, as he was busy attending to the fortification of the Salerno and Naples water fronts. When they did see him, he always spoke with little respect for his German allies. Stan and Allison liked the general, but O'Malley did not warm up to him. The Irishman had never liked high-ranking officers. To him they were always brass hats.

The days passed slowly. The boys had a small radio and always tuned in the Algiers radio station for news of the Allied attack upon Sicily. The news of the fighting made them squirm, and for hours after listening to a military report of the advance of Patton and Montgomery they paced the floor. O'Malley was especially restless. He marked each day off on the calendar and planned his escape.

On the twenty-seventh day the boys were seated on a shady balcony from which they could look down toward the city of Naples. Directly below the grounds of their villa were the headquarters and general assembly fields of the Germans. They seemed to be present in considerable strength. Stan sat with his feet on a railing. Allison was near the railing. O'Malley was sprawled out in an easy chair.

"Sure, an' it will be no trick at all to get away," he said.

"Before our parole is up the general will make other plans for us, you can bet on that," Stan answered.

"I'll bet we're locked up," Allison added.

"We could sneak out a bit ahead o' time," O'Malley suggested.

"The general has treated us very fine, besides saving our lives. We stay until one minute after midnight of the thirtieth day," Stan said firmly.

"I'm goin' crazy," O'Malley growled, "sittin' around here listenin' to air fights. There won't be a German plane left to tangle with by the time we get back into

it." He sat up and scowled down at the German camp. "Besides, these Italians can't make decent pie."

The boys laughed and O'Malley joined in. Behind them a curtain parted and four officers stepped out on the balcony. The general was paying them a visit and he had with him three flying officers of the Italian air force.

The Yanks got to their feet. The general smiled in friendly fashion and waved a hand toward the three fliers.

"I have brought three of my boys, Tony Bolero, Arno Bolero and Lorenzo Bolero. They are all officers of our air corps." He faced the Yanks. "Lieutenant Wilson, Lieutenant O'Malley, and Lieutenant Allison."

The Bolero trio bowed deeply. Stan stepped forward and held out a hand.

"Glad to meet you, Lorenzo," he said.

The fliers shook hands while the general beamed happily upon them.

"Sit down. I have much to say to you men," he said.

They found chairs and pulled them up beside a table. The general seated himself and puffed out his cheeks as he fished a thick envelope from his pocket.

"What I am about to say is most unusual. I have a request to make of you Americans. I wish you to extend your parole." He lifted a hand as O'Malley opened his mouth to say no. "I feel that you should do this after the manner in which you have been treated." He smiled at Stan.

"For how long, sir?" Stan asked.

"I cannot say exactly, but not for very much longer. I am leaving my boys here and they will be with you during the time you stay here." His smile faded and he suddenly looked tired and old. "I ask this for a personal reason. Perhaps I am selfish."

"You saved our lives, sir," Allison said. "I'm giving my parole for a while longer."

"I'll give mine, sir," Stan promised.

They looked at O'Malley. "An' I'm gettin' away if I can," he declared.

The general bowed. "You know, of course, that I must place you in custody of a guard?"

"Sure," O'Malley replied. "Sure, but I'm gettin' itchy feet."

The general nodded. He handed the fat envelope to his eldest son, Lorenzo.

"You will keep this for me. Above all it must not be given to the Germans." He got to his feet. "Now I must be getting back to headquarters. I trust you have been comfortable, gentlemen?"

"We have, thank you, sir," Allison said.

Gravely the general shook hands with the three Yanks and with each of his sons. At the doorway he paused and they all gave him a snappy salute. After he was gone the Bolero boys were silent. They stood at the balcony looking down on the shady road until his car disappeared inside the German camp. Lorenzo turned to Stan and there was a tight smile on his lips.

"This is a strange war for the Italians," he said.

"It is," Stan agreed.

The brothers shrugged their shoulders and started to chat with the Yanks in smooth English. They had learned the language in Great Britain. O'Malley sat back and said nothing. Stan and Allison carried on the talk. The war was not mentioned again. Allison and the brothers talked about schooldays in England.

At last Lorenzo got to his feet. The others joined him. They all bowed.

"We leave you now but will see you at dinner tonight."

After they had gone, O'Malley burst out, "You sure did get tricked by that ol' brass hat."

"I don't think so," Stan said.

"I say, old man, you better change your mind. If you don't, I'll wager you a dinner we see action before you do." Allison was smiling.

"Sure, an' you talk riddles," O'Malley snorted.

"There's only one place the general can put you for safekeeping right now. He'll have to turn you over to the Germans. This part of the country has been taken

over by the Nazi gang." Allison spoke slowly. "The general hates the Nazis. Figure it out for yourself."

"An' suppose he pops up with a regiment o' soldiers to take you to a camp about five minutes before our parole is up?" O'Malley asked.

"He could do that anyway," Stan answered. "We've waited a month. A few more days won't kill us. I have a feeling Allison is right."

"The Italians have thrown Mussolini out, perhaps they will start throwing the Germans out," Allison said.

"They wouldn't have a chance," O'Malley answered.

"I guess you're right about that, but something's up. I'm going to wait and see." Stan walked to the balcony rail and seated himself.

That night at dinner the Bolero brothers were quite gay. And for the next few days they were always around, but always friendly and polite. Stan wondered why they were not at the front. Italy certainly needed every pilot she had. He did not think that the officers had been detailed to watch them.

The parole day came and a guard arrived in the morning. The three Yanks saw a squad of Italian soldiers headed by a young officer halt in the yard below. O'Malley sat on the rail, watching. The young officer came to the balcony alone.

"Which one is Lieutenant O'Malley?" he asked.

O'Malley grinned at him. "Sure, an' that's me. I'm glad you dropped in. Tell General Bolero that I am givin' my parole, though it is against me better judgment."

The officer bowed. "I am pleased," he said. "I will report this to the general." He bowed again and turned on his heel.

Stan looked at O'Malley. "I thought you'd get some sense into that shaggy head of yours."

"We'll rot right here," O'Malley said with a scowl. "But the likes o' you has need o' someone to look out for you."

"Thanks," Stan said. "You are very thoughtful."



CHAPTER VIII

ESCAPE

The three Yanks were sitting on their balcony restlessly watching the activity in the German camp below. They were beginning to wonder if General Bolero ever meant to release them from their promise. His sons still remained at the villa, but they never mentioned the war. Suddenly Lorenzo burst out on the balcony. He halted and lifted both hands excitedly.

"Italy has surrendered!" he announced. "You are free men!"

Before the Yanks could reply, Arno and Tony rushed in. They were very excited.

"This is the hour we have waited for," Tony shouted. "Now we will drive out the Black Shirt Fascisti and the Germans." The younger brothers embraced each other and danced up and down. Lorenzo smilingly watched them. Slowly he turned to the three surprised Yanks. "My family—we have fought against the big-talking Mussolini. We belong to the society Free Italy."

"Great!" Allison exclaimed.

O'Malley was already headed for the door.

"Wait!" Lorenzo shouted after him. "I must tell you some things."

O'Malley halted and turned toward the door. "Sure, an' all I want is to get back into this fight."

"I am sure you do," Lorenzo said. "And I am going to help you."

"Good," Stan said.

Lorenzo took a fat package from his pocket. It was the package his father had given him. He held it out to Stan.

"Here are the locations of all German bases in Italy, the positions of batteries, the supply routes used, and all the military maps you will need. This is very important information."

O'Malley was staring at the package. "Sure, an' it's of no use now with Italy out o' the war. We'll be headed for Germany."

Lorenzo shook his head. "I'm afraid it is not so easy as that. Germany has complete control of Italy as she has of any conquered country. The Germans will be helped by our Black Shirts, who know they will be treated badly if they do not stay in power." He spread his hands wide. "Every officer like my father will be hunted down. We will be hunted. Today we dress as civilians and go north to destroy Nazi rail lines and supply dumps."

Stan took the packet. "Have you any suggestions for our getting out of Italy?"

Lorenzo smiled. "My brothers and I will have no use for our Nardi fighter planes. Perhaps after the war we might be repaid with an Airacobra."

"'Tis a foine set o' brothers ye are," O'Malley cried. "Lead me to those Nardi ships."

"They are in a woods north of the villa. On the hunting acres of the Bolero estate there is a runway the Germans have not found. I will lead you to your planes. But we had best hurry as the Germans are taking over everything." He spread his hands wide and shrugged his shoulders. "You know how efficient the Germans are."

"You will go nowhere," a harsh voice said.

The boys whirled toward the wide doorway leading to the balcony. Four German soldiers with tommy-guns stood glaring at them. A youngster with an officer's insignia on his shirt spoke.

"We have heard what you said. You are spies and will be dealt with quickly."

Lorenzo was in front of Stan. He whispered, "Over the balcony rail. There is a large shrub to land on. Take the path leading from the kennels. Cross the ridge. There is no road to the field."

"You, stop talking!" the German officer shouted.

Stan did not hesitate. He did a backward flip. As he went over the railing he saw flame flash from a machine gun. He caught a glimpse of Lorenzo sagging forward, his hands gripping his stomach.

The next instant he had plunged into a large bush which broke his fall. He lay

beside a rock wall in a ditch. Vaguely he knew where the kennels were. Tony had taken him back to see the dogs one evening after dark. From above he could hear the officer bellowing down to the men he had left below. He hoped the Germans had felt so sure of their quarry that they had not surrounded the house.

Reaching a corner he discovered a guard there. The man was looking up, listening to his commander's orders. Stan hit him hard in the back with a knee and slapped a viselike grip around his neck. The man sagged down without a murmur. Stan stripped off the fellow's cartridge jacket and grabbed his tommy-gun. He was glad the Germans had equipped their hounds with rapid-fire guns.

Leaping forward he reached the back of the house. There he halted. The squad cars were in the back yard, two of them. Four men stood at the back door listening to the shouting above. Stan saw the kennels and set himself to blast a path to freedom.

Suddenly he heard a wild yell from above. It was O'Malley and Stan could tell the Irishman was seeing red. There was a fight in progress up on the balcony. Machine guns chattered savagely. Stan felt suddenly sick to his stomach. The boys were up there mixing it barehanded with four Germans armed with machine guns.

The guards at the door whirled to leap into the house. Stan's submachine gun burst into flame and he swept a pathway of death across the ranks of the Nazis. They went down in a writhing mass, one of them rolling off the steps and crawling away on his hands and knees, leaving a bloody path behind him.

Stan leaped for the back door and plunged into the house. He went through the spacious music room and up the wide stairway leading to the balcony like a charging tank, his submachine gun at his hip, his eyes like cold steel.

Leaping through the doorway he swept the room with his gun. O'Malley and Allison and Tony were crowded back against the wall. O'Malley was bleeding profusely from a wound in his shoulder. A broken chair lay on the floor and beside it lay a dead German. Lorenzo lay on the floor face up. He was dead, but there was a smile of triumph on his lips. Arno had sagged down into a chair. He, too, was bleeding from a head wound.

The three Germans had their backs to the door. The officer was wild with fury. He was shouting wildly.

"If I did not have orders to bring you in so that we can force you to tell who your underground helpers are, I would shoot you all and leave you here to rot!"

"Put up your hands or you'll stay here to rot!" Stan snapped.

The Germans whirled about. As they turned, the two soldiers dropped their guns and elevated their hands. The officer came around with his machine gun firing. Stan opened up and cut him down. The two men began shouting:

"Kamrad! Kamrad!"

Stan backed them up against the wall. Before he had gotten them moved O'Malley and Allison had their tommy-guns. They stripped the ammunition from the soldiers.

"Tie them up," Stan snapped. He turned about and saw that Tony and Arno were kneeling beside their brother.

"We should go now. We cannot help him, but I shall see that he is mentioned in my reports as a hero in the cause of democracy," Stan said softly.

The two brothers straightened and rose to their feet. They stood stiffly and saluted.

"We will show you the flying field," Arno said.

"We better get moving. Both squad cars made off and they'll bring back reinforcements. The drivers didn't happen to be armed or else they thought the place was garrisoned." Stan nodded toward Arno and O'Malley. "Plug those wounds as you go along."

"I will get first aid and medicine from the cabinet in my room. I'll overtake you," Tony said.

They moved down the wide stairway, leaving the German soldiers where they would be rescued. Tony dashed off while the others, led by Arno, hurried out of the house and across the yard to the stables. Racing through the spacious barns they came to the kennels. By the time they had passed these Tony had caught up with them.

Pushing through a hidden gate in a hedge they came to a bridle path over which tall trees draped their branches.

"I say, a beautiful spot," Allison murmured.

"It has the smell of auld Ireland," O'Malley said wistfully.

"We are very fond of it," Tony said.

Arno was ahead, moving rapidly upward. They hurried along and caught up with him. From then on there was no talking; the trail wound upward steeply, covered by a canopy of trees. Reaching the top of the ridge they broke out into a forest. Arno led them to a spot where there was a narrow flight strip. Still they saw no planes.

Crossing the strip they entered a grove of tall trees and there stood three, trim ships. O'Malley yelped with joy. Stan looked at the craft critically. They were Nardi FN 500's, obsolete in speed and fire power, but trim and sturdy ships just the same. Arno smiled.

"We built this secret field so that we could slip in at night without the black-shirted Fascisti knowing where we had gone. We met often to plan the overthrow of Mussolini and his murderers."

"You landed here at night?" Allison asked in amazement.

"Certainly," Arno answered modestly.

"We could use you as a fighter pilot," Stan answered. "When you get through blowing up bridges and trains, you'd better join us. We'll vouch for you."

"We will do that. We like very much to fly," Tony said eagerly.

"You will find the guns on the ship are serviced. The engine is 1200 horsepower, you have two fixed guns firing through the prop and two guns fixed in the wings. You can get three hundred and fifty miles per hour out of those ships," Arno spoke proudly.

"Yet they are not as good as the Messerschmitts or the Focke-Wulf," Tony added. "And I think you will have to fight your way home against the Germans."

"Sure, an' we'll show them a fight," O'Malley said happily.

"You have gas to reach Malta, but not much for fighting. It is best that you run fast for home," Arno advised.

"We'll do just that," Stan said, remembering the package inside his shirt.

Tony and Arno helped them wheel the Nardis out on the flight strip. They were surprised to find another ship tucked away under the trees.

"Father's ship," Arno said with a catch in his voice. "But he has not been able to come for it."

"He'll come," Allison said, but he was not so sure the general was alive. He knew the Germans would be ruthless in wiping out all anti-Fascist leaders in the territory they controlled.

The boys climbed up and got into the beautifully streamlined cockpits. They slipped into the Italian parachutes and got set. Arno and Tony acted as ground crew and the engines were soon turning over smoothly. Stan checked his dials and made himself familiar with gun controls and equipment; he cracked the throttle and listened to the roaring surge of power. Then he throttled down and leaned out, waving an arm in a signal that he was leading off. O'Malley and Allison answered the signal. They knew it was their job to see that Stan got through with his reports and maps.

Stan kicked the throttle open and the Nardi roared to life, leaping forward with surprising speed. Stan hoiked her tail with an added blast of prop pressure and tested her. She lifted at once. Unburdened by the armor plate carried by a Lightning or an Airacobra for the protection of the pilot and constructed of much lighter materials, she bounced off the ground before half of the short runway had been covered.

Stan leveled off close to the tops of the trees. He wanted to make sure Allison and O'Malley got away, and so he did not want to stir up the swarm of German fighter planes on the big flying field just a few miles away.

O'Malley came up and then Allison. They dropped into formation beside Stan and he set his course by compass, straight for Sicily.



CHAPTER IX

HOMeward BOUND

Stan was not sure of the terrain he had to fly over. He wanted to avoid the German flying fields if possible, but knew there would be many dispersal areas and flight strips. Getting through would be largely a matter of luck.

The formation of Nardi FN's swooped over the ridge above Bolero Villa. Stan was flying low and pushing the Nardi hard. He grinned as he glanced at the air-speed indicator. They were topping three hundred miles per hour.

Suddenly they swept away from the hilly country and were over the German air base. There was nothing to be done about it but keep on going. Stan cast a critical eye downward and laughed softly. He took in the details of the carefully hidden dispersal plots, the tree-shaded oil dumps and the shrub-covered barracks. The picture he was fixing in his mind might be useful later.

They had reached the center of the area when the surprised ack-ack gunners woke up. A half-dozen groves of trees suddenly erupted flame and the sky above the three streaking Nardi's was filled with smoke tracers and exploding steel.

The Yanks went on and were away from the field before the gunners got their altitude spotted. Stan drew a deep breath of relief. He was glad that he had followed his hunch to fly low. Then he noticed O'Malley, on his right, zoom upward, while Allison looped off to the left. An instant later he spotted the reason for this maneuver. He had been so interested in the ground below that he had forgotten the sky. A returning flight of twenty Messerschmitts had spotted the Italian planes.

The Me pilots evidently had received orders not to let any Italian planes escape to join the Allies. They were coming in low for a landing and that gave the Yanks a break. But there were twenty of them, and they were faster and more heavily armed than the Nardi ships.

Stan held his course steadily, while he tried to coax a few more revs out of his motor. He was doing three-forty and could get no more. Glancing up he saw that by quick thinking O'Malley and Allison had gotten the edge on the Jerries. They

were up above and getting set to come down to cover his retreat.

Grimly Stan gave his attention to his course. He was hedge-hopping over trees and power lines. Never in his life had he seen so many power lines. By staying down he made it tough for a diving enemy. But these Jerries were veteran fliers. They had learned a few things about rhubarb raiders and how to handle them from the many raids staged out of England upon the low countries. Three of them fanned out each way, right and left, and came zooming around in a circle like coyotes bent upon cutting off the retreat of a jack rabbit.

Stan watched them as they went into their circle and saw that even in making such a maneuver they could outfly his ship. He held his course and a tight smile formed on his lips. Everything depended upon his timing. If he handled the thing right and guessed right, he would dodge the cross fire of the six killers.

The Me's came in in pretty formation, three to a side, staggered so as to lay down a terrible and enclosing wall of death. Stan's hands were cold upon the controls, but they were steady. His eyes took in all the attackers in one moving picture. He was waiting for a tip that would give him the break he needed. He had given up hope that O'Malley or Allison would be able to break through and crack the deathtrap. Fourteen Me's were savagely attacking them, bent upon their destruction.

The Jerries gave Stan his break just before they went into the final act of the kill. They thought they were trapping an Italian pilot and they knew just how the Italian boys flew. One of the planes on the left lifted a little to clear the zoom of the Me under him. That was all Stan needed to know. The three Jerries on the left would go up, slamming lead across his path. Two of the Me's on the right would go down and one would come in straight. Stan kicked the Nardi over hard to the left, heading her for the tower of a high line that swung down from the hills.

The Me's went into their act, guns blazing away, punching holes into the air. The maneuver was a beauty. The only thing wrong with it was that the target had shifted course suddenly, leaving them in a wild tangle with a lot of stunting to be done before they could close in again.

But Stan's troubles were not over. His left wing raked through the top of a small tree less than ten feet high. The power line and the high steel tower were hurtling at him. He flattened out and held his breath. There was no time to zoom over the heavy cables; he had to go under and hope for the best.

Stan did not see the cables or the tower go by; all he knew was that he was boring straight for a red-roofed building set on a knoll. He zoomed up and drew in a big lungful of air. Looking back, he saw that his hounds were still busy getting untangled. He spotted only five of them and guessed that one had come to grief in the circus stunting they had been forced to do.

Looking upward he saw, far above in the blue sky, smoke trailers and little, darting planes. O'Malley and Allison were still up there, he could tell by the pattern of the fight. Then he noticed that the five Jerries who had been battling him started up to join the fight. He had a powerful urge to turn back and help his pals, though going back would be a suicide move.

Bending forward he felt the bulky package inside his shirt and his eyes hardened. His job was to go ahead. O'Malley and Allison were sacrificing themselves so that he could go on. If he went back, he would be throwing away the fruits of their courage and daring.

Dimly and like a miniature motion picture, the battle above and behind him was reflected on his rear-vision mirror. There was a lump in Stan's throat as he noticed that two of the planes were coming down, twisting and turning, trailing plumes of smoke. Before the picture faded out he saw one parachute blossom, a tiny white flower against the green of the hills and the blue of the sky.

A little later he spotted the coast and the sea. A line of hilly, high ground slipped under his wings and he headed out toward the beaches. Suddenly the peaceful sky around him exploded in his face. Coastal batteries had spotted him. He was low, but this time the gunners were looking for low-flying bombers and strafing planes. They laid their flak and their tracers on him in a deadly hail of screaming steel. The Nardi bucked and turned half over as a shell burst under her belly. Ragged, saw-edged pieces of shell casing ripped through the wings. An exploding shell ripped away the whole nose and the prop. Stan felt the Nardi wobble. Her terrific speed hurled her on and out over the water, away from the pattern of shells. But she was a dead duck and Stan knew it. His greenhouse was mashed down close above his head. He tried the hatch cover and found it jammed tight. Testing the controls, he found he could still handle the ship in a glide.

Below him he could see two destroyers lying off the shore. They were blasting away at the batteries he had spotted for them. In closer, two PT boats darted back and forth, leaving trailing plumes of white foam behind them.

The Nardi had been flying so low that Stan had no chance to maneuver. He figured she would sink like a rock when she hit the water. Heaving with all of his strength he tried to open the hatch. The cover refused to budge. Green waves were reaching up for him. He smashed at the glass overhead and was able to push out a pane. Savagely he battered away as the Nardi settled down.

With a twist he laid the ship over, then flattened her, heading straight for one of the PT boats. Now he was smashing with both hands at the panes over his head. The glass cut his hands and arms, but he did not feel the pain. He had a hole and he needed desperately to enlarge it.

The Nardi nosed gently into the trough of a big wave, then it hit the wave and crumpled up. Green water surged over the cockpit into Stan's face. He heaved himself upward and fought to get clear. His parachute was off and he was half out of the cockpit, but a great force was sucking him down, down into the cool depths of the sea.

Stan felt the Nardi hit bottom. The thought flashed through his mind that they were in shallow water. At a moment like this, cold, unwavering control of mind and body was necessary. One moment of panic meant death. Stan gritted his teeth and heaved hard. His waist pulled free and suddenly he was floating upward. His lungs were bursting with fire and his hands smarted, but he stroked hard and a few seconds later he burst out of the water, blowing and flailing. The first thing he saw was the PT boat. It was circling the spot where the Nardi had disappeared. Its skipper waved to Stan and shouted.

"Keep afloat! We'll toss you a line!"

"Thanks!" Stan shouted back.

The line came out as the boat moved closer. Stan grabbed it. Two sailors hauled him aboard. He was met by a grinning young lieutenant, junior grade.

"I sure appreciate the lift," Stan said and grinned.

The skipper stared at him. "A Yank!" he exclaimed. "Where did you get the Eity plane?"

"It was loaned to me by Italian friends," Stan replied. "I have important papers which need to be dried," he added.

"And some dry clothes," the skipper said. "Come below."

They went below and the lieutenant introduced himself. "I'm Lieutenant Del Ewing."

"I'm Lieutenant Stan Wilson, Army Air Corps," Stan said. "I have been a guest of the Italians for more weeks than are good for anyone."

"They outfitted you when they gave up?"

"They did. A lot of them are German haters and will help us all they can." Stan spoke soberly. He was thinking of Lorenzo lying on the floor with a smile on his lips, and of General Bolero, who probably had been shot by now. "A lot of them have real courage," he added.

Del Ewing nodded. "I've seen some of it," he said.

"Now about these papers." Stan took the package out of his dripping shirt. The gummed wrapper fell off, exposing an oiled cloth envelope. That was lucky. The maps and papers were dry.

Del Ewing was digging into his sea chest, laying out dry clothing and an oilskin coat. He spoke over his shoulder:

"I can't land you until tomorrow. This is a mission that can't be dropped. My radio is shot and I'm here to stay until that destroyer out beyond turns in. If I quit my sector, a sub or a torpedo boat might slide in and plant a tin fish in her side."

"The papers are vitally important to both Army and Navy," Stan said. "But tomorrow will do."

After fitting Stan out with dry clothing, the skipper went on deck and the PT boat got under way to resume her patrol work. Stan soon began to wonder if the little boat had not joined battle with a German craft. She was hitting a nerve-shattering, plank-busting speed that tossed Stan all over the little room. He turned to the navigator and discovered that the kid was having trouble keeping from being sick all over his charts. He gave Stan a green-lipped smile.

"The skipper is pushing her a bit fast, isn't he?" Stan asked as he lurched into a seat beside the navigator.

"Just planing speed, sir," the boy answered.

"Seems to me like a cross between a submarine and an airplane," Stan said. He was beginning to feel a bit sick himself.

Deciding he needed fresh air, he made his way up on the deck. Clinging to the rail, he set his teeth while spray lashed his face and tubs of water hurtled at him. Stan was reminded of riding a pitching buckler while somebody dumped buckets of water into his face. The whole ship was vibrating from the powerful thrusts of the Packard engines in the stern. The deck bristled with light cannon, torpedo tubes, and machine guns. Up there in that wild smother of foam and noise there was no chance to talk, but Stan watched a while.

The PT boat ducked and wove in and out between the destroyers and the shore. Shells burst around her, churning up the sea, but the gunners were unable to guess where the flighty PT would be at any given moment, so they never hit very close to her. Stan hoped they would spot a sub or an enemy patrol boat, but nothing showed up except other PT boats.

Stan started to go below. He did not even want to think about food, but he did feel like resting. The skipper came forward and offered to show him a bunk, but before they went down he said:

"You must undo your oilskin up topside; I mean, up here on the deck."

"But I'll get soaked," Stan protested.

"No matter, if you remain vertical for any length of time below decks you're done for." He grinned at Stan.

Stan went below and made it into his bunk after the third try. He lay there with the bunk falling away from him, then slapping him hard in the face as it came back at him. He closed his eyes and utter exhaustion finally put him to sleep. His dreams were filled with writhing sea monsters, every one of them rushing through the water at express-train speed.

In the morning the skipper informed him that they were heading for Malta, which was now the headquarters of the Allied invasion forces.

"We got the radio going and asked permission. When we mentioned papers from General Bolero, they called us right in." Del Ewing grinned broadly. "We're in luck getting away from this game of tag."

Stan was standing beside him on the deck and the boat was knifing along half out of the water. Suddenly Ewing bellowed:

"Hard a port!"

The helmsman spun the wheel and Stan clung to the railing with the breath knocked out of him. He saw a black object swish past.

"Wandering mine!" Del Ewing bellowed. "Probably one of our own!"

Stan drew a deep breath and grinned at the skipper. "I'll take mine in a plane!" he shouted.

"I would, too, only I can't pass the physical examination for aviator. They tell me I wouldn't be able to stand the strain!" Ewing laughed heartily.

Stan wiped salt water out of his eyes and shook his head. He had seen many rough-riding vehicles of war, such as tanks and jeeps, but the PT boat had them all bested. Any craft that was such a rough-riding brute that half of its seasoned crew got sick was no place for him, he assured himself.

Toward eleven o'clock Malta came into view, and they put into port through a mass of ships and flatboats and barges. A sprinkling of warcraft, including one British warship, filled the channel they were following. But that did not bother the skipper. He sent his boat in at planing speed which necessitated a lot of ducking and dodging.

Pulling alongside a dock, the PT boat was made fast. Stan climbed over the side and set his feet firmly on the ground. He was glad to be off the deck of the speedy craft. The skipper grinned at him.

"I'll get you a ride to headquarters. Your legs don't seem to be up to walking that far."

"Thanks," Stan said. "I'd be picked up by the M.P.'s for being drunk if I tried to walk."

The skipper secured a jeep for Stan from a Navy supply outfit. They shook hands and the jeep roared away at top speed. Stan leaned back and took the jolts. They seemed like caresses after the skipper's PT boat.

News of the package he was carrying had come in ahead of Stan. A lieutenant was waiting for him.

"This way, sir," he said and hurried away with Stan almost running to keep up.

They entered a room where a dozen officers sat around a big table. Stan's guide halted and saluted.

"Lieutenant Wilson, sir."

A grizzled general looked up from a map. Stan stepped forward and handed over the package. The general took it and ripped it open at once. Stan stood waiting to be dismissed. He started to back away. The general lifted a hand.

"Don't leave, Wilson. These papers are vitally important." He stopped talking and spread out the contents of the package. The other officers were leaning forward. "These are most important, most valuable," the general said. He shoved the papers over to a colonel.

"Look them over and let me know what you think of them." He turned to Stan and smiled.

Stan waited for whatever might be coming. The general fingered his close-cropped mustache and continued to smile. Suddenly he leaned forward and spoke.

"Since receiving a message from the Navy regarding your rescue I have had your service record handed to me. I find it quite interesting. What happened to Lieutenant O'Malley and Lieutenant Allison?"

Stan did not smile. "The last time I saw them they were fighting a ten-to-one battle with a flight of Messerschmitts, a delaying action, so that I could get through with these papers. We were flying Nardi fighters furnished us by the Italians."

The general's smile faded. "You think they are lost?"

"I'm going to check with operations," Stan said. "Both O'Malley and Allison have come back from some tough fights."

The general reached for a telephone. "I'll have a check made," he said.

"Has Colonel Benson been asking about us?" Stan asked and there was a twinkle in his eye.

"I believe it will be best to transfer you to another command. We do not wish to approve your conduct as ferry pilots, but you certainly have rendered a great service." The general gave his attention to the phone. After fifteen long minutes of waiting and talking he cradled the instrument and shook his head. "No Nardi fighters have been reported flown in by escaped American pilots. A number have

come in piloted by Italian officers."

"Thank you, sir," Stan said. "I would like to have immediate service in a fighter squadron."

"That will be arranged from my office. Now get into some proper clothing and report to Mess Nine. Hold yourself ready there to report to this office. We have a lot of questions to ask and we'll be ready to start asking them as soon as you are clothed and fed."

Stan snapped a salute and about-faced. He marched out of the office, got the location of Mess Nine from an orderly, and headed in that direction.



CHAPTER X

LONE EAGLE

A week passed with Stan lounging around Mess Nine waiting to be assigned to a fighter squadron. During that time he divided his hours between the officers at Intelligence and the board of strategy. He rubbed elbows with generals, British and American and French. During those interviews he got an idea of the great campaign which was being planned. It helped to soften the ache inside him, because he had heard nothing from O'Malley or Allison. It also helped to keep him from getting restless. He knew that a great reserve of air power was being assembled to throw an umbrella of planes over the coming thrust, which was aimed at the heart of Germany, through or across Italy.

The second week was well under way and everyone, except the generals, was beginning to complain and to cast a critical eye at the headquarters of General Dwight D. Eisenhower and General Harold R. L. G. Alexander. Stan knew enough of the plans from his meetings with the officers to know that the blow was coming, and that it would be a swift, savage thrust.

One morning he received a call. It was delivered by an orderly. Stan opened the folded sheet and read an order from headquarters. "Report to Colonel Benson at once for assignment." Stan stared at the order. Benson had located him and demanded his return. The friendly general who had promised to transfer Stan was now in North Africa. Folding the report, Stan began packing the few things he owned. Colonel Benson's command had been moved up to a field close to Messina. That was some comfort. It meant action as soon as the main invasion broke.

But Stan was uneasy. There were many nasty jobs around a fighter squadron to which he could be assigned as punishment for his part in the ferry mess. When Stan was given a low-powered observation plane to fly to Messina, his worst fears seemed about to be realized.

The plane was a Ryan ST-3, a plane used for basic training back home and for odd jobs of scouting, ferrying first-aid supplies, and other non-combat jobs. It was sleek and fast, as light planes go, but it was far from a fighter.

Stan sent the Ryan up and headed her north by a point or two east. The Ryan showed surprising speed for the size of her engine. Stan grinned as he gunned her. He got to thinking that after the war he would like to own a ship like it.

Swinging in around Mount Etna's cone, he set down on the Italian field where Colonel Benson's boys were holding forth. A field officer took his papers and waved him toward a row of drab buildings.

"The commander wants to see you at once." He spoke gruffly and showed no interest at all in Stan.

Stan unloaded his gear in the briefing room and walked across to the colonel's headquarters. The door was open and he looked into a room barely large enough for a table and three chairs. Colonel Benson was seated at the table. He looked up and when he saw Stan he frowned.

"Come in, Lieutenant Wilson," he called.

Stan stepped inside, saluted, and stood waiting.

"Sit down." The colonel motioned to a chair.

Stan seated himself and waited. The colonel regarded him for a moment, then started to speak.

"In all of the years I have been in service I have never read a report like the one handed to me. That report covers your activities as ferry pilot in my command." The colonel shifted some papers on his desk, selected one and began reading it silently.

"Yes, sir," Stan said, feeling some reply was called for.

"It is a continuous recital of violations of orders resulting in a great deal of trouble. In my opinion it deserves drastic action." His cold eyes stabbed into Stan.

"Yes, sir," Stan answered. He did not intend to argue, not at that moment.

"Take this report." A smile formed at the corners of the colonel's mouth. "The Navy gives us the numbers from three planes that saved a warship from being sunk off Sicily. In checking the numbers we discover the planes are ferry planes bound for Malta." He picked up another report. "Here is a memorandum from General Eisenhower citing Lieutenant Wilson for the delivery of vital documents

from inside Italy." The smile faded. "And there is a line mentioning Lieutenant's O'Malley and Allison for covering your escape." The colonel dropped the paper and leaned back.

"Yes, sir," was all Stan could say, but a warm glow was beginning to stir inside him.

"And that last line is the reason for my calling for your services, Lieutenant. I have received a message brought in by an Italian pilot who managed to fly his plane over here." He shoved a piece of soiled paper across to Stan. "It is addressed to you."

Stan caught the paper eagerly and read the scrawled lines upon it.

"Shot down. Prisoners. Held in shed back of Bolero barns. Tony with us. One of the Bolero servants will try to smuggle this out." The note was signed by Allison.

"They're alive!" Stan almost shouted.

"They are," the colonel said dryly.

"They'll be treated like spies and not prisoners of war. The Germans pulled that on us before," Stan said anxiously.

"You three seem marked down as irregulars," the colonel said. "I now find myself in the position of becoming a party to your wild schemes." He laughed outright. "I have not reported this to headquarters. I am afraid O'Malley and Allison should and would be marked down as expendables and left to be shot by the Germans." He straightened and shoved the papers aside. "With a fast, light bomber, would you have a chance to land over there?"

"I certainly would," Stan said eagerly. "The Bolero boys have a secret landing strip where they hid their planes when they didn't want Mussolini's agents to trail them. That landing strip is just above the place where the Germans are holding Allison and O'Malley."

"In that case I'll assign you a fast bomber and an objective. You will drop your bomb load at another spot and make a try." His eyes were twinkling. "And if you should bring back Mussolini, I think you might get a medal."

They both laughed. Stan looked at his watch. "Dusk would be the time to hit

there. I can make it tonight."

"As you like," the colonel said. "Report to me at once when you get back. What information you gather should clear over my desk." He grinned. "I am a bit of a politician, you see."

Stan saluted and made off while the colonel got busy on the telephone getting a ship assigned to him.

When Stan reported to the briefing room he found the colonel there. The briefing officer and his second in command gave him his locations and his bombing data, the weather and the wind drift. Everything was very much routine and like a hundred other sorties being made hourly over selected targets by from one to fifty planes. The colonel walked out to the runway with Stan.

They shook hands like old pals. Stan smiled. The colonel was deadly serious.

"Landing almost on a German flying field isn't going to be a soft touch," he said grimly. "Not even with your luck."

Stan turned to his ship and his smile broadened. Colonel Benson had gone to considerable trouble in selecting a bomber. The ship that stood with idling props was a De Havilland Mosquito. She was humpbacked like a codfish. Her forward gun opening and her nose greenhouse made her look like a fish. They furnished eyes and mouth. She was a plywood job, light, but the fastest bomber in the world.

He waved a hand to the colonel and climbed up. None of the ground men seemed interested in his lack of crew or light bomb load. In the swelter and rush of round-the-clock operations the boys followed orders and rushed each job out, knowing that another ship had to be on the line as soon as one craft cleared a spot.

Stan leaned back against the shock pad and checked his dials. He cracked the throttle a bit more and his powerful radials roared with surging power. The Mosquito shuddered and trembled against her chocks.

"Ready, Flight Fifty-four?"

"Ready," Stan called back.

"Lane Three, Flight Fifty-four." The voice from the control tower snapped off.

Stan eased up and signaled the men below. The chocks were jerked loose and Stan gunned the ship. She leaped forward with a snap that would have done credit to any fighter craft. Darting down the runway she hoiked her tail and was off before she had covered a fourth of the allotted space. Upward she roared like a streak. The boys on the ground grinned. The Mosquito got off so fast she was out of sight before any spotter could pick her up.

Easing around in a wide circle, Stan put her nose into the wind and let her have her head. He settled himself to the job ahead, his pulses beating in tune with the roar of the slip stream of air piling up and rolling off the leading edges of his wings. A good ship, the De Havilland. She was the craft used to make regular flights between England and Malta. Too fast for interception, the Mosquitoes streaked right across Hitler's Germany or across France, running supplies daily through enemy-guarded skies.

The coast of Italy showed clearly ahead. Slipping in over Reggio Stan picked a rail line and checked with his eye. No need for a bombardier here. He lined up on the track and then spotted a short string of cars. The train was standing still and smoke lifted from its locomotive. Stan suspected some other Yank had spotted it and laid a stick of bombs on the track, blocking it.

Stan knew he should cut loose his bombs and be on his way. But the feel of the Mosquito made him eager to try her out. This was an ideal target for the fast-flying bomber. If he went down he would be sure to stir up German fighter planes. The temptation was great. Stan nosed over and sent the Mosquito roaring down the chute. He lined up on the freight train as he went.

The landscape wavered up at him. The train seemed to be twisting and turning like a snake trying to wiggle away, though he knew it was not moving. The wind ahead of his diving wings piled up and banked like invisible snow, making the plane shudder and shake. Stan grinned. Only the Lockheed Lightning could fly a dive fast enough to bank up air like snow; that was what he had always thought, but the diving Mosquito was doing it. Stan began to wonder if a ship made of plywood could take the strain of a pull-out after such a dive.

He released his stick of bombs and the Mosquito bounced like a golf ball before the cutting edge of a driver. Up she went and Stan set himself against the "high G's" he had to expect. First, as he started up, there was a blurring of vision, then a graying, and then a momentary blackout. Instantly the graying appeared before his eyes again, then the blurring, and a moment later clear vision. Stan whistled

softly.

"Some ship!" he muttered. "She makes anything I ever flew except the old Lightnings look slow."

Three Messerschmitts knifed down from a cloud, but the Mosquito was on her way under full throttle and leaving the toe of the Italian boot at a space-devouring pace. The Me pilots saw what they had picked up and slid off in disgust.

The Mosquito went up so fast that Stan could not see the results of his attack upon the train. Heading east he caught sight of the bay of Taranto, then turned north. Flying on the east rim of a mountain ridge he bored along.

Checking the miles off as best he could, Stan turned west when he thought he was opposite Naples. He zoomed up higher and higher until he spotted the city on the coast, then he eased around and ducked back and up into a layer of clouds. Darkness had not settled, but he figured he could slide in back of the ridge above the Bolero villa and spot the hidden landing strip.

Easing down he clipped along the tops of the trees. Three Focke-Wulf 190 fighters spotted him and he made off, leaving them to wander above the hill country. Returning, he zoomed along the ridge. Back and forth he slid but failed to locate the strip. Again he was spotted and had to run for it. The next time he came back he flew along the top of the ridge, which caused no less than a dozen Jerry fighters to take after him. But he spotted the hidden strip before he made off.

Dusk was beginning to settle when he came back. This time he had to land regardless of the fighter planes. He came in straight for the strip, flying so low he was below the trees in many spots. He was surprised to find that there was a natural avenue which allowed him to slide in under fair cover. The Bolero boys had selected their secret field well. One Me darted over to have a look, but did not dive down. Stan set himself and cut his engines. He was coming in now, either for a landing or a crash. Topping a row of small trees he let the Mosquito settle toward the grassy lane below.

The wheels of the ship tipped the grass, then settled down solidly. Stan applied his brakes and eased into a smooth and even landing. As he rolled in, he spotted the big trees with overhanging branches where the Nardi fighters had been parked. Gunning the Mosquito a bit he slid under cover just as three Me's roared

past looking for him. They went on to the east, but came back to crisscross the ridge. Stan smiled. The German pilots seemed puzzled over the way a bomber had vanished into thin air.

Swinging the Mosquito around under her own power he set her in position for a quick take-off, then began getting out his pack of rations and the light machine gun he had brought with him. He was eager to work his way down the bridle path before darkness settled completely.



CHAPTER XI

RESCUE

Stan kept under cover until he located the bridle path leading over the ridge. The Me's were still combing the ridge above, but the woods and the meadows were full of long shadows which made spotting a camouflaged object impossible.

Moving down the path Stan kept a sharp watch for guards. The pathway was really a tunnel under the trees. Overlapping branches formed a natural roof. This cover made the path almost pitch-dark. But Stan moved swiftly. He wanted enough light to spot the prison where the boys were being held.

Reaching the opening in the hedge he discovered that someone had moved the branches of the hedge row so that they entwined over the opening hiding it. Standing behind the hedge he listened. Judging by the sounds, there was plenty of activity in the camp, and Stan could see lights shining through the wall of leaves. A motorcycle roared and a truck motor joined it. Men's voices could be heard clearly.

Moving along the hedge Stan peered over it. He could see into the wide yard of the villa and also into the yards around the barns. Every building was lighted up and the place swarmed with Germans. Stan had never seen so many German officers in a single spot before. Groups of them sat around outdoor tables in the back yard of the villa. They were eating and drinking wine from the Bolero cellars. There was a lot of shouting and laughter.

Stan turned to the barns. He moved along them until he could see the back yard of the big barn. Here there were a number of smaller sheds and barns as well as the kennels. All of them were lighted and so were the yards around them. Guards marched back and forth in front of the kennels and before three of the sheds. Stan was certain he had located the prisons, but there was no way of telling which one contained his pals. One thing was certain, the Germans felt safe here at Bolero Villa. They probably figured Allied bombers would think the place was Italian and leave it alone. The many trees hid the trucks, cars, and German soldiers from view. Stan grinned. When he got back, the bomber boys would know where to drop a stick of bombs.

This condition made it easy for Stan to observe because the guards figured their only job was to keep the prisoners from escaping. They were not worried about an attack. Moving around behind the kennels Stan found darkness. He managed to wiggle up to the back wall. There were no windows in the back of the shed. He checked the other guarded sheds and found no windows in the rear of them. Moving back to the hedge he crouched there watching the three buildings.

The only way to get into any of those buildings was through the doors or one of the front windows. The windows were open and not barred, but at least a dozen guards patrolled the grounds. They were scattered out, making a blitz machine-gun attack difficult. By the time Stan had blasted the guards out of the way he would have several hundred officers and men attacking from the grounds below.

A soldier approached one of the guards, spoke to him, then entered one of the buildings, a shed between the kennels and the third barn. A light flashed on and Stan could see men inside the building. They were packed in, standing close together, those he could see through the window. All of them were Italian soldiers.

After a bit the soldier came out with an Italian officer walking ahead of him. They went directly to the grounds below. Stan eased along the hedge until he was opposite the kennels. Here he halted and parted the branches of the hedge. He listened intently. The prisoners in the kennels were talking but their voices were very low. One of them laughed and the guard at the door shouted an order in German. With the butt of his rifle he hammered against the sill. There was silence inside and then a voice called out:

"Get away from that door, ye dirty spalpeen! Yer disturbin' the pleasure o' gentlemen!"

Stan almost shouted. That was the voice of O'Malley. The guard beat harder upon the sill of the door and shouted louder. Stan heard Allison warning O'Malley to keep his mouth shut. Silence settled inside the building.

Pulling out his sheath knife Stan began cutting a hole in the hedge. The hedge had been carefully tended by the Bolero gardener. The limbs of the shrubs had been entwined and laced together, making the hedge almost a solid wall. Stan cut away a large hole, leaving only a few branches over the inside to hide his work. Getting down he crawled into the opening.

The guard was standing facing the spot where Stan was crouching. A floodlight

in the yard made the whole place as light as day. Stan watched the other guards as they moved about. Under a tree at the entrance to the yard a heavy machine gun had been planted. A crew of three men manned the gun. It was set to cover the three jails and the whole yard.

The situation looked hopeless. With so much light an attack could not be engineered. Suddenly Stan's lips pulled into a straight line. He had a bright thought. The yards and grounds had never been lighted up so completely by the Bolero family. That meant the Germans had strung a lot of wire. If he could locate the main line and cut it, he could plunge the place in darkness long enough to break into the shed where his pals were being held.

After studying the yard and the lighting, Stan decided the wires came in from the big barn. Working his way around the sheds he came to a spot where a wide and well-lighted roadway separated them from the big barn. Four Germans guarded the road and they were well spaced. Again he was blocked.

Then he noticed that a set of heavy wires came down from somewhere in the darkness to the corner of the big barn. They swung in from high above his head. Stan grinned. The electricity for the whole villa came in from behind the barns. It was like General Bolero to have unsightly power poles at the back of his estate. Stan turned and headed into the woods. He was looking for a power line pole.

The job of locating a pole among a forest of trees was not easy, but Stan had the general location from the run of the lines. After a few minutes of hunting he located the pole and got set to climb it. He stacked his things at the base of the pole. He would have to slide down in a hurry and dash to the attack. He hoped there would be plenty of confusion. He also hoped the lead-in wires were insulated. The line was at least 220-volt, because there were three wires leading to the barn.

Climbing up the pole Stan came to a transformer. Gingerly he tested one of the wires with the hard rubber handle of his knife. Nothing happened, so he started sawing away. He was not shorted by any part of the transformer or any wire he might be touching in the darkness. The wire was thick and heavy but it was copper and his sharp knife bit into it. With a tug Stan severed the heavy wire and felt it go twisting away into the darkness, which had suddenly become very black because all of the lights in and around the villa had snapped off.

Stan almost fell down the pole. He heard shouting and bellowing from the yard.

Shots were fired and flashlights began to stab back and forth. Stan grabbed his machine gun and leaped into the road leading to the small barns. Suddenly the machine gun under the tree opened up. The Germans knew a prison delivery attempt was on. Stan halted and pulled a grenade from the sack slung over his shoulder. Jerking the pin, he tossed it just as he had often tossed a forward pass in a football game.

A sharp roar and a flash of fire told him the grenade had gone off, and the sudden ceasing of the staccato voice of the machine gun told him he had scored a hit. He did not have time to look as he charged toward the kennels. He ran into a German and knocked the soldier down with the barrel of his machine gun. Reaching the door he came to grips with three Germans. They had an electric lantern and they spotted him closing in, but not quick enough. Stan's tommy-gun blasted them off the wide stone flagging before the door.

"Hi, Allison! O'Malley!" Stan hit the door with his shoulder in a leaping dive. He went crashing into the room with the door draped around him.

"Stan!" O'Malley roared from the darkness.

"Here! Get close to me and follow me!" Stan shouted as he staggered to his feet.

Outside, the flaming and the sound of Stan's tommy-gun had given away his location. Rifles and pistols began blasting away. Bullets splintered the front of the building.

"Get down low!" Allison called.

A dozen men had rushed out of the kennels, carrying Stan with them. He heard a man groan and go down as a bullet hit him.

"Here!" he bellowed.

O'Malley and Allison located him. They knew just about where he was headed. Wiggling along on their hands and knees, the three fliers moved to the hole in the hedge.

They slid through and, paused. "Where's Tony and Arno?" Stan asked.

"In the shed next to ours," Allison answered. "They were captured the day we were shot down."

"Sure, an' if you'll wait I'll go beat down the door," O'Malley whispered.

"We'll all go," Stan answered. "We'll batter open both prisons."

The three, keeping close together, circled and charged into the mass of milling Germans. They were not spotted because there was little light. Flashlight beams stabbed here and there, but none of the fingers of light found the three Yanks. They actually shouldered their way to within a few yards of the first door.

"I'll take this one, you and O'Malley take the other. I'll clear the way with the tommy-gun," Stan hissed.

He opened up with a burst of fire which scattered the Germans, then charged the door. O'Malley and Allison smashed the other door. Stan heard the shouts of the prisoners as they piled out. He backed away as men lunged out of the building he had opened. Stan thanked his luck that the doors had been built out of light plywood. He leaped aside and turned his submachine gun on the Germans. He swung his arc of fire across the yard and sent the Nazis charging for cover.

Ceasing his fire he ducked for the hole in the hedge. Allison was already there, but O'Malley had not showed up.

"Hope he hasn't gotten any crazy ideas," Stan growled.

"He probably has," Allison said. "How'd you douse the lights?"

"I cut the main line, but they'll locate the break and fix it in a hurry."

Suddenly they heard O'Malley coming. He ducked through the hedge. Behind him came two other men. O'Malley had stayed to locate Tony and Arno.

"How did you find us?" Tony asked excitedly.

"Allison got someone to smuggle out a note. I have a bomber up on your secret field to take us off, if we can get up there," Stan answered. "It's so dark, I don't know whether we can locate the path."

Arno laughed softly. "We will lead you and we will show you how to take off in the dark."

"I'm glad you're along," Stan said.

Arno led the way up the trail. He moved along at a fast pace. He knew every twist and turn in the trail. The Yanks were hard put to keep up with him. Tony brought up the rear, which helped to keep the party together.

They reached the little meadow that served as a runway. Arno led them straight to the hidden parking ground. Here they halted under the wing of the Mosquito.

"What you flying?" O'Malley asked.

"A Mosquito bomber," Stan answered.

"One o' them wood crates?" O'Malley asked. He did not try to hide his disgust.

Stan laughed. "And I'm flying her, see? I wouldn't ride in as fast and tricky a ship as this Mosquito with you at the controls."

"I'll bet me auld grandmother could fly as fast," O'Malley said.

"The lights are on below," Arno broke in. "I hear German soldiers coming up the slope through the woods."

"They have a big force down there," Allison said. "I'll bet they comb this mountainside."

"We'll never be able to take off as black as it is," Stan said. "We'll have to wait for the first light so we can see something."

"By that time the Germans will have found the ship. See the lights flashing in the woods below?" Tony spoke sharply.

Arno laughed. "Now I will show you how we took off on black nights. Will your bomber lift in a hurry?"

"Faster than a Nardi fighter," Stan said.

"Wait. I will show you," Arno said and disappeared into the blackness.

"We have done it many times," Tony said, laughing.

Arno was gone only a few minutes. When he returned he explained:

"First we roll the ship out from under the trees by hand if we can."

"That will be easy. There is a downgrade and the Mosquito is light weight," Stan said.

"Then we get the engines warm enough to take off." Arno paused.

"That will take a little time. We may have to stand off the Germans," Stan said.

"When the engines are hot I will place two blue flares with a red one in the middle for a target. It is so easy. You head for the red flare and take off before you get to it."

"Good work. You have the flares?" Allison asked.

"We keep a supply here," Arno said. "I will place them. When you shout to me that the engines are ready, I will light them. Then I come running and we take off."

"'Tis very simple," O'Malley said eagerly. "Sure, an' we better get her rolled out."

The boys got hold of the Mosquito and rolled her out. Arno made off to set his flares. Before the boys piled in, Stan handed his tommy-gun to Allison. "You're an artist with this sort of banjo. You stay on the ground. If any German squads show up, you chase them back into the woods."

"Good idea, old boy," Allison said as he took the gun.

Stan went up and wound up the radial motors. They coughed and sputtered but finally took hold, first with a rumbling gallop that was uneven, then with a smoother roar. The sound of those powerful radials shook the night air. Stan knew their full-throated exhausts could be heard by the Germans.

Flashes of light winked in the woods below, Stan judged that the German squads were not over two hundred yards down the slope. Some might be even farther up the hill. He tested the engines with a jerk of the throttle. They bogged down and sputtered, too cold to take off.

Suddenly rifle fire broke out across the open meadow. The Germans were firing at the flaring exhaust flames from the Mosquito's engines. Bullets whistled past the ship. Allison opened up and the firing from the woods ceased. Suddenly a machine gun began to blast. Its bullets ripped into the ship and around it. Stan gunned the engines and they caught, bursting into a perfect and unbroken stream of power.

On the ground Allison could tell by the sound of the engines that the ship was ready. He began shouting to Arno. Stan throttled down to allow Allison's shouts to carry.

Suddenly a flare blossomed. A few minutes later another flamed. Stan waited impatiently for what seemed a long time. He could tell by the stabs of flame

from the rifles across the meadow that the Germans were charging down upon Arno. Then the red flare burst into flame. Stan fixed the spot in his mind, just in case a German got to the flare and put it out. Allison was blistering the Germans rushing down upon Arno, but the distance was too great for a tommy-gun.

Stan kicked the motors on, setting his brakes hard. The attackers were now fanned out and charging across the meadow. Allison could not halt them because they had spread out thinly over a wide front.

"Should we leave Arno?" Tony asked. "He would want more than anything else that you men got away."

"We're not leavin' him!" O'Malley shouted. "I'll get down an' go help him. He may have been hit by a bullet."

"No, we won't leave him," Stan agreed grimly.

Suddenly Allison climbed up. "They'll be on us in a minute!" he shouted.

"Here comes the boy!" O'Malley bellowed.

Arno's head appeared in the circle of light from the instrument panel. Allison gave him a hand, dragging him into the cockpit.

Before the trap could be closed Stan gave the Mosquito her head. She shot away like an arrow released from a bow as her brakes eased free. Straight at the stabbing tongues of rifle fire she roared. The firing ceased as the Germans leaped frantically out of the path of the charging bomber.

Stan held her straight for the red flare. Long before they reached it he hoiked her tail and bounced her off. She went up like a kite caught by a gale. O'Malley, sitting beside Stan, looked over and grinned.

"That was sweet!" he shouted.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" Stan shouted back. He leaned toward O'Malley, "Have Allison get the radio set working."

A few minutes later Allison had established long-range communications with the base at Messina and was reporting in. O'Malley went back to put in an order for three huckleberry pies and a steak. Arno took his place. Stan was letting the Mosquito cruise along. He leaned toward Arno.

"What about the general?"

"The Germans have him. He is a prisoner at Naples," Arno said in a worried voice.

"We'll take care of that. We're taking Naples very soon," Stan assured him.

"I'm afraid that may not help much. The Germans are in a fury over the action we have taken. They will take revenge not only upon Father, but upon the people of Naples and of every city they have occupied." Arno looked straight ahead into the night.

"We'll figure out something," Stan said grimly.

O'Malley came forward and sat back of Stan. Stan called over his shoulder.

"I am to deliver you fellows to Colonel Benson."

"Colonel Benson!" O'Malley yelped. "Sure an' that means we'll spend the rest o' the war in the guardhouse!"

"That's the safest place for you," Stan retorted.

Allison called forward over the intercommunication phone that the colonel sent his regards and that he had personally ordered O'Malley's pies and steak for him. O'Malley listened in. He began to grin.

"Sure, an' mebbly the old brass hat has some feelin's after all."

"Don't build up any false hopes," Stan warned.

"Did he send you after us?" O'Malley demanded.

"He did," Stan said.

O'Malley leaned back and licked his lips. He closed his eyes so as to be better able to get a mental picture of the pies awaiting him.

Stan eased down a bit and called to Allison for a check on their location and course. Everything looked fine and fair, but Stan knew that it was at such times that trouble usually popped.

Messina was easily located as they came in at low altitude because the Yank and British batteries on the island were shelling the German-held port of Reggio

across the two-mile strait. Flares were blossoming along the mainland, dropped by Yank fliers. Allison got in touch with their field and they came in. The air traffic was heavy and the field was a beehive of activity. No special attention was given the De Havilland except by the crew assigned to take her over. They came racing out to make her fast.

The master mechanic grinned at Stan as he jumped down. "Good work, sir," he said eagerly. The Mosquito was his pet and he had worried about her all the time she was away. After finding out where she was going he had been sure she would never get back.

Stan smiled at him. "She's home without a scratch, and she's a great ship, sergeant," he said.

The sergeant beamed happily. "She sure is, sir," he agreed proudly. Then he added, just having remembered the important message he was to deliver to the bomber's skipper, "Colonel Benson wishes to see your entire crew as soon as you land." He snapped a salute and turned to his crew.

"Sure, an' I'm starved. I'm hopin' he won't give us a two-hour lecture on how to invade Italy," O'Malley grumbled.

They hurried to the colonel's headquarters, where they found their commanding officer waiting for them. He beamed upon the dirty, unshaven group headed by Stan.

"I'll only keep you a few minutes, gentlemen," he said. "Be seated."

Stan saluted smartly and spoke his piece. "I'd like you to meet General Bolero's sons, Tony and Arno. They made it possible for us to deliver the papers from the general and later to escape."

"What you have done is appreciated. I hope I may be able to be of service to you," the colonel said.

"We wish to fight the Germans. We are both pilots," Arno said.

"I believe that can be arranged," Colonel Benson said.

He looked at Allison and O'Malley and a broad smile formed on his lips.

"I have heard of the luck of the Irish. Now I am willing to add the British to that list. What I wanted to say is that you are requested not to talk about your

experiences at all until you have reported to headquarters in Malta. After that you will be returned to my command. No one is going to talk me out of three fliers like you men." He looked at Tony and Arno. "Possibly I might be able to make it five."

O'Malley seemed to feel this was a soft spot where he could safely make a request. He grinned at the colonel.

"We have a job to do, sor, one that won't wait very long."

The colonel's smile faded and he eyed O'Malley sternly. "I'm listening," he said warily.

"General Bolero has to be rescued from them Germans. They may decide to shoot him."

The colonel looked suddenly very unhappy, "That is really a job I am not supposed to handle. After all, I am only a sector commander and not in charge of the war in the Mediterranean area."

"It could be done aisy," O'Malley said. "I'd like to have the job."

The colonel regarded O'Malley grimly. "I don't doubt but you would do it. However, there is some little risk. While you men are reporting to headquarters, Lieutenant Wilson and I will be giving the matter our consideration." He got to his feet. "Wilson, you see that our friends are outfitted. Get cleaned up and have a big feed." He nodded toward O'Malley. "I have set aside a supply of pie for you, Lieutenant."

The party saluted and made off. O'Malley was not too happy. "If you sneak off alone to get the general, I'll thrash the daylights out o' you when I get back from seein' the brass hats," he growled.

"I won't take on the whole German army alone," Stan assured him. "I'll see that you're in on it."

"You better," O'Malley warned sourly.

They found their quarters and all headed for the showers. O'Malley wanted to eat first but they talked him out of the idea.



CHAPTER XII

SALERNO

Events moved rapidly for Stan during the next day or so. General Montgomery's Eighth Army was driving up the toe of the Italian boot, while General Clarke's Fifth Yank army was having a tough time holding its bridgehead at Salerno. Stan was tickled when O'Malley and Allison returned. Arno and Tony came with them.

Colonel Benson called the boys to his headquarters. He was a very busy man. He was working twenty hours a day and lines of weariness furrowed his face. His fighters and bombers were at last masters of the air over Salerno, but they got no rest after their victory. The Germans were entrenched in specially prepared spots on high ground overlooking the beaches. Artillery positions had to be blasted, and the repeated tank attacks had to be checked or the Fifth's landing force would be blasted into the sea.

The boys entered the colonel's office. He nodded toward chairs. When they were seated, he turned to Stan.

"Have you any plans for the rescue of General Bolero? We need his knowledge of military positions behind the German lines."

Stan looked at Arno. "The plans are really Lieutenant Arno Bolero's," he began. "Arno and Tony are familiar with every foot of the country where their father is being held. He is a prisoner in a house once owned by Don Sachetti. The Sachetti family and the Bolero family were very close friends. Arno and Tony have spent many days at their home. If they can go with us, we will have a chance of success."

"They can go. Now what is your plan?" the colonel glanced at his wrist watch. He was to have a conference with high officers in five minutes.

"We will take one De Havilland plane. Four of us will parachute into a field at night. Here, again, the boys will know just where to land to hit a field of grain the Germans are saving for harvesting. The plane will return to base and come after us the next night. If we do not set signal flares for landing, the plane will

retire and keep watch until forced to fly home. It will return the next night and if we do not signal it then, it is not to try again."

Colonel Benson looked from one to the other of the boys. "I understand you men are accustomed to such dangerous jobs. To me it seems there is about one chance in a hundred of your even landing your parachute force."

"If there was an attack on the German field south of the place about the time we arrive, we could get in easily," Stan suggested. "I have prepared a set of maps showing good targets. The Bolero house is a hotel for German officers."

"I'll have operations chart a raid," the colonel promised. "Now I have to go. Lieutenant Wilson will be in command. I have given orders to have him supplied with what he wants." He stepped around the table and shook hands with the boys. "I'm leaving this show up to you fellows. Good luck to you." He turned and hurried out of the room.

"Sure, an' that's the first time the brass hats iver turned us loose," O'Malley said with a big grin.

"And it will likely be the last time," Allison said with a chuckle.

"We'd better be getting over to operations. Now, who's flying the Mosquito?" Stan looked from Allison to O'Malley.

O'Malley swallowed eagerly. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down, but he turned to Allison. Allison grinned at him.

"You fly the crate, old man. I'm one blighter who wants to get even for some of the slaps and kicks we got in that prison dog house."

"Sure, an' I'll be after flyin' her," O'Malley said. "But only because I'm thinkin' ye'll be needin' the best pilot in this crew at the controls o' that ship."

"You hate yourself, don't you?" Stan teased. "You fly her, but just remember, if you get into a dogfight and don't show up when we set off our flares, you'll get the beating of your life when we walk in." He grinned at O'Malley.

"I'll be right there," O'Malley promised.

All of the details had been worked out and gone over so many times by the boys that they did not need to check again. They drew the machine guns and grenades they needed along with flares and other equipment. The supply officer got blue

parachutes for them from an operating unit.

"Can't be spotted at night," he explained.

Evening was closing in by the time they had everything set. The Mosquito was warmed up and ready. She was stripped down for carrier purposes and to enable her to handle an extra gasoline tank. The ground crews gave her a final once-over, waved to her crew, and backed off. Stan sat up front in the copilot's seat to see that O'Malley was not teased into a fight. Allison and the Bolero brothers manned the machine guns.

O'Malley was a bit skeptical about the powers of the De Havilland, in spite of what Stan had told him. He gunned her and gave her her head. When she snapped off the ground in a manner that would have done credit to a Lightning, he began to grin and mumble to himself.

"Just don't get any wild ideas," Stan warned. They had sighted a flight of Focke-Wulf 190 fighters and O'Malley was eyeing the Germans with a dangerous gleam in his eye.

"If they run in on us, ye can't blame me," he said sourly.

The 190 fighters tried a run at the De Havilland, but she ran away from them before they could begin to cut her off.

"She's so fast she keeps out of trouble," O'Malley said in disgust.

"That's just what she was built for. Every night her sisters keep Berlin awake with bombing attacks, and every night they fly materials and dispatches from England to Malta. This is something you've overlooked, Irisher." Stan chided O'Malley.

"I may be after lookin' into her doings one o' these days. Spendin' ivery other evenin' in London wouldn't be so bad," O'Malley decided.

Heading north they eased across the backbone of the peninsula which the Germans had not taken the trouble to occupy in any numbers. They moved along while darkness settled. Arno and Tony kept a close check on landmarks. Finally Arno called up to Stan over the phone.

"We can head west again. I have located the ridge and the mountain we will use as a marker."

O'Malley headed the Mosquito west, letting her ease down to low altitude. Arno called in directions.

"We are coming to the divide. There we will follow the ridge north."

O'Malley followed instructions. As they swept up the ridge they saw below them a great fire, with several smaller fires breaking out near by.

"Colonel Benson's boys have hit the flying field," Stan observed to O'Malley.

"Sure, an' I think they're over the Bolero place right now." O'Malley jerked his head to the right. At that moment Tony's voice came in over the intercom.

"The bombers are attacking the villa." He tried not to show his feelings, but the boys knew how he felt. His home was being blasted.

"The whole German staff for this area ought to be down there at this hour," Stan answered. "It's tough, but we have to do it."

"I know," Tony agreed. "If the boys catch even half the staff there, I'll be satisfied."

"Now head west again, very low," Arno ordered.

O'Malley swept lower over the darkening terrain. Stan began to wonder how Arno was going to spot any landmarks. Hopping out into the night would not be so nice. There were lakes and woods and rocky ridges all over the country.

"Into the valley a point left," Arno called. "Fly low and line up on two peaks with square tops which should be against the sky."

O'Malley and Stan peered ahead as the Mosquito dropped into a wide valley.

"There's yer peaks," O'Malley said. Stan spotted the markers as his pal spoke. Two peaks with square tops loomed against the sky ahead.

"Regular gunsights," Stan said.

"Get everything ready to jump," Arno called.

Stan slapped O'Malley on the shoulder. "Be seein' you soon," he said as he slid back to help with the guns and other things they were taking along.

He found the boys getting set. Tony was loaded and ready to jump. Arno was

spotting his markers.

"Go!" he called.

Tony unloaded through the open hatch and disappeared into the blue blackness, followed closely by Allison. Arno nodded to Stan and Stan piled out. As he went down into the cool night he slid his hand to the rip cord. They were jumping from low altitude and there was no time for free falling. He pulled the cord and felt his chute open and snap him into suspension. A shadowy form above him and very close told him that Arno had wasted no time in following him out of the ship.

Stan adjusted his pack and his tommy-gun for a landing. Peering down, he saw the field they were to land on. At first he thought Arno had missed and dropped them over a lake. He could dimly see what looked like rippling waves. Then his feet touched waving grain and he eased up on the cords to make his landing. A split second later he was down in a field of tall and ripening grain. Wadding his chute up he drew in a deep breath. The field reminded him of Kansas with its rich, ripe smells.

A low whistle off to his right indicated one of the boys was asking for a location. Stan gave a bird call and listened. He got three answers and heard his pals working their way toward him. Twice more he gave the assembly signal. Then he noticed that the sky above and over toward the twin peaks was lighting up with streaks and points of light. Tracers were arcing up and over, in and out. Grimly Stan watched. Night fighters had tackled O'Malley. He watched the battle, following the action by the tracers and the bursts of cannonfire. Suddenly one of the planes broke into flame. Like a torch it twisted earthward.

"Could have been a Messerschmitt," Arno spoke close beside Stan.

"It burned up like a plywood job," Allison's voice said. He spoke in his usual unruffled drawl.

"O'Malley never would run from a fight," Stan said grimly.

"This time I think he ran," Tony cut in.

Allison laughed. "You just don't know O'Malley, old man."

"No matter what happened to O'Malley we have to get going. Lead on, Arno," Stan ordered. There was no use in going sour over what might be a tough battle. They had plenty of work to do.

Arno led the way out of the wheat field. He located a thick woods and they entered it. A few minutes of walking through tangled bushes brought them out on a pathway.

"This is the trail to the orchard," Arno whispered to Tony.

"There is another trail branching off, the one we used to follow when we went swimming in the little lake below the hill," Tony said.

"That one we must find," Arno answered as he moved on.

The boys had their packs swung high on their backs. Their tommy-guns were held ready. If the night fighters who had jumped O'Malley had spotted the parachutes they would have given an alarm. Arno seemed to be thinking about this. He moved carefully, pausing to listen every few yards.

Tony was bringing up the rear. He called softly to Arno. "Here is the trail, you passed it."

They halted and went back. Arno checked the cross trail.

"Yes, this is the trail," he said.

He headed off to the right and they followed. Coming to the top of a little hill they saw lights below, dim and shaded lights, but many of them.

"That is the house," Arno said.

"How far is it?" Stan asked.

"About a kilometer," Arno answered.

"Less than a mile to go. What's in between?" Stan asked.

"There is a settlement where the Sachetti farm workers used to live. I see lights down there." Arno was bending forward, peering into the night.

"And I hear cars and trucks," Allison added. "I'll bet the Germans have a repair depot or an assembly point down there."

"In that case the half mile between the settlement and the house will be filled with Germans," Tony said.

"One way to find out. Lead on," Stan ordered.

The little group moved slowly down the trail. After a couple of halts Arno paused and pulled the boys close to him.

"I think it best to leave the trail. Just a little way ahead it opens into a roadway. There we should certainly run into outposts."

"We better go on until we locate them," Stan said.

"If you think that is the best way," Arno agreed.

"I'll walk ahead with you," Stan said.

They moved along very slowly, stopping every few feet to listen. Finally they heard guttural voices in the darkness ahead. Halting, they listened. Allison moved forward a little to try to overhear what was said. Soon he came back.

"This is the outpost," he whispered. "Six men and two machine guns. They are about to change guards." He chuckled. "And they do not expect us."

"Can we move around them?" Stan asked.

"We could, but I think we should stay. An officer is coming out to inspect the guard. He's coming from Villa Sachetti." Stan could almost see Allison's sardonic smile. "Nice spot for a surprise party, eh?"

"Swell," Stan answered. "We'll take over the post. Allison can be the decoy to lure the officer in close. He speaks German."

"Good, very good," Arno said eagerly. "Will we use the short knives on them?"

"No shooting if we can help it. We'll shove in close and have a look." Stan began moving down the pathway with Allison at his side. The party kept very close together so as to be able to give signals to each other without speaking.

After edging forward a short distance they were halted by a gruff laugh ahead. Getting down low they peered through the starlight and spotted the sentries. They were grouped close together, four seated, two standing. The two men standing up moved off, one to the left and one to the right. Stan got his crew into a close huddle.

"Allison and I will do our commando stuff on the two guards walking post. I take the one on the right, Allison the other. You boys stay right here. We'll be back soon." Stan spoke in a low whisper.

One of the seated Germans suddenly sprang to his feet. He stood looking into the night toward the party of raiders. Tony started to move forward. Stan pulled him back. The German walked up the pathway a few feet and halted, listening. The boys turned their faces away and remained perfectly still. After a minute or so the man went back and sat down. Stan gave Allison a signal and they moved off the pathway. They left their tommy-guns and carried only their pistols, knives, and short lengths of rope.

Stan moved silently along in a direction that would cut across the beat walked by the sentry. Soon he spotted his man moving at a slow walk along what appeared to be a pathway. Stan moved in and halted beside a bush. There he remained without moving a muscle. The sentry had reached the end of his beat and was turning back. Stan ducked his head to make sure no light was reflected from his face. Tensing his muscles he waited.

The sentry seemed to be enjoying the night. He sauntered along, his rifle slung carelessly over his shoulder. The barrel missed Stan's head by inches as the man brushed past the bushes where he stood. Straightening, Stan leaned far forward, his arm shot out and encircled the man's neck. At the same time his knee came up through the bushes in a smashing blow. The expert application of Stan's arm and the blow in the spine knocked the German limp at once. He did not struggle and he could not cry out. Stan dragged him back into the bushes, hurriedly gagged and bound him.

Moving swiftly back to the pathway he came upon the boys. Allison was already back, kneeling with Tony and Arno.

"Fast work," Stan whispered softly.

"He was a rotten soldier," Allison answered. "He sat down and started removing one boot."

"We'll close in fast but without noise. I have a hunch we'll get a break. If two of the men should start out to check the men we disposed of, Allison and I will take them out. You boys take the other two. Make sure they don't get a chance to yell."

"They will not yell," Arno promised grimly.

The four raiders moved in on their hands and knees. They halted only a few yards from the four men. Here they waited. Finally one of the men got up and called. He listened, then challenged his sentries again. When there was no answer he caught up a rifle, snapped an order to one of the others, and headed off down the picket line.

Instantly Allison slithered away into the night. One of the others got to his feet grumbling loudly. He caught his rifle up and held it at ready as he moved off. Stan was after him at once.

Before Stan had overtaken the guard, having allowed him to get down the pathway a little distance, so as not to arouse the two left behind, he heard sounds of scuffling. Arno and Tony had not waited. They were in action.

Stan leaped in upon the guard just as the fellow whirled around. He knocked up the man's gun and closed with him. The German shouted once before Stan could get a strangle hold upon him, then he went down, struggling wildly. He was a burly fellow with powerful arms and thick legs. Stan was not sure that he could hold the headlock he had slid down into a strangle grip.

They flopped and thrashed around until Stan finally worked behind the German and put on more pressure. After that the fellow wilted in short order. Stan was binding and gagging him when Arno came running to help him.

"Did we act too quickly?" he asked in great excitement.

"A bit fast," Stan admitted, "but I have him now. He was a tough customer." Stan rolled the sentry into a clump of bushes and faced Arno. "How did Tony make out?"

"Fine, very fine. Tony hates all Germans." Arno laughed quietly.

They moved back to the guard station and found Allison and Tony there. One glance at the two sentries Arno and Tony had silenced told Stan they would not have to be bound or gagged. The boys had used their knives expertly.

"Now about the reception committee?" Allison queried softly.

"We need four helmets. I have one and there are two on the ground. Get one more," Stan ordered.

"I have it," Allison answered. "On my head."

Sure enough, Allison was wearing a German helmet. "You boys know what the Germans will do with us if they catch us wearing even one of their helmets?" Stan asked.

"The firing squad," Arno answered as he slipped one on his head.

"If the inspector's car has its lights on bright we'll have to get down. Arno and I will be out on each side as though on beat. Allison will have to make up a challenge that will pass."

"I have their password," Allison answered. "Got it from the man who brought up word of the inspection. He gave it to get up to the post."

"The Germans are not so smart," Tony said. "They are fools to warn their soldiers of a coming inspection."

Allison laughed. "The man who came up was a pal of the squad. He was tipping them off."

"There's a car coming up the road," Stan warned. "Use your tommy-guns to cover them, but no shooting unless we have to fight it out."

He and Arno moved into the darkness, leaving Allison and Tony seated on the bench which had been used by the Germans.

"There ought to be four of us here," Tony said.

"I don't think that will make any difference," Allison said. "They'll think the others are out on the beat."

The car came up the gentle slope slowly. It did not have its bright lights on. The

slit in the headlight hood gave only a meager amount of light and did not show more than ten feet ahead of the car. Allison moved several paces down the road and shouted an order in German.

The car halted and Allison shouted again, making his voice gruff. He got the password and snapped permission to advance. The car charged forward in a surge of speed that made Allison leap aside.

From the darkness beside the road Stan had moved in. He saw that there were three men in the car, counting the driver. He also saw the shadowy form of Arno closing in on the other side. A tall officer climbed out. He snapped an order at Allison. Allison backed away a few steps to allow the other two officers to get out. Stan had moved up and Arno had a gun barrel shoved into the neck of the driver. Tony leaped forward with his gun ready.

"Get your hands up!" he snapped and Allison gave the same order in German at the same instant.

Startled grunts came from the three officers. One of them reached for his pistol. Allison's gun barrel came down over his head and the officer pitched forward. The other two elevated their hands.

The boys closed in and took away the men's side arms. They helped themselves to caps and light topcoats and belts, then they bound and gagged the officers. The ranking officer, a colonel, was furious. Until the gag stopped his mouth he poured forth a stream of angry abuse.

With the officers laid out far back in the bushes, Arno donned the driver's cap and jacket. They were ready for the real adventure, cracking the gates of the German prison camp.

"You know the roads, so you take over, Arno," Stan said.

"Shall we drive right through and into the front yard of the big house?" Arno asked.

"Is there a back yard?" Stan asked.

"A very spacious one, but with a high stone fence around it and only one gate, though it is a very wide gate," Arno answered.

"There is the stone passageway to the wine cellars," Tony put in.

"We don't want to be caught in any wine cellar," Allison answered.

"We have to figure on fast work. The dirty work we've done here will be discovered within a few hours, then they'll be after us," Stan said.

"I know the house and I think I know the spot where prisoners will be held. The Germans always take the best rooms for themselves. I think they will hold my father in the servants quarters at the back of the house. I have even decided which room he will be given. There is one having no running water and very little light."

"We'll have a look there first," Stan said. "If we park in the back we'll be near to those rooms?"

"Yes," Arno answered. "We can reach them through a narrow hallway without entering the main part of the house."

"O.K., driver, move on."

Arno started the car and they rolled down the road at a fast pace. Stan could not see the road but Arno knew every turn. They soon swung into a long driveway and headed toward a big stone gate with machine gunners at each side. Sentries armed with rifles paced back and forth across the opening.

"Here goes!" Stan snapped. "Try your German on the boys. If you flop, we start shooting our way in."

Arno charged up in the best German manner of driving an official car. The heavy machine guns on each side of the gate converged on the car and one of the sentries bellowed an order.



CHAPTER XIII

NIGHT RAID

Arno did not put on his brakes until he had forced the guards at the gate back two paces. Allison leaned out over the door, his cap pulled down over his eyes. He bellowed loudly in German, blurring a string of words together and winding up with the password from the outside post. He was taking a chance that that was the password for the whole area.

The guards backed away, presented arms, and jerked into stiff positions of attention. Arno lost no time in shooting the car through the gates. They entered a shadowy courtyard where the light was dim. The Yank raid on Bolero Villa, just over the hill, had caused every post in the vicinity to be blacked out.

"We are under the window of the room," Arno said in a low voice.

"There's a guard down the wall a ways," Allison said. "I'll give you fellows a calling-down in German to make the guard think I'm really on the warpath, then we'll march right in."

"Perhaps I had better try the window while you are trying the door," Tony said. "You might have trouble. There will be plenty of light inside."

Allison raised his voice and began berating the boys in German. "*Schwinehund!*" he bellowed and followed that up with other choice words of abuse. He had a bright idea and added that he was going to find the man who had handled the blackout. He said he could see light from the back hallway all the way out to the road.

Instantly they heard the guard moving toward the back door.

"Now's our chance," Allison whispered. "I said we could see light from the back hallway. We'll make them douse the lights."

They headed toward the back door and stomped up the wide steps. The guard opened the door and they saw that the hallway was dark. Allison roared at the fellow and he came to a stiff salute, presenting arms.

"General Bolero," Allison snapped. "We would speak to him."

The boys did not understand, but they caught the general's name and had an idea. The guard protested but Allison thrust several papers at him. He had taken the papers from the officer's pocket but had no idea what they were. When the man started to use a pocket flashlight to read the papers, Allison smashed the light out of his hand, roaring at him about the blackout.

The soldier was thoroughly cowed. He turned and started down the hallway with the boys close behind him. Tony had found the window barred on the outside and had joined the others. He nudged Stan as they halted before a door. It was the very room Arno had said his father would be kept in.

The guard unlocked the door. As it opened, a flood of light shone over the men. The general's window had been boarded up, so he was allowed a light. He was sitting at a little table writing. Stan did not wait to see any more. He knew the guard was wise the moment he saw the raiders in the bright light. Their shoes and trousers gave them away as well as their faces. Stan had moved along very close to the guard. His arm went out in a perfect commando attack and before the guard had time to shout he was silenced and heaved into the room.

In an instant Tony was across the room and in his father's arms. Arno stood beside them gripping one of the general's arms. The general looked over Tony's shoulder at Stan and Allison.

"I am honored," he said.

"Turn out the light," Stan ordered.

The general shoved Tony aside and switched off the light. "You have taken greater chances than you should. I am hardly worth the effort."

When he had ceased speaking they listened. Several men were moving down the hall, talking in angry voices.

"That is the commandant of this post. I know his voice. He has with him a number of his officers," the general said in a low voice.

"They'll wonder where the other guard is," Stan said. "We better jerk the boards off that window and get out of here."

"That cannot be done," the general said. "They are planks, not boards, and they

are spiked to the outside of the house."

Allison had opened the door a crack. "They have turned on the light. There's five of them, and they seem excited."

"How far down the hallway?" Stan asked.

"At the door," Allison answered.

The voice of one of the men lifted as he shouted an order. "He's calling in a squad of armed men from the gate," Allison said.

"It seems we are trapped," Arno said grimly.

"Can we go out the front way?" Stan snapped, turning to Tony.

"Yes. There is a side door and a front door. But we can't get back to our car because of the walls around the back plaza."

"Our tommy-guns and grenades are in the car," Allison said.

"We'll have to chance it and move fast. Lead off." Stan reached for the doorknob. Opening the door a little way he looked out. The five officers were standing in the doorway down the hall looking out into the night.

Stan stepped out, whipping his Colt from its holster as he went. "Down the hall!" he hissed. "Lead them, Tony. I'll cover your retreat."

The raiders and the general moved out and started down the hall. They had taken only a few steps, when one of the officers at the door turned around. He let out a startled shout. The others whirled. Stan covered them with his Colt. The distance was a full thirty feet, good shooting range for the forty-five.

"Get your hands up!" Stan snapped. The bore of his gun wavered over the stomachs of the officers and came to rest on a spot between the eyes of the colonel.

Amazement showed on the faces of the Germans, then hatred and fury.

"Fools!" the colonel grated. "You will all be shot as soon as the alarm is sounded."

Stan was moving backward. He grinned at the colonel and made a good bluff. His free hand slid into the pocket of his coat. "Perhaps," he said loudly. "But I

have a grenade here, an American-made grenade. You know how much damage they do. I'm going to toss it right where you are standing just as soon as I get to the corner."

He knew at once that he had scored a hit. The Germans knew that tossing a grenade in just that manner was the way Rangers and Commandos worked. Three of the men, those in the doorway, dived out into the night where they began shouting. The colonel and one other officer edged toward the door. Stan reached the corner and made a motion to jerk his hand out of his pocket. The two Germans dived for the door.

"Whirling, Stan raced down the hall. He was passing a door when a hand reached out and jerked him into a dark room or hall, he could not tell which. Allison's voice hissed:

"Inside, we're going up on the roof." Stan heard the door slam and all was dark. "Tony knows how to go through a French window in this room out to a trellis. We climb the vines."

"But the general, he's pretty heavy," Stan said.

"The boys are boosting him up right now." Allison was dragging Stan across the room.

They went through the window and saw the stars above. Dark shapes loomed against the wall of the house where vines climbed up to the eaves. Stan and Allison started up the trellis. They could hear General Bolero puffing and grunting as Tony and Arno helped him climb upward.

Stan looked down and saw the top of the garden wall. "I'm going down after some grenades and a submachine gun," he hissed. Before Allison could stop him he had swung over the wall and was dangling in space. The vines ended at the wall and Stan could not see what was below. He took a chance and cut loose.

Stan was lucky. He landed on top of a canvas-covered van. The padding dulled the thud of his landing. He sat up and listened. The yard below was filled with shouting and yelling. Boots pounded as men ran across the hard ground. Doors slammed and someone fired a pistol. Stan whistled but got no answer. Then he spotted his gang. They were crouching on the roof above. Stan whistled louder and saw a shape detach itself and slide down toward the edge of the roof. He was sure it was Allison. When the dark shape loomed directly above him he called up

cautiously.

"There's a canvas-covered van right here. Get the men and have them drop off on top of it."

"Pretty far down, isn't it, old man?" Allison called back.

"Not too far," Stan answered. "We'll get to our car and blast our way out of here."

Allison moved back up the roof. In a minute he was back with the general and his sons.

"General Bolero coming down first," Allison called softly.

Stan moved back but got ready to help the general. A bulky form swung down from the roof, then fell, landing with a thud beside Stan. Stan helped the general to a sitting position.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only slightly jarred," the general assured him.

The others dropped off in a hurry. They crowded around Stan. "Now to get to our car," Stan said.

They slid off the back of the van. It was parked a yard from the wall of the house. Other vans stood beside it as closely as they could be packed in. The raiders moved along the wall, halting behind the last van. The car they wanted to reach was only a few feet away, but it was surrounded by a squad of men. Flashlight beams stabbed into the car and men talked excitedly.

Inside the house there was a great uproar as the Germans searched for the missing men. Tony chuckled, then whispered:

"Little Don Sachetti and I used to get spanked for sneaking through that window and climbing the trellis."

"We had better take over that car and our guns and grenades. This is the best chance we'll ever have. Most of the Germans are in the house," Stan said.

"Don Sachetti was executed yesterday. I think he would rest better if we tossed a few grenades through the windows of his home," the general said. "By all means let us proceed with the capture of the car and matériel."

"You drive, Arno," Stan ordered. "Fan out, boys, and start shooting when they spot us." He turned to the general. "Sorry, sir, that we do not have a gun for you."

"I will soon have one," the general answered grimly.

The boys spread out in the darkness along the side of the last van. They moved forward with automatic pistols ready. Stan picked his man, a burly officer with a flashlight. The Germans were so intent upon the arms they had found that they did not see their attackers until the boys were upon them. The burly officer was the one who sounded the alarm. He shouted loudly as he shot his light over the raiders. Instantly the boys opened up. With pistols flaming they charged. Stan saw the general leap ahead and tear a rifle from the hands of a falling German.

For a moment the action was furious, but the fire from the forty-fives was deadly and the Germans went down or leaped away. Stan located a sack of grenades that had been removed from the car. He took out a couple and tossed them over toward the big gate. The result was all that he had hoped it would be. A dozen armed guards had been standing at the gates under shaded lights, while the machine-gun crews outside were dragging their guns around to bring them to bear inside the yard. After the second grenade exploded with a roar Stan saw nothing at the gate at all except a pile of bricks where one of the entrance pillars had stood a moment before.

"Good going, but Tony has been hit," Allison shouted. "Better get into the car!"

Arno had the engine roaring while Allison and the general were sweeping the yard with tommy-gun fire. Tony lay on the floor of the car, shoved down to keep him clear of flying lead. From the shadows all around them bullets were whining. Stan slid in beside Arno. He could not find a tommy-gun, but he had the sack of grenades on his lap. Leaning out through the window of the car he began lobbing them at the windows of the big house. He hoped some of those he tossed would be incendiary grenades. Arno drove parallel to the house for a short distance to give Stan a chance with his grenades.

The car swerved as they passed the door. Stan was able to plant a grenade into the open door and to add another before they straightened out for the charge at the gate. They hit the pile of loose bricks lying in the entrance and one tire exploded. The car wobbled and careened but shoved through the opening without turning over.

As they smashed through, Stan saw flames leaping out of the doorway. A gaping hole in the wall, revealed by the fire, showed where one grenade had done its work. They had charged ahead only a few hundred yards and were not clear of the driveway when they saw ahead of them a small tank and two trucks. Men on foot swarmed beside the vehicle. With a roar the whole driveway ahead burst into action. The careening car had been sighted. Arno twisted the wheel and they plunged through a hedge and down a steep bank where the car came to halt with its radiator smashed against the trunk of a tree.

"Get the tommy-guns and grenades," Stan snapped. "Get Tony out!"

Tony was already out. "I have the wound plugged," he said in a weak voice. "I'll manage."

"We'll help you along," Stan said. "You lead the way, Arno."

"I know best how to get out of here. I was here more than Arno," Tony said. "I'll lead you."

"Give him a hand, Arno," Stan said. "They're coming through the hedge up above."

Allison and Stan opened up on a group of Germans breaking through the hedge above. Their gunfire drove the Germans back and allowed Arno and the general time to get Tony up the bank and into the woods.

Whirling, they ran up the bank and overtook the three who were waiting for them.

"Where to now?" Stan asked.

"We have to stay in the woods and keep moving. Near the top of the ridge we'll find a small lake. There are a number of small huts up there. We can hide in one of them." Arno spoke quickly.

"But they'll search every foot of the woods and every hut," Allison objected.

"They do a very good job of hunting down escaped men," Stan agreed.

"We might fool them if we hide in the Sachetti villa. They would never think of looking for us there," Tony said.

"An excellent idea, but how can we get in without being discovered?" the

general asked.

"There's an outside air shaft leading down into the cellars. It is covered with vines and there is a tree growing beside it," Tony said. "I used to be able to slide down that shaft."

"A good idea," Stan said. He was beginning to realize that Tony would not be able to travel very far or very fast. "Let's get going."

"See, they are making a circle around the woods," Tony said.

Lights were flashing above and below them. But the Germans did not seem to think it necessary to throw a line between the woods and the house. Arno and General Bolero helped Tony. Stan and Allison brought up the rear. They moved through the trees and across a garden thickly planted with shrubbery and grapevines.

Behind them the woods were filled with German soldiers. The searchers had fanned out into the valley below and upon the hills above the villa.

"Here is the shaft," Tony said as they halted in the black darkness under a tree.

Stan could see nothing that looked like a shaft or like the roof of a wine cellar.

"We must be careful not to disturb the vines or the bushes." Tony laughed softly. "Mr. Sachetti went to a great deal of trouble in hiding the cellar and the shaft. He said they ruined the beauty of his garden." Tony was pushing aside bushes as he spoke. Finally he called very softly. "Come now."

The raiders moved under the spreading branches of the tree and from there they crawled under a leafy vine. They found an open shaft with a high metal cone over it. Tony and Arno went down first. When the general tried it he had trouble squeezing down the shaft. Stan was the last to slip through. He lowered the guns and grenades to Allison before he descended. Sliding down he found himself in total darkness.

"Now we have to hide. The Germans will be coming down here often for wine." Tony spoke eagerly. "We'll hide behind the vats containing the new crop of grapes. The Germans will drink only the old wines. They are on this side."

Feeling their way they located a row of huge barrels and crawled in behind them. Stan and Allison located themselves near the outside barrel.

"We can hear the doors open when anyone comes down here," Tony said. "The hinges are rusty and will squeak loudly."

"How about dressing your wound now, Tony?" General Bolero suggested. "I will tend to it myself."



CHAPTER XIV

NIGHT FLIGHT

The creaking hinges of the wine cellar door served as a warning signal to the hiding men behind the wine casks. Every time a German orderly was sent for wine they knew he was coming before he had even entered the short passageway leading into the main room. Usually the men were sent in pairs, sometimes three or four came. The men always had liberal samples of the wine before filling the decanters for the officers.

The cellar was damp and smelled of rotting wood and stale wine. The space behind the wine casks was limited and legs developed cramps as the night and the next day wore on. Belts had to be tightened over empty stomachs, but there was no complaining. Tony regained his strength and with it his belief that they would escape.

"We can't very well climb back out of that chute," Allison said for the tenth time. "We'll have to plan some other strategy. It's three P.M. right now and we still don't have any ideas. We have to be up at that wheat field by midnight."

"I'll slip out into the hallway and have a look," Stan offered.

"And get caught," Allison said sourly.

Further talk was halted. The hinges of the door creaked dismally. Four men entered and turned on the small light over the row of old wine barrels. They talked and had a few drinks before filling the pitchers they carried. There was much laughing and joking. When they had gone, Allison translated their conversation.

"We finally have some information," he said. "The Germans blame the Italian peasants for our disappearance. They are sure the peasants spirited us away and they are taking reprisals."

"That is like them," General Bolero said sadly.

"And here is the big news. The Germans figure we have escaped and will reach the British lines in the south. They expect a bombing raid upon this spot, similar

to the one on the Bolero villa. So tonight they will evacuate under cover of darkness and they will put this place, wine cellar and all, to the torch before they go." Allison laughed.

"When are they going?" Stan asked.

"They plan to get out as soon as darkness comes to cover their movements from our air force, which seems to have taken over the sky. As soon as they have evacuated they will destroy the place. I gather the high command has ordered that every place evacuated is to be destroyed in revenge for Italy's quitting the war."

"So. We have to get out of here by dark," General Bolero said. "And that we will do."

"I hope so," Stan said.

"We will evacuate with the Germans," the general said. "That is our only chance."

"Right-o," Allison agreed.

"So we may as well lay a few plans." The general seemed eager to get into action.

"We could shoot our way out," Tony suggested.

"We would do better to use our heads," the general said firmly.

"We ought to be able to take over one of the gangs sent here to get wine. The German officers will want to haul away all of this fine wine they can possibly take with them," Stan said.

"Now we're beginning to get places," Allison agreed.

For the next hour they planned and talked. Tony explained the route they would have to take to get to the field where O'Malley was to pick them up. No one said anything about O'Malley's not being there at midnight. Their big worry was to get to the field themselves.

It was well after dark, according to their watches, when things began to happen. An officer and a squad of soldiers entered the cellar. The officer barked commands at the men for a few minutes, then marched off.

The raiders crowded close to Allison to learn what had been ordered. Allison whispered his report while the men a few feet away began rolling barrels from the racks.

"They are taking the old wine. The new wine in these vats is to be poured out. The barrels are to be smashed. They have a drum of gasoline outside and will pour it into the cellar and set fire to it as they leave." Allison paused. "They have a simple method worked out for emptying these barrels. After the gasoline is set afire the men are to toss a few grenades in here to smash the barrels and make certain the cellar is destroyed."

"We better take over right now," Stan said. "Those birds have only side arms. We'll slide out with our tommy-guns covering them. Each take a barrel and when I whistle step out."

The German workmen were startled out of their wits a second or two later when five armed men stepped out from behind barrels and covered them with machine guns and a rifle. They stared at General Bolero, blinked their eyes wildly, and then elevated their arms toward the ceiling.

"Tie them up," Stan ordered. "Take the door with Arno." He nodded to Allison. "If any more men come, cover them and bring them back here."

Tony and the general and Stan got busy. It took a little time to bind and gag eight men when the bonds and gags had to be ripped from their clothing with trench knives. Before that was finished Allison and Arno added two more noncom officers who had come in to hurry up the squad.

"I suggest we each roll a barrel outside," General Bolero said. "We can use them as something to hide behind if we meet resistance."

"Good idea," Stan agreed. He turned to Tony. "Can we get out without charging the main gate? If we rouse the Germans, we'll be in the same spot we were in the first time we got loose."

"I don't think so," Tony answered.

The problem was solved by the appearance of an officer. He bellowed angrily into the cellar, then took a step or two into the dark passageway. That was a mistake. Allison tapped him over the head with a gun barrel and dragged him back.

"He says the villa has been fired. There is only a few minutes to load up and get out." Allison laid the officer beside his men.

"We won't tie him up. When he comes to he can free his men. I wouldn't roast even a German," Stan snapped. "Get a barrel and let's get going."

The floor and the passageway sloped gently down into the cellar because the barrels always came in full and went out empty. The boys soon discovered that it took two of them to roll a heavy barrel. They managed to get three barrels rolling and headed for the entrance.

Outside they found a big van with a driver who was dancing up and down shouting. Three planks sloped up into the truck. The first barrel hit the planking and the boys heaved it up. The driver was yelling wildly and he had every reason to yell. The yard was as light as day. Flames licked up all around the house and the smaller buildings blazed furiously. The heat was intense and the smoke was thick.

Allison snapped an order at the driver and the fellow put a shoulder against the next barrel. No sooner had he leaned forward than Arno tapped him over the head with his pistol butt.

"Get our guns and the sack of grenades and flares," Stan shouted. "Arno, you drive."

They had two barrels in the back of the van where they could be seen. In a moment the guns and the grenades were in the truck along with Tony, the general, and Allison. Stan armed himself with a tommy-gun and rode up front with Arno.

Out at the main gate guards were shouting and waving at the van to hurry up. No Germans remained in the courtyard. Arno started the van and they headed for the gate. The guards wanted a ride, but Arno had gotten up speed and did not stop. They roared down the driveway and headed out into the road. Foot soldiers were everywhere. Arno slipped into a line of trucks and they chugged along toward the settlement. They reached it without mishap, though a dozen officers had shouted orders at them, and one captain had ridden several hundred yards on their running board. The complete blackout necessary to make a convoy movement safe helped a lot.

Reaching the settlement, they were directed to a grove of trees where their truck

was shoved back into deep cover.

Allison came forward and got in with Stan. When an officer came along checking their load, he explained they had wine for the officers' mess and suggested it be shoved deeper into the woods to keep it from being tapped by the soldiers. The officer cleared a pathway and led them deep into the timber beyond the rest of the convoy. He ordered the crew to report to a designated spot and then rushed off.

The five raiders gathered beside the truck and broke out laughing.

"So considerate of them," Arno said.

"I have never known the German army to be so co-operative before," the general observed.

"We better be on our way," Stan said.

They gathered up their things and headed into the woods with Tony leading the way. After an hour of searching and much argument between him and Arno they finally located a trail and followed it.

Stan and Allison began to suspect the boys were lost, when suddenly they came out on a knoll. Above them, silhouetted against the starlit sky, were the two square-topped peaks.

"See," Tony said to Arno. "Now you must admit I was right."

"You were, I am sorry I argued."

"It's twenty minutes to twelve," Allison said anxiously. "How far is it to the wheat field?"

"Just a ten-minute walk," Tony answered.

"We'll hit it right on the minute," Stan said eagerly. "Lead on."

Tony led them out of the woods and into the wheat field. They checked the wind and got out their flares. Arno took one, Tony another, while Allison took the red center marker.

"Clear a space so as not to set the field of wheat on fire," Arno warned. "I'll show you how far to go."

Stan and the general went along, carrying the guns and grenades. They were about in the center of the field when they heard the roar of a plane motor. Stan listened and then grinned. The engine was a powerful radial. He was certain O'Malley was at the throttle.

The plane swooped around and around high above while the boys got spaces cleared and everything set. Arno called to the others and the flares blossomed out. Looking up into the sky they waited. The plane circled and headed in. Suddenly a barrage broke loose from a hill a half mile away. A German battery had heard the plane and had spotted the flares. The gunners were shooting at the flares and by the dirt they were lifting they seemed to be getting the range.

"He'll be blown to bits when he lands!" Arno shouted.

"We'll have to move back or get blasted ourselves," Allison called, breaking into a run.

Shells were exploding close to them, kicking dirt over them, and the barrage was swinging toward them. Overhead the plane was coming in. It roared over their heads a few feet above the barrage.

"Overshot it!" Tony yelled. "Now he'll have to try again."

"And the Germans are coming!" Stan yelled. "Get set with the machine guns!"

When a shell burst close to Allison, he stopped running. Suddenly he shouted, "He's fooled them! He's set down at the far edge of the field!"

Sure enough, the plane had landed almost at the edge of the woods. It was swinging around. They all ducked and raced toward it. Stan got there first and was greeted by O'Malley's voice from the plane.

"Sure, an' you got out the band for a welcome!"

"As soon as they spot the flare of your exhausts the welcome will get hotter!" Stan shouted back.

Loading up was only a matter of seconds, but the Germans on the hill and those charging down into the field had the Mosquito located and began pounding the lower end of the field. O'Malley headed into the barrage and hopped her off without getting a direct hit. They circled overhead and then swung south. Stan was seated across from O'Malley.

"Have a nice trip?" O'Malley asked with a grin.

"We did," Stan answered.

"I hear there'll be a flock o' tinware waitin' for you when you get in." O'Malley continued to grin. "The boys are bettin' ten to one that you all got shot. I'll be richer than Rockefeller when I get back." He chuckled to himself.

"Right now we could do with something to eat," Stan said as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Colonel Benson has a banquet spread for you. Have Allison get on the radio and tell him to put it on the table, and have him order me two apple pies." O'Malley opened the Mosquito up another notch as he thought of the pies.

Stan clicked on the intercom and got Allison. He felt, at the moment, as though he could stand a vacation, but glancing back he saw a great fire raging with an intensity that lighted the sky for a hundred miles. The Germans were destroying the historical city of Naples. There would be no vacation.

THE END

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