

DAVE
DAWSON
BY
GUADAL
CANAL
BOWEN

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BY
GUADALCANAL



The
WAR
ADVENTURE
Series

DAWSON

Project Gutenberg's Dave Dawson on Guadalcanal, by Robert Sydney Bowen

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DAVE DAWSON ON GUADALCANAL

BOOKS BY R. SIDNEY BOWEN

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DAVE DAWSON WITH THE FLYING TIGERS

**DAVE DAWSON
ON
GUADALCANAL**

by
R. SIDNEY BOWEN

THE WAR ADVENTURE SERIES

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**FOR
DICK BOWEN**



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CHAPTER ONE

Canceled Orders

Stretching out as comfortably as the gear-packed bomb compartment of the Flying Fortress would permit, Dave Dawson lazily unwrapped a bar of semi-sweet chocolate, and bit off a man-sized hunk.

"Ub glub dish blub ice," he grunted, and winked at Freddy Farmer, who was sitting on a packing case of spare parts a few feet from him. "Deferenally jice!"

The English-born air ace gave him a cold stare and a scowl.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, little boy!" he said. "In fact, don't talk at all."

"And that from a guy I've often seen eat peas off a knife," Dawson chuckled after he had swallowed. "But, as I was saying, this is my idea of something nice. Definitely nice."

"You think so?" Freddy snorted, and glanced out the port at the broad expanse of sun-flooded Indian Ocean beneath the wings of the B-17. "What's nice about it, I'd like to know? Nothing but water down there. And more water!"

"So what are you kicking about, Pal?" Dave shot at him. "You're only seeing the top of it, you know. But I meant it's nice to be air chauffeured around once in a while. Just sit back and relax and enjoy yourself, while some other guy does all the work."

"I always suspected that you were born lazy," Freddy said. "And every day in every way I'm becoming more and more convinced. I wouldn't relax too much, old thing, if I were you. In case you don't remember, there is still a world war going on. And particularly in this part of the world. Just over there a couple of hundred miles or so are some islands called the Dutch East Indies. Right now a mess of slant-eyed devils are in control. And they have quite a few airplanes, too, for another thing."

"Meaning?" Dawson grunted and frowned.

"Meaning that we're expected to do something in return for this hitch hike hop

from India to Australia," the English youth explained. "In other words, we are expected, like everybody else aboard, to keep an eye out for possible approaching enemy planes."

"Do tell, do tell!" Dawson murmured, and pushed himself up to a half sitting position.

Turning his head slightly, he took a long look out the port nearest him. Then presently he shook his head, relaxed and slumped back to his original position.

"Nope," he grinned at Freddy. "No enemy planes approaching, sir. Now what?"

Freddy made sounds in his throat and stabbed a finger at the bomb bay doors.

"You could step down through there, and neglect to take your parachute along!" he snapped. "You know something, Dave? I'm just a little worried about you."

"Good!" Dawson chuckled, and bit off another hunk of chocolate. "Worrying about me will keep you out of trouble, and that will be fine. But, seriously, what's on your mind, my good fellow? You do have a mind, don't you?"

"I have a *mind* to toss you overboard, and not even mention it to the others!" Freddy came right back. "But seriously speaking, too, I really am worried about you. You've lost your pep and you're going stale. And—"

"Hey, what gives?" Dawson cried, and sat up straight. "Just stick a Jap Zero out there, sweetheart, and I'll show you who's going stale. Where do you get that stuff, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't mean that," Freddy said with a faint gesture. "I imagine you could shoot down a Zero—if the pilot would keep it still long enough. No, I mean about your pep, your—well, your disinterest, Dave. Once you used to be all keyed up about what was going to happen next. But now...? Well, you just seem to slide along from day to day. Sort of take things as they come."

"So?" Dawson mumbled, and munched on his chocolate.

"See what I mean?" Freddy cried angrily. "No interest at all in what's going to happen next. Take this flight we're making right now. A couple of weeks ago we were pulled out of China to India. And now we're on our way to Australia. And, from there to where, or what? You haven't said a word about that. Yet once you used to comb your brain for the answers. Nowadays, though, you don't appear to

give such things so much as a thought. Are you getting war weary, Dave, or just naturally slipping."

Dawson didn't say anything for a while. He finished his chocolate and licked his fingers in frowning silence.

"Well, I'll tell you, pal," he finally spoke. "Maybe it's because I'm getting old. And so are you, only you won't admit it. Yet maybe that's not right, either. I think it's because I'm all washed up with guessing, and never guessing right. I mean about jobs for us to do. Think back over our war experiences, Freddy. Think back and just name one time when we got orders to report some place that we knew why, and what it was all about. Go ahead. Think hard, and try and come up with one example. Just try, brother; just try!"

Freddy Farmer concentrated hard for a moment or two, and then finally shook his head.

"No, I'm afraid I can't think of a single time," he said. "But—"

"Nuts to the buts!" Dawson snapped. "That's the idea, see? Here today, and some place else tomorrow. And nobody ever tells us. So why get all steamed up wondering and guessing? I'm just tired of doing it, see? So I skip the wondering and guessing, nowadays."

Freddy Farmer stared at him and then grunted and dragged down one corner of his mouth.

"And if you'll pardon the Yank expression, my dear sir," he said, "you are what is known as a cockeyed liar. And you know it! You mean to tell me you're not wondering *why* we've been ordered to Australia? Don't be coy, old thing! You're just trying to put off an act!"

"It's put *on* an act, dummy!" Dave growled at him. "Okay, I have wondered a little. So what? At least I'm not filling the breeze with a lot of questions out loud. I'll just take what comes, and let it go at that. Only I hope it's some action. And I do mean real action!"

"And I've a fancy that's just what you're going to get!" the English-born air ace spoke up. "I was talking with a chap in Calcutta, just before we left. He has a friend attached to Far East H.Q., and he hinted that the Japs have assembled a thundering big naval and air force in the Southeastern Pacific. And an all out attack is to be made on Australia 'most any day now."

"Nuts!" Dawson snorted. "After all these years, and you fall for that kind of rumor stuff. You should know better, Freddy!"

"Oh, you think so?" the English youth flared up. "I suppose you've got the real inside information straight from General MacArthur?"

"No," Dawson replied with a straight face. "But I met a chap in Calcutta, too. A Yank infantry lieutenant. He has a girl who goes around with a fellow who has an uncle who had dinner in Washington with the close friend of a Senator. And what do you think that Senator said had been decided?"

Freddy Farmer hesitated, but couldn't stop himself.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"That the U.S. has made a deal with Japan about the Pacific!" Dave came back instantly. "We're going to take half, and the Japs are going to take half. We're— Hey! What's wrong, Freddy?"

The last was because the English youth had suddenly wrapped his arms about his middle, and was swaying back and forth with an expression of agonizing pain on his face. He suddenly stopped and gave a sad shake of his head.

"You!" he groaned. "Good grief! Why did it have to be you, my very best friend? And I swore by all that's holy that I'd do it, too!"

"Say, what is this?" Dawson demanded, and leaned forward. "What in thunder are you raving about, anyway? Swore you'd do what?"

"Swore I'd shoot the very next blighter who pulled that old, old one about the U.S. taking the top half of the Pacific, and the Japs the bottom half!" Freddy groaned. "So be a good chap, and hand me your gun, will you?"

"I'll hand you more than a gun!" Dave growled. "You bum! You had the pants scared off me there for a moment. I—"

Dave cut off the rest short as Captain Banks, of the Army Air Transport Command, and pilot of the Flying Fortress, came through the door from up forward. He held a slip of paper in his hand, and he gave Dawson and Farmer a quizzical look.

"Big shots I've got aboard, huh?" he said with a grin. "Maybe personal friends of MacArthur?"

"Not that I know of, anyway, Skipper," Dave replied with a grin. "Why? Is that thing in your hand news for us? If it's bad news, then we bailed out about ten minutes ago."

"Good or bad, I wouldn't know," the Flying Fortress' commander said with a shrug. "It's a radio from MacArthur's Headquarters. We're to land at Broome. There you two are to grab a plane and hike straight over to H.Q. in Sydney, and report."

"But I thought you were taking us to Darwin?" Freddy Farmer spoke up.

"We were, but orders are canceled," Banks replied. "The big boys seem to want you two to get to H.Q. in a hurry. You wouldn't have any idea, I suppose, huh? Us Air Transport slaves don't get very close to the fighting very often. Kind of a lonely life, if you get what I mean? Take this ferry hop, for example. We're armed, of course, and there are Jap air bases within range to give us some action. But will we run into anything like that? No such luck. So we bear up the best we can, and make a hobby of collecting gossip. So if you two know any—"

And that's as far as the Flying Fortress commander got. At that moment there came the bank and snap of the aft turret guns. And a split second later the excited cry carried through the ship.

"Enemy aircraft off to port! A half dozen of them. Zeros!"

"My gosh, what do you know?" Captain Banks gasped, and stared wide-eyed at Dawson.

"You shouldn't have talked so loud, Skipper!" Dave laughed, and sprang to his feet. "Tojo heard you that time, and is obliging!"



CHAPTER TWO

Aces Don't Miss

Maybe Tojo wasn't obliging the Flying Fortress' commander, but six Jap Zero pilots most certainly were. As Dawson leaped to a pair of waist guns and peered to port, he saw the six Zeros prop-piling down like six bullet-spitting maniacs. Steadying himself, he trained his guns on the leading plane and fired. His tracers streaked out and seemed to be cutting the Zero's left wing in two, but the Jap craft continued to come boiling in at the big four-engined bomber. Lumps of lead began to bounce and jounce around in Dawson's stomach. The pilot of that leading Zero seemed to be bullet-proof. He also seemed to have but one thought in his head: to keep right on thundering down and ram the Flying Fortress in midair.

But cold fear was Dawson's for only a brief instant. He corrected his aim and let fly again with his guns. This time the Zero was out of luck. It took the full fury of Dawson's fire, seemed to stagger in the air for a moment before it blew up in a cloud of orange flame and smoke, and went showering down out of sight.

"One for our side!" Dawson shouted happily. "Now—!"

The chattering yammer of Freddy Farmer's guns in the slot above him cut off the rest of Dawson's words. And in practically the same instant a second Zero spouted black smoke, and then nosed over to go hurtling straight downward, tracing its path of doom straight to the surface of the Indian Ocean.

"My error!" Dawson bellowed. "I meant, two for our side. Nice going, Freddy!"

Of course the English-born air ace didn't hear him, because all of the Fortress's guns were hammering death and destruction into the four remaining Zeros. In less time than it takes to tell about it, there were only two Zeros left. Then only one. And then, as Dawson got off a perfect deflection burst, there weren't any Zeros left in that section of the sky.

"And that's that!" Dave panted as he searched the sun-tinted air. "Six for six. Not bad. It was almost fun while it lasted. It—well, strike me pink, as Freddy would say!"

He had happened to glance down at his shirt to see that his silver Air Forces pilot's wings were not pinned in place above the left pocket flap. His decoration ribbons were there, but no wings. Where they had been was a nice clean tear in the material. Pop-eyed, he stared at the tear, and then impulsively looked down at the compartment floor boards. And there they were. His wings. But not as he'd ever seen them before. In a few words, they looked as if they had been run over by an express train. Or better still, as if they'd been accidentally dropped into a meat grinder. They were twisted all out of shape, and there was a deep smooth groove right across the middle from one wingtip to the other wingtip. And as Dave stared at them, and leaned over to pick them up, a twitch of pain passed across his upper left chest.

"And I didn't even feel that Jap bullet!" he gulped, and fingered the bullet-creased wings. "But, boy, that—that was too darn close!"

"What was too close, Dave?" Freddy Farmer's voice spoke at his elbow.

Dawson held out the bullet-creased wings for Freddy to see.

"One of those birds was a sharp shooter," he said with a mirthless chuckle. "Only not quite sharp enough, thank my lucky stars. Kind of close, huh?"

Freddy Farmer's eyes widened, and for a moment all he could do was stare at the damaged wings and then at the torn space on Dave's shirt where they had been.

"Good grief, I can hardly believe it!" he finally gasped. "It's—it's a miracle, Dave. You should be dead, by rights, you know."

"Thanks, I like it better this way," Dawson replied grimly, and dropped the wings into his pocket. "If I believed in signs I'd take this to mean that it was only the beginning of something. And now that I come to think of it, I wonder if it is."

"Rubbish!" Freddy Farmer snorted. "It's a sign, all right. But it's a sign of how blasted lucky you always are!"

"Sure!" Dawson growled. "Also a sign that I've got to fork out dough for a new pair, and—No, by gosh, I won't! The pin on these is okay. So darned if I won't wear them for continued luck. I'll—"

He cut off the rest as Captain Banks came hurrying into the compartment. The worry on the bomber commander's face faded away as soon as he laid eyes on the pair.

"You two okay, eh, thank God!" he grunted. "Well, then I can bawl you out. What was the big idea, anyway? Didn't you stop to remember that there're eight other guys on this sky wagon?"

"Huh, Skipper?" Dawson echoed. "Come again?"

"Six nice juicy Zeros!" Captain Banks said with tears in his voice. "Six of them! And what happens? You birds nail four of them between you. It ain't right. There should be a law against birds like you cheating us war-starved ferry crews out of a look at the war. Kidding aside, though, fellows, thanks, and how! Those Zero rats don't waste much time giving you the works, do they? And my heart was choking me when I thought that one of them was going to ram us. Wonder I didn't put this old baby in a power spin. I—Hey! What happened to your wings, Dawson? You been teething on them?"

"They dropped off, and Farmer stepped on them before I could pick them up," Dawson grinned. "Look at his big feet, if you don't believe me. But, speaking of other things, Skipper, how long before we get in?"

The Fortress commander glanced at his wrist watch, and pursed his lips.

"Twenty minutes," he said. "Unless we run into more Zeros. And I hope we do. But hey! Those jobs were pretty far out to sea, now that I come to think of it."

"Too far," Dave told him quietly. "My guess is that they were carrier-based. This is your usual ferry course from India to Australia, isn't it?"

"Check, and I get your thought," the pilot nodded as his face became grave. "You think maybe the Japs have sent out a carrier force to cut a hole in our air supply route, huh?"

"Could be," Dawson shrugged. "I wouldn't want to bet against it, anyway. And—well, skip it."

"No," the other said. "Go on and say the rest of it."

"Well, if I were flying this job," Dawson replied with a half grin, "I think that right now I'd give those four Wright Cyclones you've got a chance to show what they can do. But, after all, I'm strictly a safety first guy, Skipper."

"That makes two of us," Banks said quickly. "Anyway, my job is to get these babies to Australia for other guys to use, so I'll just stick to my knitting, I reckon."

Okay, fellows, hang onto your hats. I'm going to cut that twenty minutes to fifteen, at least. And again, thanks for that job on those Zeros."

The Flying Fortress commander not only called the turn, but made good. Just ten minutes later the west coast of Australia was sighted. And five minutes after that the big four-engined job, being ferried out to the South Pacific to play its part in the war, was tooled down to an expert landing on the Air Forces constructed field on the outskirts of the city of Broome. Dave and Freddy gathered up their small and compact kit bags and climbed out with the rest of the crew onto the ground. There they intended to bid goodbye to the others, but before either one of them could open his mouth a jeep streaked out from the hangar line and a staff major popped out of it like a pea out of a split pod.

"Captains Dawson and Farmer?" he barked, and looked hard at Dave.

"I'm Dawson, sir," Dave replied with a nod. "And this is Captain Farmer."

"Very good!" the senior officer snapped. "Come along, then. Get into the car quickly! Your plane is waiting. Maps and weather charts are in the pits. Come on; snap it up!"

A flash of resentment passed through Dawson. The major was a ground officer. He wore no wings on his tunic, nor any decoration ribbons, either. As a matter of fact, he looked to Dave like one of those well known forty-eight-hour soldiers. In other words, a man who gets a commission while en route to Washington, and comes back wearing his brand-new tailor-made uniform.

"Something up, Major?" Dave asked quietly. "What's all the rush about?"

"What would you suppose?" the major came right back angrily. "There happens to be a war on. Also, lots of things to do. H.Q. has ordered for you to report in a hurry, and that's what you're to do. Now, let's get going, you two!"

Dave knew that he was letting his anger get the better of him, but he couldn't help himself. This staff major was the type of officer that always gave him a pain in the neck. He'd met up with more than one during his war career. Put an officer's insignia on their shoulder straps and they went sky high with importance. And the higher the rank they held, the higher went their belief in their own importance. Maybe that was okay around training camps or induction centers. But that sort of thing didn't go with shot and shell-seasoned veterans. So naturally it didn't go with Dave.

"Just a minute, Major," he said. "I think first I should report the engagement."

"What's that?" the other gasped, rising to the bait. "Did you say engagement?"

"That's right, Major," Dawson assured him. "Half a dozen Zeros attacked us about ninety miles off shore. We got them all, but they must have been carrier-based. I heard a report that there is a huge Jap attack force heading for this coast. Of course, it may be only a rumor, but—"

"Heading for *here*?" the Major gulped, and his face tightened. "Are you sure?"

Dave shrugged and gestured with a hand.

"Well, I didn't actually see them, Major," he replied truthfully. "But the Japs have pulled a lot of fast ones in this war. You never can tell, you know."

"No, you never can, that's right," the other said, and glanced nervously toward the west. "Well, your plane is waiting. I'll run you over, and make the report *myself* to the commanding officer. A huge Jap attack force, eh?"

Dawson didn't say anything. He simply nudged Freddy Farmer's arm, and the pair stepped into the jeep. The major stalled the engine twice before he got the jeep going. And then he made a dash down along the edge of the field as though Jap troops were actually rushing up from the other side. He braked to a screaming halt in front of the field office, waved a hand at a waiting plane some fifty yards farther on, and then leaped out and dashed inside.

"Good grief, the blighter is in a hurry, isn't he?" Freddy Farmer breathed as they walked over toward the plane, a Wright-powered Vultee attack bomber. "But why did you fill him with all that junk about a huge Jap attack force?"

"Well, you said you heard on good authority that there was one, didn't you?" Dawson chuckled. "And, I just don't like efficient stuffed shirts like him. I like to see them get their whiskers burned. Anyway, I'm hoping that the C.O. of this field is the kind of a bird who'll do it. We'll know when Major Importance comes out. Well, anyway, we've got a nice job to fly. And we should see quite a bit of this down-under continent by the time we hit Sydney."

"You take the scenery," Freddy Farmer grunted, and stowed his kit in the Vultee's pit. "I'll take Sydney as fast as I can get it. Lord, Dave! Do you suppose General MacArthur himself wants to see us?"

"Nope," Dawson replied instantly, and tossed his kit aboard. "If the orders had read for me to report *alone*, I'd say probably. But we are both to report, so meeting the general is definitely out, if you get what I mean?"

Freddy Farmer glared and stuck out his tongue.

"Too bad you were wearing those wings at the wrong time!" he snapped. "But pardon me, old thing, for stirring that brain of yours. You aren't wondering about the future any more, are you? Well, let's get on with it. Half a moment, though. As I recall, it's my turn to pilot. So get into the gunner's seat, young man. Up with you!"

Dave shook his head, and grinned.

"Let me sky-steer her this time, as a favor, Freddy," he pleaded. Then, as he looked past Farmer toward the field office, he added quickly, "There isn't time to explain, but be a good guy and let me take her off. I'll remember you in my will, if you do."

The English youth started to shake his head, but something he saw in Dawson's face suddenly caused him to change his mind. He let out a resigned sigh, and shrugged.

"Right you are, then," he grunted. "But I think I'm a fool to let you. You're up to something!"

"Me?" Dave murmured innocently, and strapped on his parachute pack. "Perish the thought, sweetheart. I just like to pilot. Oh-oh! Somebody got choked off plenty, but is trying not to show it!"

That somebody was the staff major. He came over to the plane very flushed in the face, and with an ugly look in his eye.

"You reported that rumor to the commanding officer, sir?" Dave asked politely.

"I did!" the other snapped, and let it go at that. Then, suddenly pointing a stiff finger at Dawson, he barked, "And just what do you call *that*, Captain?"

Dave didn't catch the meaning of the question for a couple of seconds. He was enjoying the mental picture of this band box officer rushing into a hard bitten C.O.'s office with a scare rumor that a huge Jap attack force was *less* than a hundred miles off the Australian coast. And of how he came out with his ears

burning from the officer's words about what he could do with his crazy and utterly impossible tale! And then Dave realized that the Major was stabbing a finger at his bullet-smacked wings.

"Why, they're my pilot's wings, sir," he replied. "They met with a little accident."

"And they certainly look it!" the Major rasped. "A fine thing to wear on a Government uniform! A lot of you young officers certainly need to be taught a bit more respect for your uniforms, and the insignia you wear. I'd advise you to obtain a new pair before you report to H.Q. in Sydney. Now, go ahead and take off! You're late enough as it is! Get going!"

"Yes, sir, very good, sir," Dave said as meekly as he could, and climbed into the pilot's pit with anger seething in his soul.

The engine had already been warmed up, and it was now just idling over. Strapping himself in, Dave looked back to get the nod from Freddy, and to snap a quick glance at the major. The senior officer was standing a few feet off the right wing tip in the perfect attitude of an old crank waiting to make sure that a couple of trespassing kids got off the property. Turning front, Dave smothered a grin and released the wheel brakes, and inched open the throttle enough to get the Vultee rolling forward. Then when the tail came abreast of the major, Dave opened up the throttle wide and tapped the left wheel brake just enough to swing the tail over to the right. Then he banged the throttle the rest of the way open and took off in a hurry. As he cleared the ground, he looked back and hooted. The major was flat on his back in a cloud of dust, with his feet straight up in the air. And his officer's cap was spinning along the edge of the field like a runaway spare wheel.

"Oops, so sorry, Big Shot!" Dawson shouted. "Darned if I didn't forget you were there. Better go wash your neck. The Army must always look clean and tidy, you know, Major. So long, chump!"

"And the Military Police will probably be waiting for you, old thing, at Sydney!" Freddy Farmer sang out between spells of laughter. "There's such a thing as radio, you know."

"And that'll be okay, too!" Dave chuckled. "They can bring me back here, so's I can do it all over again. Make cracks about my wings, huh? Too bad he wasn't a captain, or I wasn't a major, too. I think I would enjoy very much pasting that make-believe in the nose. Well, here we go again. On again, off again—as

usual!"



CHAPTER THREE

Flight To Nowhere

The sun was sliding down over the western lip of the world in a hurry when Dawson sat the Vultee down on the Sydney field after a trans-Australia flight from Broome. As soon as they taxied into the line and mechanics took over, a sergeant of the Military Police came hurrying over to them. For just a brief moment Dave's heart floated up to the region of his throat. It was just a wasted sensation, however. The M.P. was simply doing his duty of informing all pilots landing from other bases to report first to the operations office.

Dave and Freddy legged out, collected their stuff, and went over to operations. They were obviously expected, for the officer on duty greeted them with a grin and a nod, and jerked a thumb at the motor transport building next door.

"A car and driver are waiting, Captains," he said pleasantly. "Over there in front. He'll take you to Headquarters at once. Have a nice trip out?"

"It wasn't too bad," Dave replied. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he added, "I suppose I'd be shot if I asked questions?"

The operations officer chuckled and shook his head.

"No," he said, "you wouldn't be shot. But you wouldn't get any answers, either. Because I don't know any. I can tell you this much, though, if it will help any. You two are the umpty-umph pilots since yesterday morning who have checked through here in a hurry to get to Headquarters. Looks like something big is in the wind, but I wouldn't know. Nobody tells us guys anything, anyway. Good luck, just the same, and—Well, for the love of Mike, Dawson! Did some sweet young thing in China try to steal your wings with her teeth? Man, those are chewed up, what I mean!"

"No, Zero teeth, if you get what I mean," Dave grinned. "I'm a lucky guy, I guess."

The operation officer's eyes widened, and he let out air slowly.

"Did, huh?" he breathed. "Luck, and how, what I mean! Man, what I wouldn't give for a war souvenir like that! You're the second chap I've met whose life was saved by a bullet ricocheting off his wings. I know one fellow, too, who got saved by his cigarette case. No fooling, Dawson, you've really got something there. Well, anyway, scram along, kids, and a million in luck!"

"Same to you, and in bunches, soldier," Dave grinned, and went outside with Farmer.

"See what I mean, Freddy?" he said as they walked toward the motor transport building. "There's nice guys, and otherwise, in every man's army. You never can tell a fellow by the rank insignia on his shoulders."

"Quite, oh quite," the English-born air ace murmured absently. "But I'm wondering why so many pilots have been ordered to Headquarters. I wonder."

Dawson shrugged and headed toward a war-painted staff car with a corporal driver lounging against a front fender.

"Search me," he said. "Could be that they have decided to wash out the Army Air Forces, and make ditch diggers of us all. Not a bad idea, after the flying I've seen *some* guys do."

"Yes, definitely," Freddy Farmer replied instantly. "But how the deuce do you manage it, Dave? I should think the whirling prop tips would smash it."

"Huh?" Dawson ejaculated. "Come again, Freddy? How do I manage what?"

"To hold a mirror out in front of you, so you can see yourself flying around!" the English youth shot at him. "Quite a trick, isn't it?"

"Bingo, and out!" Dawson laughed. "Okay, wise guy! That puts you one up for the day. But the sun hasn't set yet. So keep right up there on your toes, my lad. Well, this must be ours."

As Dave spoke the last he returned the salute of the corporal driver, who had straightened to attention.

"This the H.Q. taxi, Corporal?" he asked.

"I guess you could call it that, sir," the non-com said with a chuckle. "Step right in and it will take you there itself. It sure has made enough trips these last couple of days to be able to do it on its own."

"Really?" Freddy Farmer murmured. "All Air Forces officers, Corporal?"

"No, not all, sir," the non-com replied. "About fifty-fifty Army and Navy, sir, I'd say. Quite a bunch of them, too. I guess maybe something's being cooked up for Tojo and his boys. High time, I'm thinking, too. We're quite a few runs behind them tramps."

"But we'll catch up, don't worry," Dawson assured him. "They took first swings, you know, so our team will get last swings. And I do mean last swings, too."

The non-com driver nodded and grinned broadly. Then as he held the car door open for the pair to climb in, he let his eyes rest on their decoration ribbons.

"Yeah, Captain," he grunted, "we get last swings. But I can see that you two officers ain't been exactly hitting loud fouls every time you came up. Nailed plenty of them slant eyes, huh?"

"A couple, I guess," Dave grinned. "But they were probably fledglings on their first time out."

"Yeah, I bet, I bet!" the corporal snorted, and slid in behind the wheel. "Well, here goes for trip nine thousand and something!"

Regardless of what number trip it was for that corporal, it was certainly the fastest, wildest ride that either Dawson or Freddy Farmer had ever had in a car. When they finally pulled up in front of the building that served as USAFFE Headquarters (United States Armed Forces in the Far East) they were both quite certain that they had left ten years of their lives somewhere along the road. As he climbed out, Dave took a five-dollar bill from his pocket and offered it to the driver. But the non-com shook his head.

"That's okay, sir, and thanks just the same," he said. "I used to drive a hack in New York before the draft nailed me. So I know right guys when I see them. I don't want no tip, sir."

"It isn't a tip," Dave grinned, and dropped the bill in the driver's lap. "Just a little something to buy stuff from the hospital canteen with while you're convalescing. Go on; keep it."

The non-com blinked stupidly for a moment; then his flat, freckled face cracked in a broad grin.

"I get it, Skipper," he said with a chuckle. "I won't spend *this* in no hospital. I can drive this baby with my eyes closed."

"And I think you did!" Dave laughed at him. "And good luck."

"And good hunting for both of you, sir!" the driver called out as Dave and Freddy went up Headquarters front steps.

Just inside the big front doors, they were buttonholed by an officer seated at a desk who wanted to know their business there. They couldn't tell him that, but they gave the officer their names, and that was good enough. In fact, it seemed to please him, for he let out a long sigh.

"Well, thank Heaven, you're the last of the lot!" he breathed. "I've been seeing nothing but Army and Navy pilots—even in my dreams. Report to Room Twelve Fifty for further orders. Good luck."

Dave asked where he'd find Room Twelve Fifty, received the information, and started off with Freddy.

"This is getting to make me feel not so good," he grunted, as he stabbed an elevator button and waited for the car to come down.

"What do you mean?" the English youth asked quickly. "Have you heard something I haven't?"

"With your big ears?" Dave shot at him. "Such a question! No. I mean the parting crack everybody gives us. Good luck, good hunting, and so forth. It makes me nervous when everybody keeps wishing me good luck. Makes me feel they really do know something bad is going to pop, and they're saying to themselves, 'And he seems such a nice guy, too!'"

"If they *know* you they're not saying that!" Freddy cracked back fast. "But I get the idea of what you mean. Frankly, I'm getting to hate those two words, good luck. Half the time I fancy they're not really meant."

"Boy, are you going sour in your middle age!" Dave chuckled. "Cheer up, pal, and—and *Good luck!*"

Freddy glared, and he might have started things right then and there but for the fact that the elevator came down at that moment and the sliding doors parted open. A couple of minutes later they were pushing through the door of Room

Twelve Fifty. It wasn't a very big room, but it seemed jammed to the ceiling with Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pilots. Both Dave and Freddy spotted several pilots whom they knew. Then, suddenly, both came to a full stop and stared pop-eyed at the far end of the room. There was a desk there manned by a couple of high ranking officers. The pilots in the room were filing past the desk, and obviously giving their names, and so forth, to the two officers. One of them was an infantry colonel, and the other was an Air Forces major. It was sight of the infantry colonel that caused both Dave and Freddy to stop dead, and gape. In short, once again they were meeting their old friend Colonel Welsh, Chief of Combined U.S. Intelligence.

"Oh-oh!" Dave murmured. "Do you see what I see, Freddy?"

"I most certainly do," the English youth replied. "Fact is, we might have guessed, what?"

"Yeah, something like that," Dawson grunted absently. "The colonel in the flesh, huh? Well, that means there isn't any clam bake coming up, that's certain. But I guess we must have fallen down on that last job he gave us, Freddy. And he's very disappointed."^[A]

"Eh?" Freddy gasped. "What do you mean, we must have fallen down on the job? Don't be silly!"

"Well, look at all these other pilots here," Dave replied. "Must be he doesn't think we're so hot any more, and is going to give us plenty of help on the next job—whatever it is."

"Man! How some people hate themselves!" Freddy Farmer snorted. "But I wonder what's up; what he has up his sleeve?"

"Well, there's one way to find out, I guess," Dave grunted, and started to move. "Get into line, here, and ask him when it comes our turn."

As Dave and Freddy were the last two to enter the room, and were therefore at the end of the line, the room was pretty well cleared of pilots when they reached the desk. Colonel Welsh was bent over a list of names and didn't look up.

"Name, rank, and former unit?" he asked mechanically.

"Dawson, sir. Captain. Returned from special assignment in China."

Colonel Welsh stiffened, let his pencil drop, and looked up quickly. A broad smile of welcome lighted up his thin, sun-bronzed face. He didn't bother to reply to their salutes. He simply put out his hand.

"So you made it, Dawson, and you, too, Farmer?" he said. "Good! I've been worrying you wouldn't get under the wire. How are you?"

"Fine, sir," Dave grinned as he shook hands. "And sort of curious, of course."

"Oh, quite, sir," Freddy echoed, and extended his hand. "And I fancy Dawson has expressed it for both of us."

"Well, stay curious for a while, boys," the colonel replied with a dry chuckle. "But here, I want both of you to meet Major Taylor. He's seen a bit of action in this mess, too. Take a look at his decorations, if you don't believe me. Major Taylor, Captains Dawson and Farmer."

The two youths shook hands with the major, and both liked him instantly. He had twinkling grey eyes that could become as cold as ice cubes when he wanted, and a warm smile that showed he always meant what he said from the heart.

"Big moment Number One for me today, Captains," he said. "I've heard about you two plenty, of course. So I'm mighty glad to meet you. Maybe we can have fun together. With the Jap rats, I mean."

"Nothing would suit me better, Major," Dawson replied, and meant it, too.

"Definitely, Major," Freddy Farmer added. And then with a faint smile, "But *where*, sir?"

"Oh, haven't I told you yet?" Colonel Welsh spoke up with a quick laugh. "Why, we're all making a little flight to—well, to give you something to think about, Farmer, let's call it a little flight to nowhere!"

[\[A\]](#) *Dave Dawson With The Flying Tigers.*



CHAPTER FOUR

Action Bound

"Flight to nowhere, eh? What the blasted blue blazes did he mean by that? Is this thing going to be fitted with wings, or something, I'd like to know?"

It was Freddy Farmer who spoke the words. With Dave Dawson, and some two dozen Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pilots, he stood on the deck of an American destroyer steaming out of Sydney into the Tasman Sea at full knots. Just five hours ago they had met Colonel Welsh at H.Q., and—and learned nothing except that they were going on a flight to nowhere. Shortly after the Colonel had imparted to them that choice bit of "secret information," he had sent them on their way to enjoy the sights of Sydney for a few hours, and then to report to a certain Army pier at such and such a time.

Well, they had seen most of the sights of Sydney in a restaurant where Freddy Farmer was at least happy, because the place was stocked with far more food than he could possibly eat at one sitting. And when it was practically coming out of his ears, they left the place and took a short walk about town. At the proper time they reported to the pier where a bunch of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pilots were already gathered. Everybody was full of questions, but there wasn't a single answer in the whole crowd. Then presently a sleek, battle grey destroyer slid in and tied up long enough for the whole gang to be taken aboard. And now the destroyer was cleaving the night-blackened waters of Sydney Harbor and sending spray flying well back over the bridge.

"Don't ask me, sweetheart," Dawson grunted, and stared down at the black waters swirling past the destroyer's hull. "Could be they're going to take us out and drown the lot of us. How do I know?"

"Well, you could at least be helpful enough to make a sensible guess!" Freddy snapped. "Confound you Yanks, anyway! I never saw such mysterious business!"

"Listen to the guy!" Dawson hooted. "You forget I've been to England, and served in the R.A.F. with you. For cat's sake, it usually takes a ton of TNT to get

an Englishman to open his mouth long enough to admit that the sun is shining. Us Yanks mysterious? Pal, we're blabber-mouths compared with your British Intelligence Service. And don't argue with me, because I've had experience, I have!"

"Rot!" the English youth growled. "But never mind, anyway. The point is, where are we going?"

Dawson said nothing. He just leaned a bit more over the chain railing, and stared down at the water.

"Well, can't you make a guess?" Freddy insisted.

Dave started to shake his head, but on second thought checked himself. He turned and peered at Freddy in the gloom.

"I don't have to guess, Freddy," he said quietly.

Young Farmer stiffened, caught his breath in a gasp, and leaned close.

"What's that, Dave?" he breathed excitedly. "You know? You know where we're going?"

"Yes, I know," Dawson murmured, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to know. "Sure, I know, pal."

Freddy Farmer waited just two split seconds before he practically exploded in a shower of small pieces.

"Then for goodness' sake, tell me, Dave!" he choked out. "Don't keep me like this, blast you! *Where are we going?*"

"You want to know, huh?" Dave echoed, and bent his head close to Farmer. "You want to know where we're going? Well, see where my hand is pointing? Out there beyond the bow of this tub? Well, we're going out there, sweetheart."

Freddy groaned, choked and spluttered, but before he could spit out a single word, Dawson pushed back the cuff of his jacket to reveal his wrist watch. The radium-treated dial showed that it was exactly five minutes to midnight.

"So that makes us one all for the day, Freddy," he chuckled. "I told you I'd get you to bite on something before the day was over. I warned you to keep up on your toes. Okay, and not sore, huh?"

"Just plain disgusted, you blighter!" Freddy snarled. "Man! Why I put up with you day after day, I don't know!"

"Maybe it's love," Dave chuckled, and jumped quickly as the English youth aimed a booted foot.

Freddy's foot didn't connect with certain places, however. And he didn't make a second try. He simply snorted to himself and joined Dave in staring silently down at the black water flowing past. For perhaps some ten of fifteen minutes neither youth said anything. Each seemed to be quite content with his own thoughts. Eventually, though, Dave broke the silence.

"Well, there's one thing, anyway, Freddy," he said. "Wherever we're going, we're going to get there soon, I guess."

"Would that be the beginning of another side-splitting act of yours?" Freddy growled. "And what do you mean by it, anyway?"

"It's the detective in me," Dawson replied, unruffled. "Here we are on a destroyer heading out to sea in pitch darkness, but I haven't been assigned any place to sleep, have you?"

"By Jove, that's right, Dave!" young Farmer exclaimed excitedly. "We haven't, have we? Good grief! Do you suppose this is taking us to New Zealand, and we've got to ride on deck all the way?"

Dawson didn't answer for a moment. He threw back his head and stared up at the trillions upon trillions of stars that glittered and gleamed in the jet black sky.

"My celestial navigation tells me we're headed more toward New Caledonia than New Zealand," he said. "But I'll bet you a pair of flying goggles that we're not going to either of those places."

"I won't take the bet, because you're too blasted lucky," Freddy spoke up quickly. "But anyway, why didn't you think so?"

"Well, I got hit by a sudden hunch, while we were waiting on the pier for this tin can to tie up," Dawson said slowly. "And I got chewing the fat with some of the others there. Know something, Freddy?"

"Well, I will after you tell me, of course," the English youth replied. "What?"

"Keep your shirt on; a guy has to take a breath now and then, you know!" Dave

grunted. "Well, I didn't run into a single guy who hasn't had some experience flying off an aircraft carrier. If you want my guess, it's that this load of pilots is being taken out to some carrier force waiting way off shore."

"I wonder, I wonder!" Freddy Farmer murmured after a long pause. "Why would a carrier force be so top hat as not to come in and get us, I'd like to know?"

"Call it 'high hat' next time, Freddy," Dave corrected gently. "White folks will think you're English, if you—"

"Now, look out, my good man!" Freddy began menacingly. "I'll have you know that I'm—"

"And I don't blame you for being proud that you're English, pal," Dave broke in with a chuckle. "So would I be, if I wasn't Yank. Okay, skip the funny crack. The reason a carrier force wouldn't come in to pick us up is probably because of that one word pronounced *spies*! One thing we want to keep plenty secret out here in the Southwest Pacific is the location of our carrier task forces. So we were loaded aboard this tin can at night, and are being sneaked out to one. Catch on?"

"Not definitely," Freddy Farmer muttered, and scowled in the darkness. "Seems to me that a carrier task force at sea would have its own pilots, and what not. Besides, a lot of us aboard this destroyer are Army Air Forces pilots."

"So what?" Dave said, and shrugged. "So maybe the Navy needs help in the air, and knows just where to get it."

"Better keep those remarks under cover, or a certain Army pilot may be reported lost overboard!"

Dave jumped straight up at the sound of the voice at his elbow, and whirled around in midair. When his feet came back on deck again he saw Colonel Welsh standing in front of him.

"Gosh, you scared me, Colonel!" he gasped. "I thought a Navy pilot *had* overheard me!"

"Good thing one didn't," the senior officer chuckled. "Plenty of rivalry between you Army and Navy pilots. And I'm afraid there are hot heads on both sides. Well, how are you enjoying a ride on a destroyer, eh?"

"Oh, just too, too wonderful, sir!" Dawson replied with a groan. "But I didn't see

you on the pier, Colonel. When did you come aboard? At the last minute?"

"No, I came aboard much earlier," the Colonel replied. "I've been up in the commander's quarters."

"Er ..." Freddy Farmer began, and faltered. "I mean," he began again, "I don't suppose he told you, sir, where we are headed?"

The colonel laughed and shook his head.

"He didn't have to, Farmer," he replied. "You see, I already knew. But hold on with your questions, because I don't mind telling you, now that we've shoved off. We're making for a rendezvous with a carrier task force a couple of hundred miles out to sea. We should contact it just about dawn. You chaps, if you want to sleep, will have to do it on the deck, I'm afraid. I wouldn't advise it, though, the way this ship is smashing the swells. And the commander says that it will be even rougher outside."

"Thanks, I think I'll stay awake," Dawson laughed. Then, in a serious tone, "And when we reach the carrier task force, sir?"

"Why, we go aboard, of course," the colonel replied. "There are two carriers. The Hawk, and the Carson. Half of you will go to one, and half to the other."

"And then, sir?" Dave persisted.

"For military reasons, Dawson, I'm afraid I didn't hear you," the senior officer replied. "Count on it for something interesting, though. And not easy by any manner of means. Fact is, all this may be simply the beginning of a very costly waste of time, and effort."

The Chief of Combined U.S. Intelligence spoke the last while staring flint-eyed out over the rail, and as though he were repeating his own thoughts aloud to himself. A million questions piled up on the tip of Dave's tongue. And it was the same with Freddy Farmer. However, neither one of them spoke for fear it might stop the Colonel from saying more. However, they were both out of luck. The senior officer grunted, shook himself a little, and turned to them with a smile that showed his even white teeth even in the gloomy light.

"Well, I wish I had time, now, to get a first-hand report from you boys of that trip to Chungking you made," he said. "And your experiences with the Flying Tigers. However, I only popped out for a breath of air. There's still a lot of paper work

for me to do. I'll be seeing you soon, though; don't worry. A lot of you, probably, as I'll be aboard your carrier, the Carson. Until then, good luck!"

Dave groaned, but not loud enough for Colonel Welsh to hear as he walked away.

"Even him!" Dave sighed. "Good luck to you, and good luck to you—and nuts! If anybody should suddenly say, 'Bad luck' to me just once, I think I'd keel over in a dead faint!"

"Oh, come off it, Dave!" Freddy grated. "What do you expect folks to say? Man, but you're getting to be a testy blighter! So we are going to a carrier task force, eh? Well, I'll have to admit that for once you were right. But I certainly wish he'd told us more."

"And you can repeat that!" Dave grunted. "And all this may be simply the beginning of a very costly waste of time and effort. That, my little friend, did not sound so nice to me. It didn't even sound close to nice."

"Quite," Freddy said with a little sigh. "But nothing's nice about this blasted war, you know. So we might just as well make the best of it. And—"

The English youth choked off the rest as the alarm horn sounded aboard the destroyer, and the craft seemed virtually to spin around to port the length of her keel, and then fairly streak across the water.

"The submarine detector has picked up something, I guess!" Dave muttered, and took a firmer grip on the chain rail. "Now, wouldn't it be sweet to get torpedoed even before we get any place?"

"You say the happiest things!" Freddy got out in a slightly strained voice. "Shut up, and use your eyes. Maybe we'll sight something."

"In this darkness?" Dave echoed, and promptly leaned over the chain rail and strained his eyes at the black water beyond the bow. "Don't be silly. Not unless it's trimmed with neon lights."

For perhaps five minutes the destroyer pounded through the night sea at emergency knots. Then the all clear horn sounded again. The destroyer's speed slackened off slightly, and her bow came cutting around to the previous course. A faint sigh of relief seemed to whisper along the spray-drenched decks. And then presently everything was as normal as before.

"Probably one of ours," Dave grunted. "Or just a false alarm. But either suits me okay. There's something about getting torpedoed and drowned that I just don't like."

"Quite, oh quite!" Freddy Farmer echoed. "If a chap has to cop one, much better to cop it in the air. Definitely cleaner, you know."

Dave nodded, but didn't make any comment. And once more the two air aces lapsed into silence and stood at the chain rail peering out over the night-shrouded waters, each with the same thought unspoken in his mind. Way out there ahead were two Yank aircraft carriers waiting to take them aboard. And when that was accomplished, then where to next? A tantalizing question that only time would answer for them. And the smirking gods of war, too, of course, if the two youths could but hear their death rattle voices!



CHAPTER FIVE

Instructions For Eagles

The sun was hardly a faint band of yellow white light on the eastern horizon when the speeding destroyer came within sight of the waiting task force. Despite the bucking and pitching of the craft during the dark hours of night, a good many of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pilots aboard had managed to curl up somehow on the deck and go to sleep. It was not the case with Dave and Freddy, however. They remained awake the whole time talking of this and that, or just staring thoughtfully out across the vast stretches of night-shrouded water.

And so they were among the first to see the faint shapes of the task force low down on the horizon. As usual, Freddy spotted them first and nudged Dave excitedly.

"There they are, Dave!" he cried, and pointed. "Right up ahead, there. Lord! A mess of them, what? Looks like the whole blasted Navy. I can count two carriers, half a dozen cruisers, and twelve destroyers!"

"Thanks, that saves me the trouble," Dave grunted, and squinted ahead. "Yup! That's a task force sure enough. And, boy, look at those destroyers skipping around! Fat chance Jap subs would have getting close to those flat-tops. I wonder which is the Carson? They both look the same to me."

"I don't care which is which," Freddy replied, and kept his gaze riveted on the flotilla of battle craft drawing closer and closer. "I'd much rather know where they are headed. After we've been put aboard, I mean."

"Well, keep your shirt on, sweetheart," Dave choked him off. "You'll find out soon enough, and—Oh yeah! There they are. I was wondering if either of those flat-tops had any planes up. Didn't think they'd leave it all to the destroyers. The whole works is hardly making any headway."

Freddy Farmer didn't make any comment. He had followed the direction of Dave's pointing hand with his eyes, and was watching the three sections of Navy scout-patrol planes circling about high in the air above the coasting task force. And a moment or two later, as though the task force commander had heard

Dave's comment and decided to do something about it, every ship picked up speed and swung from a southeasterly course to one due south.

"What the deuce, now?" Freddy Farmer breathed to nobody in particular. "Why are they heading south? Have the Jap rats put a landing party ashore on Admiral Byrd's Little America?"

"Well, they've sure got a long ways to go to reach it!" Dave said with a laugh. "But if you use your head and your eyes, little man, you'll soon catch on to the idea that the carriers are about to take their planes aboard. So they've headed into the wind, which happens to be from the south. Now, anything else you'd like explained?"

If there was, the slightly red-faced Freddy Farmer didn't ask. He simply gave Dawson a withering look and then watched the scouting planes aloft circle around and down and land aboard one of the carriers like so many soldiers on parade.

"Splendid!" he breathed. "Darn good show. Those Navy chaps are a bit of all right when it comes to flying."

"And okay in a lot of other things, too," Dave added absently. "Well, it won't be long now. We're changing course to cut down the distance. Wonder how we're going to get aboard them? Swim?"

"I certainly hope so in your case!" Freddy snapped, and let it go at that.

By now all of the sleeping pilots were fully awake, and were gathered at the chain rails to fill their eyes with the impressive sight. The air was filled with complimentary remarks by the Navy pilots aboard. And for once the Army pilots had nothing to say. They were witnessing something being done in expert fashion, and there was no room for chiding wisecracks.

Signal flags fluttered up aloft the destroyer carrying the collection of pilots, and signal flags in answer were seen to break out from one of the carriers. A moment later the task force ships maneuvered about into a change of position, and during the next few minutes too many things happened too smoothly to give either Freddy or Dave a chance to take in the entire picture. Colonel Welsh and the destroyer's commander stepped out on the bridge along with the next in command. Names were called out. The pilots were split into two groups, one group assigned to one side of the destroyer, and the other group to the other side.

Dave and Freddy were assigned to the port side, and in less time than it takes to tell about it, the destroyer ran up close alongside one of the carriers that was practically stationary in the water. The destroyer was warped in even closer, and at a command from the bridge the pilots went up rope ladders and in through an opened hull door of the giant carrier towering high above the destroyer.

And no sooner were they aboard the carrier than a young ensign took their names, and turned them over to a seaman who in turn led them to their assigned quarters. As a matter of fact, so smoothly and with precision had everything functioned, that Dave's first move when he entered the cabin he and Freddy were to share was to sit down on one of the bunks, give a little shake of his head, and expel air from his lungs.

"Boy, some navy!" he breathed. "No wonder they boast about it, plenty. Gosh! Seems like only a couple of seconds ago we were bouncing along on that tin can. And now here we are aboard this big baby that feels as motionless as the Empire State Building. Only it isn't. She's boiling off knots, now."

Freddy glanced out the port at the dawn-tinted waters sweeping past, and nodded half-heartedly.

"Quite," he murmured. "But now that we're aboard, what next, I wonder?"

The English-born air ace didn't have to wonder long. The last word had hardly left his lips when the inter-ship speaker (nick-named Donald Duck) barked forth with orders.

"All pilots report to the flight deck at once! All pilots report to the flight deck at once!"

"That's us!" Dawson grunted, and made a pass or two at his tunic to straighten out a few of the wrinkles that actually weren't there. "Hit the deck, Freddy! Top side with you, sailor!"

"Don't!" the English youth groaned, and took a quick glance at his reflection in the small wall mirror. "You talk bad enough as an Army man."

"Every day it comes more compliments!" Dawson mocked, and led the way through the cabin door.

Some twenty or so seconds later they were up on the flight deck and with the members of the group gathered just under the signal bridge. Up there they saw a

lot of Navy gold, but it was Colonel Welsh who spoke to them.

"You gentlemen have come aboard this carrier to take part in a difficult and hazardous operation against the enemy forces in the Southwest Pacific," he began. "The details of the operation will be explained to you in full, later. Right now, though, I want to impress upon you that you are all guests of the officers and crew of this carrier, and as such will refrain from thoughtlessly interfering with the general routine of the ship's company."

The colonel paused and grinned.

"I'm including myself in these instructions," he said, "because, frankly, this is my first visit aboard a carrier at sea. And I, too, am mighty curious to see what makes one of these flat-tops tick. However, this is no time for sight-seeing, so I am asking you gentlemen to confine your movements to the officers' quarters, and the flight deck. Well, I guess that's all—except for one thing. All of you are to report to the Ready-Room, on the hangar deck, at five o'clock this afternoon. And—But there I make my first boner!"

The colonel stopped and grinned apologetically at the Admiral in command of the task force. Then he turned back to the pilots.

"Air Forces pilots will report at five o'clock," he chuckled. "And Navy and Marine Corps pilots will report at two bells, or whatever the correct number of bells it is. Anyway, all of you be there. That's all, and dismissed."

The pilots let out a cheer for the colonel and then broke up into groups of two and three and began to wander along the smooth flat surface of the flight deck. They didn't wander about very long, however. There were few planes on deck, and the dawn sun climbing up over the horizon reminded each and every one of them that what was really in order was a little food. Particularly Freddy Farmer, and it was he who led the straggling procession down below decks to the pilots' mess room. And when he and Dave had eaten their fill of Navy chow they went to their quarters to arrange their personal belongings that had been taken aboard from the destroyer, and to chew the fat a bit. They did little of either. At least, that went for Dave. Just to "relax for a couple of shakes" he stretched out on his bunk, and the next thing he knew Freddy had him by the shoulder and was shaking him hard.

"Out of it, Dave, old thing!" came Freddy's muffled voice to his sleep-lulled brain. "Out of it, I say! You want to be late and get off to your usual bad start?"

Blast you, man! Out of there, or you get this whole pitcher of water, and I promise it!"

Dave blinked and blinked some more, and finally sat up on the bunk.

"Huh?" he groaned. "What's cooking? Where are we, and what's the idea of trying to break off my arm? And—Holy smokes! Where are we, anyway?"

"You can ask the navigation officer, later!" Freddy snapped. "Right now, move yourself, and get presentable. We've just about two minutes to get to the Ready-Room. Come on, Dave! Prop-wash the sleep out of your brain, will you? Lord! You're more bother than my maiden aunt!"

Dawson blinked again, started to speak, but checked himself as memory came rushing back into his brain. Instead he let out a yell, jumped off the bunk and cracked the top of his head against the bunk above. And he let out another yell.

"Doggone it!" he growled, and rubbed the top of his head. "Why don't they build these cabins big enough so a guy can move around without killing himself? Hey! Where's my tunic? Where's my cap? Hey, Freddy! What did you do with my stuff? Oh! Here it is. Two minutes to go, huh? Then what are we waiting for, pal?"

Freddy Farmer snorted and went outside alone, but in just about less time than it takes to tell about it Dave went out and caught up with him. And together they made their way to the Ready-Room on the hangar deck. It turned out that they were the last to show up, so when they entered the door was closed and Colonel Welsh rose from where he was sitting with the task force's commander at the head end of the room. He waited a couple of minutes for feet to stop shuffling around. Then he grinned and made a little half salute with one hand.

"Now it comes, Gentlemen," he said with a chuckle. "Now you'll get the answer to the one question that has burned holes in the brain of each and every one of you since the moment you received word to report to H.Q. at Sydney. Or could I be wrong?"

The short, hooting laugh that spread from lip to lip of those present was proof enough that the colonel had hit the nail right smack on the head. Every last one of them had thought of little else but the reason he had been summoned to H.Q. at Sydney.

"Well, here is the picture," Colonel Welsh continued, but there was no smile on

his face now, nor any light note in his voice. "The Southwest Pacific Command is going to try and beat the Japs to the punch. In other words, we're pretty sure that the Jap is about set to let fly with another of his blows at us, so we're going to beat him to it. In brief, we're going to go after them in the Solomon Islands."

The colonel paused for breath, and a mounting murmur of suppressed excitement ran its course about the Ready-Room. Nobody said anything, though, not even a whispered word of comment to his friend sitting next to him. On the contrary, each man simply hitched forward a little more on the edge of his chair, and kept his attention riveted one hundred per cent upon the Chief of Combined U.S. Intelligence.

"The assault upon the Jap-occupied Solomons," he went on presently, "will be a two part affair with land, sea, and air forces cooperating throughout. The first part will be the capture and holding of an airport on Guadalcanal Island. And the second part, which will be carried out simultaneously with the first part, will be the capture of Tulagi on Florida Island some twenty-two water miles north of Guadalcanal. That is what we have made plans and arrangements to carry out. However, a good part of whether we do it or not will depend upon you pilots."

The senior Intelligence officer paused again and for a moment let his keen eyes roam over the collection of faces before him.

"I doubt that any of you will be taking any active part in either of the two surprise attacks of which I've spoken," he suddenly hurled the thunderbolt at them. "Your job will be to find, checkmate, and stop cold Jap forces that could prevent us from carrying out either of these attacks successfully. To put it bluntly, we have information and data which indicates that a large Jap sea, land, and air force is forming at their Truk Island base in the Carolinas preparatory to moving south against our positions on New Guinea, if not directly against Australia itself. In fact, we believe that this huge Jap force is already on the move. But just exactly where it is, we can only guess. Your job, and the job of those aboard the other carrier in this force, will be—to find that Jap force *at all costs!* We have got to find that force and either destroy it or make it turn back. If we don't then thousands of American soldiers, sailors, and airmen will be forced to give up their lives in vain. No matter what, you have got to find this Jap force that is somewhere between Truk Island and the New Guinea coast!"

As the colonel paused again, not a man moved. Not a man hardly so much as breathed. Everyone sat motionless, eyes on the colonel's grave face, and thoughts

fixed squarely upon the do or die order that had been issued!



CHAPTER SIX

Blind Eyes

The Chief of Combined U.S. Intelligence seemed purposely to allow three or four moments for the importance of his statement to have its effect upon his listeners, and then he made a little gesture with one hand, and flashed them a brief smile once more.

"And the reason you gentlemen have been selected for this job," he said, "is because your commanding officers consider you best fitted and equipped to tackle it. To put it another way, you pilots are the cream of the crop. Perhaps some of you may be wondering why you were not asked to volunteer for the job. Well, the answer to that is easy. In the first place we would have been forced to reveal somewhat the nature of the job, and it was our desire to keep everything a secret right up to the last minute. And in the second place, and just as important, asking you to volunteer would be just a matter of routine. Your war records show that no matter whether you volunteer for a job, or receive orders to perform it, you go at the job all out just the same. However, before I go any further, just for the sake of the record I'd better say right here that any pilot who does not wish to take part has my full permission to withdraw right here and now. No questions will be asked, and his withdrawal will not be held against him in any way."

The colonel stopped talking and let his eyes wander about the Ready-Room again. Nobody said anything. Nobody even so much as moved. They all just sat there in their seats waiting patiently for the colonel to continue. He did, with a grin and a little hunch of his shoulders.

"See what I mean?" he said. "Just a waste of time finding out if you fellows *want* a crack at this thing. Incidentally, I'm very proud of all of you, and very grateful in the name of your country. But to get on with this thing. As you've probably come to realize by now, we've not only picked crack pilots for this job, but also crack flying teams. By selecting pairs that have had considerable experience together against the enemy, we believe that we will get far better results than if we had simply picked a crack pilot from one squadron, a crack pilot from another squadron, and put them together in the same plane. There isn't enough time for you to get to know one another in the air. And so we have selected

teams instead of individuals."

The colonel paused, half turned to glance at the commander of the task force, and then faced the pilots again.

"You will probably not take off on the first phase of this vitally important Jap hunt until tomorrow afternoon, at the earliest," he continued. "However, I want all of you pilots to remain on constant alert, just in case the unforeseen does happen. Right after I finish this little talk you will be assigned to your planes, and you will also be given instructions about take-off orders, take-off rules and signals, and communication code-words to be used while in flight. And, of course, before each patrol the team of each plane will be given complete instructions as to the patrol course to be flown, *and* exactly what is to be done in the event any units of the enemy are sighted. Admiral Jackson, here with me, and the executive flight officer, will have charge of those details. My job—"

The colonel paused and half grinned.

"Call me the team coach, if you wish," he said. "I'm the coach giving you the old pep talk before the big game. And believe me, it *is* the big game. If we don't find this Jap force reported moving southward; don't find it and do something about it, our initial offensive against the Japs in the Southwest Pacific can easily be turned into a most disastrous defeat for our forces. That possibility you must not forget for a single instant, and act accordingly."

The Chief of Combined U.S. Intelligence took another couple of moments out, and Dawson, watching him intently, saw the corners of his mouth tighten, and a hard, steely look come into his eyes.

"And let's not try to kid ourselves either," he suddenly said in a low, quiet voice that contained just a faint ring of steel against steel. "It is going to be the hardest job any of you have yet tackled. And some of you, only a few I hope to God, will not be coming back. We are playing for surprise one hundred per cent, but we've got to remember that the Japs have not thus far shown themselves to be stupid and dumb when it comes to the question of pulling a fast one. For that reason, we've got to be on the alert against any surprises they might pull out of the hat. Frankly, nobody knows where this carrier force is right now, or where it's headed. Not even our own Navy Department. This maneuver is strictly hush-hush. And that's just as it should be, everything considered. We have a tough job ahead, and there's no sense making it any tougher through being careless and not on the alert. And now, just one more thing. You can consider it an honor to be

selected to take part in this maneuver, but don't let it go any farther than that. I mean, there are pilots, and air crews aboard this carrier, and the Hawk, who will not take part in your work. That, however, doesn't mean they won't have a job to do, and a mighty important one, too. So just don't get the idea that you are something special—even if you are. See what I mean? All right, then. Thanks for listening, and a million in luck. Very good, sir. Your turn."

The colonel spoke the last to the carrier task force commander seated beside him. The high ranking naval officer rose to his feet, spoke a few words of greeting to the pilots, assured them that they were most welcome aboard the ship, and expressed the hope that they would find their stay aboard pleasant for themselves, and profitable for the cause for which they were fighting. Then the Naval officer turned them over to the executive flight officer. He in turn led them out into the deck hangar, and with the aid of a few junior officers assigned the planes to be used on the Jap hunt.

The plane given to Dawson and Farmer was a Wright "Cyclone" powered Douglas "Dauntless." That suited them both right down to the ground. Or rather, right down to the deck. It did because they both had flown that type of carrier-based plane quite often. And in their combined opinion it was the very latest thing in long range scout-bombing planes.

"Nice, very nice!" Dawson breathed happily, as he ran his eyes over the sleek, yet powerfully built aircraft. "I was worrying a little about what they were going to give us to fly. But I'm not worrying any more. This baby is all that I'd ask for."

"Quite; me, too!" Freddy Farmer echoed. "It's got the range, and the power."

"Also, it has the what it takes, in case we bump into Zeros and such," Dave reminded him. "Gee, I wonder if they're going to let us try out the ships before they send us off on the hunt job?"

"Naturally," Freddy Farmer replied, as though he considered such a question quite unnecessary. "After all, you know, even aircraft of the same type are different in lots of little things."

"Yes, I know," Dawson grunted. "But—"

And that's as far as he got. It was almost as though his question about test flying the Douglas Dauntless had been overheard, because at that moment a junior officer came up with the announcement that most of the aircraft were about to be

taken up onto the flight deck so that they could be test flown before darkness set down for the night.

And just twenty-five minutes later by Dave's watch he was seated in the pilot's pit of the Dauntless buckling his safety harness, and making the one hundred and one last minute preparations for flight. Seated in the pit in back of him was Freddy Farmer, making ready himself. The Carrier Carson had turned slightly into the wind and was rushing through the Southwest Pacific at full knots to give the pilots every take-off advantage possible.

"Okay, Freddy?" Dave called back. "All set?"

"Been waiting for hours!" the English youth shot back at him "Right-o! Any time you get the signal."

Dave grunted and fixed his eyes on the flight bridge. The officer there suddenly turned and pointed his flag at Dave. Dawson gunned his engine slightly, and with the aid of a crew man on each wing he wheeled the Dauntless forward and into take-off position. The flight officer raised the flag, looked at Dave, and then brought the flag down fast. Dawson's hand on the throttle shoved it forward. The Wright Cyclone in the nose roared up in its song of power and the Dauntless moved forward down the deck. It picked up speed with every rev of its three-bladed steel prop, and Dave had it clear of the deck in no time at all. He went cutting up and off to the left to make room for the next plane taking off.

"Well, pal, how's it suit you?" he called back to Freddy when there were some five thousand feet of air under the wings.

"What suits me?" the English youth echoed back. "This plane, or your flying, or what? Of course, if you mean your flying, why—"

"Save it, sweetheart, save it!" Dave growled. "No. This pip of a plane, and *my* expert flying, go without saying. What I meant was, how does this Jap hunt shape up to you?"

"Could be worse, I fancy," Freddy replied. "Truth to tell, though, I could do with a whole lot more details. The colonel didn't say very much, you know."

"Well, for cat's sake, what else could he say?" Dawson demanded. "Somewhere in an area of about a hundred thousand square miles is supposed to be a big Jap force on its way south to make plenty of trouble. Maybe it isn't going south. The colonel doesn't know. Or anybody else, for that matter. However, the colonel

can't take chances on our Guadalcanal and Tulagi attack going haywire. I mean, having this Jap force bump into them right at the beginning of the attack. See what I mean?"

"Rot!" Freddy snorted. "As if a ten-year-old child couldn't reason *that* out? Certainly! Of course, you silly blighter. Naturally the colonel doesn't know *where* this Jap force is. But I meant, more details on how, and when, and how long we're to patrol, and stuff? He only touched on that part by saying that we're to find the Jap force."

"Okay, okay, fire horse!" Dave grunted. "Just be patient. I promise you, I'll refuse to take off on a single patrol until your craving for details is completely satisfied. Will that be all right, fussy pants?"

Freddy Farmer made some remark, but Dave didn't hear it. He didn't because at that moment he heard the call signal from the carrier in his earphones. He answered at once, and his heart started hammering against his ribs as the crisp spoken orders came through from the carrier far below and several miles to the north of his position.

"Proceed due east from your position, Tiger!" the carrier officer said, using the Dauntless' code name. "Scout for unidentified aircraft. Proceed at full throttle. If it is an enemy aircraft, attack and destroy at once. Repeat! Attack and *destroy* at once!"

"Orders received and understood, Swordfish!" Dawson called back instantly. "On course, now!"

As Dave had spoken the words he had heeled the Dauntless around on wingtip, opened up the Cyclone wide, and was now streaking across the Southwest Pacific sky toward the east. Their headphones being connected, Freddy Farmer had heard the orders at the same time. And so, naturally, he asked no questions about Dave's sudden and violent maneuver. As a matter of fact he said nothing. He simply sat tight in his pit, and like Dave riveted his eyes on the eastern sky ahead.

The east was a little smudgy because night was approaching. Also there were some cloud banks hanging in the sky that cast all kinds of crazy shadows. As a matter of fact, half a dozen times Dawson was dead sure he spotted the shadow of a moving plane hugging close to the clouds. But each time he opened his mouth to call out to Freddy Farmer the "shadow" just melted away into nothing.

Eventually, though, Freddy Farmer's eagle eyes scored a hit on something that wasn't just a shadow that melted away the next time he looked. He called out sharply to Dave, and pointed with his hand.

"A lone aircraft ahead and about ten degrees to starboard, Dave!" he announced. "See it? Just under that cloud that's shaped like a pear. See it? See...? By Jove, Dave, get us more speed! That's a blasted Jap snooper! Good grief! And this far south? Wait! Yes, Dave, yes! It is one of their four-engined Kawanishi flying boats, just as sure as you're a foot high. Blast them! Way down here snooping on us!"

For some four or five seconds Dawson didn't make any reply. He leaned forward in the seat, as though that would aid his vision, and stared hard at the heavens ahead and ten degrees to starboard. But for those number of seconds he couldn't see a single thing that increased his heart beat. Then, suddenly, he did see it. He saw the huge four-engined long range flying boat type of craft that the Japs had copied from the type of flying boat that the French had used before the war on the mail and passenger run between Dakar and Brazil. Now that he could see it he was amazed that he hadn't seen it much sooner because of its tremendous size. The wing span was a good one hundred and thirty-two feet, and the hull made him think of a good sized destroyer. And as he peered at it and impulsively tried to force the Dauntless on to even greater speed by pressing the heel of one palm hard against the already wide open throttle, he realized without getting any closer that the huge flying boat was well armed.

"Don't you see it yet, Dave?" Freddy Farmer's voice cut into this thoughts. "It's just under—"

"Don't worry; I spot it, eagle eyes!" Dawson cut him off. "I'm just selecting which part of it to smack first. Come snooping down here on us, huh? Not today, my little Jap rats. At least, not any more. Just another couple of shakes, now, and you're going to only have eyes that are blind! And how!"



CHAPTER SEVEN

Discovered?

As Dawson grated out the words he automatically checked to make sure that his guns were ready for action. They were, but in the next split second the fear was his that he might not be able to use them. Those aboard the Kawanishi flying boat had obviously spotted his approach, because the huge craft had suddenly changed course and was racing upward and eastward toward the safety of a towering bank of clouds. Dave instantly nosed the Dauntless up for altitude, and shook his head savagely.

"No, not even that way!" he shouted aloud into the thunder of his own engine. "We'll smoke you out of there even if it takes all night. Nope! You rats are all washed up, and I don't mean maybe!"

With a vigorous nod for emphasis, Dawson hunched forward even more on the seat and let fly with a short burst from his guns to warm them up. Perhaps the Japs heard his firing and accepted it as a challenge. Or maybe the slant-eyed killer at the controls saw that he wouldn't be able to make the safety of the clouds in time, and was veering around to present less of a target to the oncoming Dauntless.

At any rate, the huge craft came curving around in the air, and its blunt nose started spewing out a jetting ribbon of red flame. Dave grinned and inched his plane up a little more.

"Thanks for saving me the trouble of hunting you out!" he shouted. "But you'd be a flock of dead ducks, no matter what you tried. Me and Freddy have been around, slobs, see? We sort of know most of the answers, now, when it comes to you baby killers. Okay! Try this one on your rice bowl!"

As the last left Dave's lips he pulled the nose of the Douglass Dauntless straight up toward Heaven. He let the plane prop claw upward until it was just this side of the stalling point. Then, with a kick on the rudder pedal and a swift pass at the controls, he whipped the scout-bomber over and down at practically the vertical. As he had been going straight up, the Kawanishi had been rushing straight

forward, and so as a result the big craft was almost directly below when Dawson came rushing down again. He had only to ease just a little out of his dive to catch the top of the flying boat in his sights. And the instant he had it pinned in his sights he let go with his forward guns.

For one brief instant nothing seemed to happen. Then suddenly the huge Kawanishi appeared to stand still in the air. Stand still and spew out jetting ribbons of red flame from a dozen different points from the nose of the hull clear back to the tail. The jetting ribbons of flame marked the efforts of the Jap gunners aboard to get the diving Dauntless in their sights. However, they might just as well have tried to pick off a haywire comet rushing down at them.

And then, as the flying boat seemed to come to a dead halt in the air, the efforts of the Jap gunners came to a swift and abrupt halt. A tiny tongue of flame shot up from the forward end. Then as though by magic it spread out fan-shaped and went sweeping backward to engulf everything in a raging inferno of flame. Eyes popping, and heart practically standing still, Dawson stared in awe at the horrible sight. And then in the nick of time he snapped out of his trance, and hauled the plunging Dauntless off to the side and into the clear.

"About time, little man!" he heard Freddy Farmer shout. "I thought you were going to run into the beggar, and tell him you were sorry. But you know you're very hoggish, don't you. A very greedy beggar, if there ever was one."

Dawson didn't make any reply at once. He brought the Dauntless back onto even keel, and then turned in the seat to look back at the Kawanishi. That is, he turned in the seat to look back at what was *left* of the huge flying boat. And that was just a great ball of flame and smoke that hovered in midair for a moment or two before it started dropping earthward trailing behind a long column of fluffy black. Dave followed it all the way down until it smacked into the Southwest Pacific with a mighty splash.

"What was that you were babbling about, pal?" he then demanded of his flying mate.

"I was remarking that you are a rotter!" Freddy Farmer snapped. "Very definitely so. And twice as greedy, too. What do you think I'm back here for, with guns of my own, eh?"

"I sure could answer that one, but skip it, pal!" Dave laughed at him. "But it was just one of those things, Freddy, so help me. I must have nailed the pilot and one

of the tanks first burst. Boy! Did he burn up and go down quick! Talk about shooting clay pigeons! That was certainly the cinchiest thing I ever tackled. I— Holy smoke! Hold it a moment, Freddy! I should be reporting to the carrier."

Forgetting Freddy Farmer for the moment, Dave concentrated on raising the carrier on the radio, and made his report. His report was acknowledged, and he was given orders to return to the surface vessel at once. The orders had been short and sweet, and Dave broke off contact with a faint frown.

"Now what, I wonder?" he grunted absently. "They didn't seem to be very pleased about it. What did they expect, anyway?"

"Good grief, what did *you* expect?" Freddy Farmer snapped at him. "A citation for a medal while you're still in the air? Use your head, old thing. The carrier task force commander is pleased right enough, I fancy. But undoubtedly quite worried, too. He wants us back in a hurry for questioning."

"Huh?" Dave echoed, and started searching the surrounding skies. "You mean, because maybe there's some more of those big babies around?"

"Oh my hat!" the English youth groaned. "At times I swear you absolutely have not a brain in your head, Dave. And this is one of them. Radio, my little man. Radio!"

Dave turned in the seat and gave Freddy a nasty stare.

"All right, wise guy!" he growled. "Stop playing riddles, and out with it. What do you mean, radio?"

"The Jap radio!" Freddy came right back at him fast. "The radio *on that Kawanishi* that you just shot down so expertly. Perhaps they sighted our task force and radioed word to their base before you put the lot of them out of commission. Now do you see?"

Dave stiffened in the seat, let out a yelp, and clapped one hand to his forehead.

"Knock me for an outside loop, am I dumb!" he cried. "Am I thick, and dumb, and stupid! Holy smokes, yes, Freddy! And I'm taking off my humble hat to you. That's right, pal. If they did sight our carrier task force and got word of it back to their base in time, then we certainly are off to a terrible start, and how. Jeepers! I wonder just how far from home that Kawanishi was?"

"We'll probably never know, but what does it matter?" the English youth grunted. "The point is, *did* they get word back about the Hawk and the Carson, or didn't they? I bet Colonel Welsh and Admiral Jackson are having a few very bad moments right now. That Kawanishi business could turn everything upside down, you know. And worse luck, it probably will."

Dawson just nodded, and let it go at that as he gave his attention to getting back to the task force as quickly as he could. It was about fifteen minutes before they spotted the force on the horizon. And it was another ten before they were safely aboard the Carson, and a junior officer was leading them to the Admiral's quarters. They found Colonel Welsh there, too. And also the ship's executive flight officer. The Admiral took the salute, but it was Colonel Welsh who spoke to them.

"Nice shooting," he said quietly. "Now let's have your report in detail. Did the Jap see you approach, or did you get him before he realized what was happening?"

Dave glanced at Freddy, got the sign to do the talking, and made a little gesture with one hand.

"I'm afraid he saw us, sir," he replied. And then he reported in detail their flight from take-off to landing.

When he had finished a heavy silence hung over the Admiral's quarters. It was plain to see that the news was not what they had been hoping it would be. And after a few moments Admiral Jackson looked at Colonel Welsh, and sighed heavily.

"Well, that changes our plans, I guess, Colonel," he said. "The Japs must certainly know where we are, now, even though they don't know where we're heading. And by morning they're bound to have flocks of their long range planes out looking for us. That makes it not so good."

Colonel Welsh nodded in unhappy agreement and chewed on his lower lip.

"Not good at all," he murmured. "A rotten bit of luck right at the start. One hour sooner and we'd have been covered by darkness. But why talk about that now? He knows where we are, and so the next move is up to us. I'm afraid, Admiral, our only hope is to fall back on the substitute plan, and take our chances."

"Confound that Kawanishi!" Admiral Jackson grated, and banged a bunched fist

on the desk top. "Ten to one he was probably way off his patrol course, and just happened to bump into us by accident. Not the first time that sort of thing has happened, either. Yes, I guess you're right, Colonel. We've got to go back to the substitute plan, and pray. I'll inform the other carrier and the rest of the task force."

The Admiral sighed, shook his head in an unhappy gesture, and then looked at Dawson and Freddy Farmer.

"Don't take any of the blame for the rotten luck, you two," he said with a faint smile. "You did the best you could. At least it's something that they'll never go back to their base to report in detail. Very well, then, gentlemen. If you'll excuse me I'll give my orders to the signal officer."

The others took the "hint" and filed quickly out of the Admiral's quarters. Dawson and Freddy Farmer went down onto the flight deck and over to where crew men were checking over their Dauntless.

"Any damage?" Dave asked the aviation machinist's mate in charge. "Did we catch any lead?"

"Not a bit, sir," the other replied. "Not a scar any place. You must have jumped on him fast, and plenty."

"Not too fast, I'm afraid," Dawson replied with a rueful grin. "They were just rotten shots, I guess."

"Maybe, sir," the machinist's mate said with a shrug. "But you smacked 'em, and that's what they pay off on in this man's war."

Dave grinned and nodded silently, and started along the flight deck with Freddy. However, they had progressed but a few steps toward the companionway leading down below decks when they heard their names called. They turned around to see Colonel Welsh striding toward them.

"I just want to repeat that it was a good job you did on that Jap rat snooping plane," the senior officer said when he reached them. "Also, don't feel too badly that you didn't get to it sooner. After all, it wasn't your fault. Our own scouting planes should have been aloft and spotted it. It was just one of those things, so don't let it throw you, eh?"

The colonel cocked a brow and smiled as he spoke the last. Dave returned the

smile and shook his head.

"I won't, sir," he said. "A tough break that just couldn't be helped. Maybe we'll have better luck next time."

As Dave spoke the last he looked hard at Colonel Welsh, and so did Freddy Farmer. The senior officer appeared not to notice for a moment or two. Then he grinned slowly.

"Neither of you would be curious, would you?" he chuckled.

"Could be, sir," Dave replied with a laugh. "Is that substitute plan you and the Admiral were talking about strictly hush-hush?"

"I guess there's no harm in telling you," the colonel said after a long pause. "Because of the size of this task force we were going to follow a roundabout route to the searching area. However, now that the Japs know that we're here, and have guessed our approximate course, they'll probably have their torpedo planes and dive bombers out combing this area as soon as daylight comes tomorrow."

"And a jolly lot of good it would do them!" Freddy Farmer said grimly.

"Probably true," the colonel said with a faint smile. "No doubt the chaps here on the Carson and those over on the Hawk, could make it quite a disastrous affair for the Japs. But that isn't the point. Our advantage of surprise on this maneuver would be completely lost. We might even sustain some damage, and be forced to put back to port. And that, of course, is the one thing we can't afford to do. There isn't too much time on our side as it is. So the only thing we can do, now, is to carry out our substitute plan. Just as soon as darkness settles down we're going to change course to due north and sneak right up by the Solomons to the searching area. By light tomorrow we hope to be well north of the Islands and out of sight of their patrol planes based there."

As the colonel stopped Dawson whistled softly.

"That'll be cutting it close!" he said. "Here's hoping we don't bump into a couple of their destroyers on the prowl, and get our hand tipped."

"Yes, here's hoping!" the colonel said almost fervently. "If they spot us sneaking by the Islands our whole maneuver will go higher than a kite. But we've got to take that chance, and pray as none of us has ever prayed before."

"Amen!" Freddy Farmer breathed softly.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Eagle's Eyes

When darkness settled down, the two-carrier task force changed course to due north, spread out considerably, and went churning forward at full knots, and with not so much as a speck of light showing any place. For a couple of hours after evening mess Dawson and Farmer loafed around on deck, as did almost everybody else who was not on duty. Little was spoken, though, in the way of conversation, and then only in low tones. From bow to stern, and from keel to signal bridge, there prevailed an atmosphere of tense, silent excitement. Everybody aboard knew that the task force would pass almost within a stone's throw of the Jap occupied Solomons some time during the night. And every other split second at least a hundred pair of eyes peered out over the port rail at the wall of night to the west.

Eventually, though, the desire for sleep was stronger than the desire to remain awake just in case. And so one by one the pilots went below. And Dave and Freddy were among the first in the parade.

"This isn't any pleasure cruise, so we might as well catch all the shut-eye we can," Dave summed it up as he stretched out in his bunk. "It's a cinch the Admiral isn't going to send word around when we reach the closest point to the Solomons, so why stay up on deck staring at nothing but darkness?"

"Quite," Freddy murmured. "And if the force is sighted we'll know about it soon enough."

"Now, isn't that a sweet thought to go to sleep on?" Dave growled, and rolled over on his side. "See you in the morning, sweetheart. Stay up and worry if you want to. But not me!"

"Who said who was worrying?" the English youth snapped. "I was only remarking that—"

Freddy cut himself off short and glared at Dawson's bunk. A faint snore told him that he was addressing an audience that consisted of only himself. He made a face, snapped off the light, and pulled aside the blackout curtains over the ports

to let in the night air, and then stretched out himself and thought of his homeland many thousands of miles away. However, he didn't think of England for very long. Sleep soon pulled down his eyelids and off he drifted.

The next thing either of them knew was the blaring of the inter-ship alarm siren, and the hubbub and scuffle of activity on the deck above. Instantly both were wide awake and leaping out of their bunks.

"Trouble!" Dave snapped. "Let's go. Hey! It's light! We must be past the Solomons!"

"There's one way to find out!" Freddy shot back at him, and grabbed up his helmet and goggles.

Dawson, also, had slept in his clothes so as to be ready for any emergency. So he grabbed his helmet and goggles and followed Freddy out of the cabin. When they reached the flight deck it was to find that all the commotion was caused by the carrier's early patrol getting off for a quick look-see ahead. There was no sign of enemy planes in the dawn-tinted heavens. In fact, as Dawson took a good look toward all four points of the compass he realized that there was no sign of anything save the flock of ships that made up the task force, and countless square miles of rolling blue-green ocean. He turned to Freddy to make some remark about the situation, but checked the words as Donald Duck blared out an announcement.

"All pilots assigned to special duty will go below for breakfast, and then report to the Ready-Room for briefing!"

"That's us, Freddy, old—" Dave began, and stopped short.

The English youth was already on his way down to eat. Dave chuckled, gave a little shake of his head, and followed his pal. And just thirty minutes later all of the special assignment pilots were gathered in the Ready-Room. Colonel Welsh and the executive flight officer were there, and the colonel started talking as soon as the last pilot to arrive had seated himself.

"Well, we made it, we think," he began. "Nothing was sighted last night, and right now we are on the edge of the area to be searched. The searching patrols are to be made in relays. That is, all of you will go out and fly your patrols, and as you are returning to refuel the Hawk will launch her planes to take up where you left off. Here on the table in front of me are envelopes containing patrol

courses and instructions for every flying team. Your names are printed on the outside, so before you leave come up and get your envelope. Well, I guess that's all, except this. We feel, now, that the Jap snooper business late yesterday afternoon didn't do us any harm. At least we hope and pray that it is like that. However, there is just a chance that the Japs have managed to trail us somehow, and will attempt to cross us up by launching a land-based attack. For that reason, keep your radios open all the time you are in the air. You may get the call to come back here in a hurry."

The colonel paused, started to make a gesture of dismissal, but checked himself.

"Now, there's one more thing I'd better mention, though you'll find it included in your sealed orders," he said. "And it is this. The safety of this task force is of prime importance. At least, until we have found this unknown Jap force and are engaging it. I mean by that, if any of you get into any personal trouble, such as being jumped by surprise by Jap planes, or something goes wrong that forces you down into the drink, don't count on any help from this task force. You will be strictly on your own. In short, as you will learn when you read your individual orders, you are *not* to make radio contact with this task force *unless you sight Jap surface units of three or more ships in number*. One reason for that is to prevent any Japs from listening in on your wave lengths, and learning of the force's existence in these waters by taking a bearing to locate our position. And the reason it must be three or more Jap ships that you sight is because the Japs might possibly try to decoy us into a favorable position for them. Well, that is all, now. Good luck, and Godspeed to all of you. We have two days and one night in which to accomplish this mighty difficult job. If we don't sight that Jap force today, then we've absolutely *got* to do it tomorrow. The attack on Guadalcanal and Tulagi will begin on the morning of the third day—whether we succeed, or fail. And so it's up to you pilots. And I know you'll make the grade. Good luck, again."

As the colonel stopped talking there was no burst of applause, or anything like that, from the pilots. Each man simply nodded gravely and then went up to the table to collect his sealed orders. Dave got the envelope for Freddy and himself, and without stopping to open it the pair hurried top-side to where their aircraft was waiting with prop already ticking over. Settling themselves in the aircraft, they took out their orders and read them over carefully. The course they were to fly extended out over the water for some three hundred and fifty miles in a dead northwest direction. They were to keep at an altitude of eight thousand feet, unless clouds or storms interfered, and their code call was to be Tiger, just as it

had been yesterday.

"Okay, Mister Navigator," Dave said, and passed the course chart over to Freddy. "You keep track of our position, pal. And don't bother to explain if you get us lost. Just jump over the side and leave your parachute behind, see?"

"Oh, really?" the English youth growled. "Well, don't worry about me, my good man. I'll take care of my end, thank you. Just concentrate on keeping us *in* the air. Matter of fact, I think it's rather silly of me to take you along. Perhaps I should speak of that to Colonel Welsh, right now."

"Do, sweetheart, by all means!" Dawson snarled, and pointed a finger toward the sky. "I'll be up there waiting for you when you get back!"

Freddy started to say something in return but checked himself as he caught sight of the signal officer pointing his flag.

"Get going, Dave," he said, and winked. "Off we go, and luck to both of us, old thing."

"Right on the old beam, pal," Dawson replied, and turned front. "You, me, and this baby with wings. Maybe we'll all be heroes of the task force, come sundown."

"You be the hero," Freddy laughed at him. "All *I* want to be is *lucky*, and to find the Jap force!"

"And you've really got something there, kid!" Dawson agreed instantly, and then gave his attention to the flag pointing signal officer on the flight bridge.

Just three minutes and twenty seconds later Dawson took the Dauntless off the flight deck and nosed it up toward the early morning sky. He kept on going up until the altimeter said eight thousand feet. There he leveled off, set his course according to the instructions Freddy Farmer gave him, took a last look down at the Carson that was launching her planes at the rate of one every fifteen seconds, and then turned front and settled himself comfortably in the seat. Minutes later the task force was out of sight far behind and Freddy and he were alone in a world of dawn light and limitless expanse of ocean below.



CHAPTER NINE

Fate Is Fickle

"How you doing, Freddy? Having fun, huh?"

As he asked the questions Dawson twisted around in the seat and grinned. They were close to the end of their patrol "beat." Soon they would turn around and retrace their air tracks to the carrier Carson.

"Me?" the English youth echoed with a forced smile supposed to indicate mock happiness. "Why, I never had so much fun in my life. Such wonderful sun-filled air. And isn't all that water down there just beautiful? I could just sit here and look at it all day—I don't think! Man! I wish we could get a look at something. Anything would be perfectly all right with me."

"And how!" Dave breathed, and pushed up his goggles. "Boy! Am I sick of looking at water. When we took off I was all hopped up and bubbling over with expectations. But no more now. Nothing can take the starch out of you like looking for something, and not finding it. So I guess this isn't our day, pal. At least not this patrol. If there's any Jap force around these parts, it's down there under water, and I can't see it."

"Quite!" Freddy grunted, and then gave a little harsh laugh. "But, after all, why should we expect fate to play into our hands? We're just two of many working on the job. It's quite possible that the blasted Jap force has already been spotted by one of the other chaps, and our force isn't going to further risk revealing its position by recalling us. Maybe—"

"Here, here, put on the brakes, pal!" Dawson laughed, and nodded his head at the radio. "If and when that Jap force is sighted we'll all be recalled and pronto. We'll be needed in the scrap, and how!"

"Yes, of course, you're right," Freddy said with a slightly sheepish grin. "Still—"

The English youth cut himself off short, stiffened slightly, and blinked toward the east.

"What's the matter, kid?" Dave asked, and turned his own head that way. "Don't tell me you see something?"

"I'm not sure; I can't say," Freddy replied, and continued to stare hard. "Thought I saw a flash of something out there a way. Like sun on the wings of a plane. Or maybe it was just the sun on a wave."

"Probably," Dave grunted, and strained his own eyes. "But maybe the team to our right has gotten off course and swung closer to us. You—"

"There it is again!" Freddy broke in excitedly, and pointed. "Right out there. And it is a plane, though I can't tell what kind."

Dawson hesitated for a split second, and then as he, too, caught sight of sunlight flashing off the wings of a moving plane he made up his mind, and banked the plane around.

"Maybe we'd better take a look, just in case, Freddy," he said. "Maybe it's one of ours way off course. And then again, maybe it isn't. So we'll go look-see."

Freddy Farmer simply nodded, and made no comment as Dawson brought the Dauntless all the way around, and gave the Cyclone in the nose full throttle. And during the next couple of minutes neither of them spoke. Both were too busy trying to keep the distant plane in sight. It was more or less between them and the sun climbing up toward the zenith, and for that reason they kept losing sight of the other plane in the sun's brilliance.

They quickly picked it out again, and presently they were close enough to get a good look.

"Hey, what do you know!" Dave cried in astonishment. "That's not one of ours, but whose is it? I sure never saw a job like that before. Did you ever, Freddy?"

The English youth shook his head and frowned at the other plane. It was a double pontooned seaplane with short, stubby-tipped bi-plane wings. It was painted a light, light gray, but carried no markings or insignia of any sort.

"No, I never have," Freddy Farmer finally replied to Dave's question. "Rather a queer-looking thing, isn't it? A two-place aircraft, too. And what in the world is it doing way out here, I'd like to know? A thing that small certainly can't carry much gas!"

"Just what I'm thinking, too!" Dawson grunted, and took his eyes off the other plane to sweep the surrounding waters carefully. "I'd bet it isn't a land-based job. Must be from some surface ship. And, doggone it, don't they see us coming over? Why don't they give some sign whether they're foe or friend? Maybe I should let them have a burst to wake them up!"

"Not a bad idea, Dave; go ahead," Freddy said. "They—no, wait a bit! They've spotted us, and are coming over. See?"

Freddy's exclamation was a waste of breath as far as Dawson was concerned. He had already seen the seaplane bank around toward them and came prop clawing across the sky. For some unknown reason, which he didn't bother to fathom at that moment, the old familiar warning of impending danger rippled across the back of his neck. And he impulsively slid the guard off the electric firing button of his forward guns, and got set to catch the oncoming seaplane in his sights at an instant's alarm.

There seemed no need to be on the alert for danger, however. The figure in the rear pit of the strange-looking seaplane stood up in the slip-stream and waved both hands in greeting. Because of the helmet and goggles the figure was wearing neither Dave nor Freddy could get a look at his face. And a flying jacket covered up whatever kind of uniform he was wearing. In short, the waving figure could well have been a daredevil ace from Timbuktu as far as Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer were concerned.

"Who the heck are you?" Dave shouted just to let off steam. "Friend or foe? And where in the world did you dig up that crate, anyway?"

Of course the thunder of the Dauntless' Cyclone drowned out Dave's words, but a split second later it was almost as though the two unknowns in the other plane had heard and understood. This time the figure in the pilot's pit stood up, and waved. Then he stopped waving and pointed past the Dauntless. Dawson frowned, then instinctively twisted around in the pit to stare back. He saw Freddy start to twist around, and then violently check himself as wild alarm lighted up his face.

"Dave! Look out! The blasted beggars are—!"

And that's all Dawson heard of Freddy Farmer's screaming voice, for the rest was drowned out by the savage yammer of aerial machine guns. He jerked front just in time to see the seaplane boring straight in at him from the left. It was

headed dead for the nose of the Dauntless, and in the infinitesimal period of frozen astonishment Dawson saw the bullets from the guns of the other plane hammer and chew their way through the Cyclone's cowling. And then before he could move the control stick, or jump on a rudder pedal, the seaplane had flashed by him, and his Cyclone was starting to cough raspily and spew black smoke out of its exhaust.

"Why, you dirty, low down rat!" Dave roared, and dropped the nose of the Dauntless. "You—you double-crossing, cheating bum! I'll teach you to pull a dirty one like that! Come back here and take—!"

But Dawson was simply exploding words, and he ended them with a bitter groan, as more smoke poured back from the bullet-damaged engine, and the power plant quit altogether. He and Freddy had been tricked as neatly as could be. There was no doubt, now, as to whether the occupants of the strange-looking seaplane were friend or foe. They were Jap rats, and true to their rotten race they had struck their blow under false colors.

And a blow they had struck, too! No doubt about that, either. Their well placed bullets had finished the Wright Cyclone, and the Dauntless was nosing down toward the waters of the Southwest Pacific below. And the danger wasn't passed, either. With a dead engine the plane was just a gliding target for those two Japs in the seaplane. They had only to sneak up under and out of reach of Freddy Farmer's rear pit guns, and drill the scout-bomber like a setting hen on a fence.

And as thoughts crashed through his brain Dawson twisted around quickly to be ready to do what little he could when the seaplane came winging back. Freddy Farmer had swung his guns around, and was waiting to catch the seaplane in his sights if he got the chance. Not a word had he spoken since his cry of alarm to Dave, but the look of raging anger on his flushed face indicated that he was *thinking* plenty.

Dave caught that look in one flashing glance and then whipped his gaze out across the air space to where the strange-looking seaplane was circling about slowly just out of range of Freddy's guns.

"What the heck?" Dave gasped impulsively, and scowled. "What's wrong with those rats? Afraid to come in for the kill? Holy smokes! They've got us cold, darn their rotten hides."

"That's what I'm wondering, too," Freddy Farmer said in a tight voice as he

spoke for the first time since the sudden attack. "They're either afraid, or else they *aren't* Japs!"

"Huh?" Dawson gulped. "What do you mean by that, Freddy?"

"Just crippling a chap's engine wouldn't suit Japs," the English youth replied. "They have to slaughter, too. That's half the enjoyment for them, blast their black hearts. So they must be afraid that I'll pick them off, if they come in closer. Or maybe they're hoping we'll bail out. *Then* it would be more fun for them!"

"Yeah!" Dawson grunted, and took a quick look down at the surface of the water now less than two thousand feet below the wings of the helpless Dauntless. "Yeah! Or maybe they want to play target practice after we land in the water. Maybe that would be even more fun for the dirty killers. Gosh, I'm sorry, Freddy. I'm a sap, a dope, and I should be—"

"Don't be silly!" young Farmer snapped at him. "Cut it out, Dave! We're both equally at fault for letting them slip in on us, and falling for that fake pointing business. But, good grief! What else would anybody have done in our shoes? Nothing. At least nothing, and have been human. Man! If only they'd come in just a little closer. I'd give them something they'd not forget, the dirty blighters!"

But Freddy was simply "shooting the breeze" to let off steam, too. The Japs were sticking to their distance, and even if they suddenly should come ripping in it was questionable whether Freddy would be able to stop them from cutting the helpless Dauntless to pieces, to say nothing of bullet riddling its two occupants.

However, the strange-looking seaplane did stay well clear, and a couple of moments later Dave stall-landed the dead engined plane in the water. As soon as the plane stopped mushing forward and began to settle slowly by the nose, Dawson unsnapped his safety harness, twisted the little valve knob that automatically inflated his "Mae West," and then gave Freddy Farmer a hand in getting the collapsible rubber life raft over the side. Into it they tossed the few things they could take with them and then climbed in and shoved off from the sinking plane.

Neither of them spoke. Both were thinking the same thing, and didn't wish to alarm the other by speaking of it. In short, both were thinking of the strange-looking seaplane now circling about above them, and waiting for it to come gun spitting down in its power dive of death. But finally Dawson broke the silence as he stared up at the circling plane.

"All right, killers!" he got out hoarsely. "The stage is all set. Here we are. Just a couple of clay pigeons named Joe. Come on down and do your dirty work. We've got a few million pals who'll even it up for us some day. So come on down, darn you! We can take it, see? You're darn right we can!"

"Easy, Dave, old man!" Freddy soothed, and placed a hand on Dawson's knee. "It isn't going to help any to rave at the beggars."

"Who says it isn't?" Dave rasped, and kept his gaze fixed on the circling plane. "It makes me feel better, anyway. Oh, don't worry, kid. I'm not blowing my top, or going off the beam. I just figure it's curtains, and, by gosh, I've got a few things I want to get off my chest. I hate those rotten—Well, for the love of Mike, maybe I am going nuts, and seeing things! Do you see what I see, Freddy? Or am I just looking at a sky mirage? *That doggone plane is flying away!*"

And that was the truth! The strange-looking seaplane had circled down to some five hundred feet above the floating life raft, and then suddenly flattened out and was now making tracks toward the northeast.

"No, it's no mirage, Dave," Freddy said in an awed voice. "The blighters are certainly leaving us. But why, I wonder? Dave! Maybe they've sighted one of our planes, or one of our ships, or something!"

Dawson didn't make any reply. Wild hope choked up in his throat, and he eagerly searched both sky and water. However, that's all he saw. Just sky and water, save for the seaplane that was fast becoming a disappearing dot in the northeast. Freddy helped him look, and for ten minutes neither of them spoke. Then Dave groaned and gave a little shake of his head.

"Well, if it was a ship or a plane, it's gone now," he grunted. "So it looks like we'll have to keep each other company for a spell longer, pal."

"Oh, yes, quite," Freddy Farmer murmured, and nodded absently. "A blasted funny business this, though. I still can't make up my mind if those seaplane beggars *were* Japs. Why did they just force us down, and then let us alone? That's definitely not Jap style. And to say that that seaplane was—But, man! That's impossible! Definitely!"

"What is?" Dave wanted to know.

"That it was one of our planes, and they shot us down by mistake," Freddy said. "But that couldn't be. Our markings were as plain as day for anybody to see."

"Yeah," Dave said, and sighed. "But maybe we *look* like Japs, and they figured we'd swiped the Dauntless."

Freddy Farmer's comment on Dave's wisecrack was a pronounced snort. Then both lapsed into brooding silence and stared more or less unseeingly out across the limitless expanse of ocean.



CHAPTER TEN

Steel Sharks

The sun was a shimmering ball of brass that seemed to hang motionless in the high heavens forever and ever. At least it seemed forever to Dawson and Farmer, huddled down in the small rubber life raft that rose and fell with maddening monotonous regularity under the urging of the long, rolling swells of the Southwest Pacific. Brassy sun on high, all about them, and even dancing up off the waters straight into their eyes.

"Oh, for a shack about six miles this side of the North Pole!" Dave groaned, and licked his cracked lips. "What I wouldn't give for a spot like that, right now!"

"Yes, quite," Freddy answered listlessly. "And, of course, during the six months of night they have up there. You know, Dave, I—I say! Look! Look, Dave! To starboard. Way out where the blasted sky meets the blasted water! Do you see something?"

For a couple of moments Dawson refused to turn his head. It seemed as though he had spent his entire life in this raft squinting hopefully at imagined objects, only to be slapped in his burning, stinging face by lost hope. For twenty-six heart-crushing long hours Freddy and he had been floating about in the raft on the crest of the Southwest Pacific. Twelve of those hours had been spent in the darkness of night, hoping, hoping, hoping that dawn's light would bring them a sight of one of their own planes, or one of the task force ships. Just to see something besides sky, water, and darkness would have been something, even if it hadn't meant rescue for them. But it had been only sky, water, and darkness. Then sky, and water again, and a blast furnace sun that seemed to pierce the top of their heads and burn their brains to a crisp.

But presently Dawson did turn his head, cup his hands to his tired eyes, and peer in the direction Freddy Farmer was pointing. At first he saw absolutely nothing. Then, suddenly, his heart leaped high in his chest. There *was* something way out there! Something on the surface of the water, or just over it. He couldn't tell for sure. And he definitely couldn't even guess at what it might be. The dazzling rays of the sun dancing up off the surface of the water were like hot needle

points that drew blood in his eyes. But there was something way out there on the horizon. Yes, definitely something, but did it mean life, or death?

That last question pounded around and around inside Dave's head as he strained his eyes at the distant horizon.

"Do you see it, Dave?" Freddy Farmer's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yeah, I see it, but what?" he replied. "A ship, a plane, or maybe just some kind of a bird?"

"My guess is a submarine," Freddy said. Then, an instant later, he exclaimed, "Yes, I'm sure of it! I can make out the conning tower. Good grief! Dave! *It's a Nazi U-boat!*"

"Huh?" Dave gasped, and sat up so violently that he rocked the raft. "You're nuts, Freddy. This is the Pacific, not the Atlantic!"

"That may be!" the English youth shot right back at him. "But that thing out there is a Nazi U-boat, or I never saw one. See? It's coming toward us now. It must have sighted us!"

"Nuts again!" Dave replied. "We'd only be a speck at that distance, even in glasses. It just happens that it's heading our way."

Freddy shrugged and made a little gesture with one hand.

"Have it your own way, old thing," he said. "It's heading right for us just the same. And if they haven't sighted us, they certainly will soon. There! See, Dave? Men are climbing out of the conning tower hatch onto the deck!"

"Yeah, I see," Dave replied gloomily. "Which means they must be pretty sure they've got this neck of the woods all to themselves. I wonder just how far we've drifted in twenty-six hours? I wonder where the Carson is? And how the others made out? I—Oh, nuts! What good does it do to wonder about anything right now? Heck! We couldn't change anything, anyway. That confounded seaplane, and the rats in her! Boy! Does that burn me up! I could kick myself all over this here Pacific Ocean!"

"Easy, old chap," Freddy said gently. "Don't let it get you down so, Dave. Good grief! What else could you have done?"

"Plenty!" Dawson said with an angry nod of his head. "I could have kept my eye

on the ball, for one thing, and not let them get so close they could cut in with a few snap bursts. But no! I had to fall like a ton of brick for that moss-covered trick of getting a guy to look the other way when you're about to slug him. So help me! I'll feel like a chump for that if I live to be a million."

"Well, go ahead then!" Freddy said in exasperation. "But you're definitely silly to feel as you do. Besides, what does it matter now? There's a U-boat coming toward us, and they certainly see us, now."

Dave looked and saw the U-boat now less than a mile away.

"Too bad we didn't strip off one of your guns and take it with us, Freddy," he said. "With a machine gun we could dust off quite a few of those apes on the deck there. And—Hey! What gives now? That's a U-boat, sure enough, Freddy. But those guys on deck aren't Jerries. They're Japs, what I mean!"

"Yes, I know," the English youth replied. "Which proves the rumors that I've heard: that Hitler has loaned some of his U-boats to the Japs, some of his old ones."

"Well, that one's not old," Dave declared, and stared hard at the approaching undersea craft. "That's a new one, or I'll eat my shirt. That's a big baby, Freddy, very big. If it wasn't for the conning tower you'd almost take it for a destroyer. No wonder we could spot it way over on the horizon. And—Oh-oh! And *how* they spot us! Look at the rats!"

The last was caused by quick movements on the bow deck of the approaching U-boat. A machine gun had been set up, and the man behind it was training the gun on the floating raft. For a couple of seconds Dave's heart came up to jam hard against his back teeth, as he half expected to see fire spurt out from the muzzle of the machine gun, and to feel the hot sting of bullets biting into his flesh.

The gun did not fire, however, and presently the U-boat was practically on top of the raft. Dark blue garbed Japs seemed to be swarming all over the place, and Dave's hatred for them mounted to white fury as he watched them, agate-eyed. Then suddenly the head and shoulders of a bull-necked officer of the Nazi Navy appeared up out of the conning tower hatch. He put a small megaphone to his lips and bellowed the words across the water.

"Make any effort to resist, and you will be killed where you are!" he thundered. "Be sensible! We are taking you aboard. I warn you to keep your hands in sight!"

The man spoke almost perfect English, and both boys blinked in surprise.

"Yes, I would, if I only had a machine gun!" Dave grated under his breath. "Nothing I'd like better than to knock you and your little brown pals kicking."

"Shut up, Dave!" Freddy ordered him: "Stop trying to play blasted soldier. You know perfectly well you wouldn't shoot, even if you did have a gun. You'd be too thankful for the chance to get out of this raft, just as you are now. And you know it!"

"Okay, okay, let me up; I'm all cut!" Dave grunted at him. "Just the same, pal, I never did care much for U-boat rides."

"Well, I'm afraid we have no choice in the matter, old thing," Freddy sighed, and let the subject drop.

The U-boat was close to the bobbing raft now. And just as a matter of precaution both Dave and Freddy made very sure that they kept their hands in full view of all those aboard the undersea craft. The two Japs behind the deck mounted machine gun leered at them over the bead sight, and it was easy to see they wouldn't mind at all an order to pull the trigger. No such order was given, however, and a couple of moments later one of the Jap sailors caught hold of the raft with a boat hook, pulled it close, and the two youths clambered up onto the wet deck of the U-boat.

No sooner had they climbed up on deck than a couple of Jap Navy officers moved in on them quickly, and searched for weapons. They found none, and were obviously disappointed. Then a shrill order in sing-song Japanese snapped the look of disappointment from their slant-eyed faces. They grunted at the two boys and then nodded toward the conning tower bridge where the Nazi commander of the craft stood waiting. They went over and up the short companion ladder with a couple of Japs sticking conveniently at their heels. They halted in front of the bull-necked German, who eyed them as though he'd never seen a couple of white men in his life before. Which, of course, was quite possible, in view of the fact he was of German birth.

Then, suddenly, he exploded in a booming voice that almost blew the boys over.

"What's the name of your carrier?" he thundered. "And how long ago were you shot down?"

Dawson hesitated a moment, and then let him have it. In a very meek and

humble voice, too.

"We weren't assigned to any special carrier, sir," he said. "We flew off any one of the five of them. And we've been in the water for about a week now. No, call it an even eight days."

The Nazi's eyes widened and he blinked them hard.

"What's this?" he cried.

Before he could get his breath to say anything else, one of the Jap naval officers stepped forward.

"He lies, *Kommandant*," he said in perfect German. "All American pigs lie. The United States have not five carriers left in all of their navy. Besides, we know these two were shot down by our plane yesterday."

The two words "our plane" had all of the effect on Dawson of a swift punch to the jaw. Impulsively he raced his eyes along the length of the U-boat, and particularly the forward end. It was then that he spotted telltale objects that told him the truth, and cleared up a little of the mystery of yesterday's meeting in the air with that strange seaplane. In short, he saw a plane hoist secured to the port side of the forward deck. It was fastened down in a horizontal position, but it could be raised upright at a moment's notice. He also saw that just about the entire forward deck consisted of two hatch covers that could be folded back to make a good sized opening in the deck. And although he could not look down through the steel plates to what was below, he had the very definite feeling that stowed neatly in the forward hold of the U-boat was that strange type seaplane with its wings folded back. Airplane-carrying submarines were nothing new to Dawson, or to Freddy Farmer, either. But it was a bit of a shock to realize that they had been shot down by such a craft. And, also, that they had been rescued by the mother U-boat of the plane.

"Yes, yes, I know!" Dawson heard the Nazi commander grunt impatiently at the Jap. "Of course our plane shot them down. But you do not know these American dogs as I do. Let them lie long enough and before they realize it they are telling you the truth. You will see what I mean. Well, take them to my quarters, and wait. This is a bad hour to remain on the surface too long. We will submerge at once."

The Nazi had spoken in German, and both Dawson and Freddy Farmer

understood him perfectly. However, both were very careful not to let that fact show in their faces. As a matter of fact, they stared puzzle-eyed at the Nazi and then looked enquiringly at each other. The Nazi saw them do that and laughed harshly.

"Do not worry, swine," he spoke in harsh English. "When the Fuehrer is in your White House all of you American dogs will be taught to speak German. There will be but one language then. German!"

The Nazi nodded violently, and then snapped a glittering eye at the Jap naval officer as though inviting him to take issue with his words. The Jap, however, refused to take issue. He simply smiled politely and then motioned for Dave and Freddy to climb over the lip of the conning tower hatch and start down inside the boat. When they reached the bottom of the conning tower ladder which ended in the central control room, and nerve center of the U-boat, the Jap didn't give them so much as half a chance to look around. He had his gun out then, and he jabbed them both hard in the back and pointed aft. The pain from the jab made firecrackers go off in Dave's brain. And for one crazy instant he was tempted to wheel around and drive both fists into that slant-eyed, hateful face. Common sense, however, came to his rescue instantly and he checked the urge and went stumbling along in step with Freddy Farmer.

When they were about half-way aft along the narrow companionway, the Jap halted them and more or less pushed and shoved them into a fairly good sized cabin. The hundred and one different smells of the insides of a submarine were just as heavy and noticeable there as they had been in the control room. However, Dawson could not help gasping impulsively at the luxuriousness of the fittings and furnishings. He had been in other Nazi U-boats, but never in one in which the commander had fitted himself out so proudly as this one. For a second he wondered if the Nazis had been forced to "doll up" their U-boats to get commanders and crews to take them out on their hazardous voyages. On second thought, though, he decided that all this was simply a Nazi touch to impress their comrades in cold murder, the Japanese.

Just the same, the cabin was certainly well appointed, and Dave secretly hoped the Nazi would question them for quite some time so that he would have a good chance to relax and get a lot of the salt water and sun stiffness out of his joints. But he experienced a very rude awakening even as he was expressing that hope to himself and starting to sit down in one of the fancy chairs. The Jap's gun came out fast and cracked him hard on the side of the head.

"Dog!" the slant-eyed one screamed. "How dare you seat yourself in the presence of an officer of the Imperial Japanese Navy! Stand on your feet. Over there, by the door. Move a muscle and I will take greatest pleasure in shooting you."

With a tremendous effort Dawson forced back the surging, blazing anger that rose up in his throat to choke him. Then he joined Freddy by the door and stood there with his gaze fixed hard and unwinking on the Jap. The little brown rat sneered and leered, and tried to stare Dawson down. He didn't even get to first base, though. And presently it was he who lowered his eyes. And so that was the picture as there came clanking sounds and roared out orders from various directions inside the U-boat. A moment later the craft trembled and shook from end to end. And Dave felt the deck under his feet slant as the craft dived and went under water.

Three, four, five minutes ticked by, and then the Nazi commander pushed through the door inside. He seemed surprised to see Dawson and Farmer standing stiff as a couple of wooden Indians by the door. He glanced sharply at the Jap, and made sounds under his breath. Then he went over and dropped his big frame into a chair, and sat regarding the two youths out of wide set eyes that held nothing but the look of death in them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Give and Take

"Well, my little fool friends! You don't seem to realize that I have saved your useless lives, do you? Well, I have, and you should be very grateful and thankful. None of your swine comrades would have come into these waters to pick you up."

The Nazi had stared so long, and been silent for so long, that the sudden explosion of his voice made both youths start a little. Dawson quickly got control of himself, and shrugged.

"We're very glad to be rescued," he said in a flat voice. "But in another couple of days the fleet would have been back from up north, and we'd probably have been sighted."

The Nazi arched his eyebrows and looked politely impressed. That is, save for his eyes. In their depths flickered pin points of polished steel.

"From up north, eh?" he murmured. "All the five carriers are returning in two days, yes?"

"That was the plan of operation, and—" Dave said, and then stopped himself, and bit his lip.

Freddy Farmer had of course been waiting for just such an opening, and he quickly took advantage of it.

"Keep your mouth shut, Dave!" he cried in an expert burst of anger. "Besides, it all depends upon their rendezvous with Task Forces Seven and Ten."

"Now who's blabbing?" Dave snarled, and whirled on him. "Why don't you keep your big mouth shut, too?"

Freddy started to make a blistering retort but simply went through the facial motions of being about to say it.

"Oh, what does it matter, anyway?" he finally said sullenly. "If they've been

patrolling these waters they know as much about these things as we do. Quite a bit more, I fancy."

"Ah!" the Nazi breathed hard. "So you are English, yes? Now I understand your words. The English always quit before the battle is completely lost. Look at Dunkirk. They ran from us there. And Greece, and Crete. And even at Singapore and Malaya you ran from the brave Japanese. Yes, yes. What does it matter now? You English know in your dirty hearts that you can never win!"

Real, honest to goodness anger blazed up in Freddy's face, and for one terrible moment Dawson feared that his English pal was going to hurl himself barehanded at the Nazi. Freddy, however, managed to keep a firm grip on himself, and he eyed the German coldly.

"The opinion of a Nazi is unimportant," he said in a scathing voice. "It always has been among the peoples of the civilized world."

The U-boat commander, however, was not to be excited into anything. Perhaps he was too comfortable in his chair. Perhaps for once in his baby-killing life he decided that brute violence wouldn't gain him what he wanted. So instead he laughed at Freddy as one might laugh at a little boy who has suddenly flown into a childish tantrum.

"Even save the life of an Englishman, and he is still an ungrateful dog," he finally sneered. "But all this does not interest me. So you have five carriers, eh? And they are up north meeting two other task forces, eh? That is interesting. What are they doing up there?"

Dave looked at the scowling Jap naval officer, grinned, and then returned his gaze to the Nazi's face. He shrugged and gave a little shake of his head.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe it's Tokyo, and *for keeps* this time. We were to get our orders later."

The Jap made a sound like air coming out of a punctured tire, and wild hatred seemed to come out all over him in lumps.

"Lies, all lies!" he screamed. "Never again will Tokyo be bombed by you American dogs. We have seen to it, yes! You will all be dead and in the water before you even sight our shores!"

Dawson shrugged again but kept his gaze on the German's face.

"Were you on the surface for very long last night?" he suddenly asked.

The Nazi started, and blinked.

"What?" he demanded. "What's that?"

"I asked if you were on the surface much last night?" Dave repeated. "Was your radio open all the time?"

The German hesitated as though reluctant to reveal even that bit of utterly useless information. Then he made up his mind, and nodded curtly.

"Yes, we were," he said. "And the radio was open. Why?"

"You didn't hear the Tokyo station, did you, by any chance?" Dave asked softly, and leaned forward slightly. "Did you hear *any* Tokyo broadcast? Say from midnight on?"

The Jap hissed some more, but Dawson didn't so much as look at him. He kept staring at the Nazi, who was all scowls now. And there was a queer, unfathomable look in his eyes. Then suddenly he blurted out the question.

"You mean that Tokyo was bombed last night?"

Dawson calmly hunched one shoulder and gestured with his two hands, palms upward.

"Maybe it wasn't Tokyo," he said quietly. "We didn't have a radio in our raft. Maybe other objectives were selected at the last minute. I just thought that maybe you had heard, and could tell me. Then you didn't hear the Tokyo radio last night, eh? And maybe it was *off* the air?"

"Lies, all lies!" the Jap screamed again, and actually jumped up and down in his fury. "Not one enemy bomber will ever get within sight of our shores."

Dave was tempted to turn and snap, "Quiet! small fry!" but instead he kept looking at the Nazi commander. He could tell that the German had a head full of thoughts, all bad. He and Freddy had planted the seeds of doubt and worry in the German's brain. And if they played it very carefully they might do more to help the Guadalcanal attack from right here in the U-boat than they would have if they had been able to make a hundred scouting patrols off the flight deck of the carrier Carson. At any rate, it was plain to see from the Nazi's face that the little "tête-à-tête" wasn't exactly working out the way he had planned. Something had

gone off the track somewhere along the line.

Suddenly the Nazi took his eyes off Dawson and looked at the Jap.

"Watch these two, and don't lose your head," he spoke in German. "For the present they are more valuable alive. I am going to surface, if it's clear, and see if there is anything on the radio. I won't be long."

The Nazi nodded, pushed up onto his feet and brushed past Dawson and Farmer and out the door. For the first couple of seconds after that Dave held his breath and watched the Jap out the corner of his eye. It was all very well for the Nazi commander to warn the slant-eyed one not to go off half cocked, but that didn't mean that the killer wouldn't revert to type at the drop of the hat. As it was, he was still trembling with savage anger, and there was definitely cold, ruthless slaughter in his glittering eyes. However, the first few moments ticked by, and nothing happened. The Jap just stared at them like a hesitant cobra, and that's as far as it went.

Ten minutes, that seemed to take ten years in passing, finally came to an end. Then the door was opened and the Nazi commander came back inside. Dawson looked quickly at his face, and was more than pleased with what he saw. The scowl on the Nazi's face was darker than ever, and he had all the appearance of a man who has received a setback that he can't quite understand. It was on the tip of Dave's tongue to ask if he had heard anything on the radio, but he remembered just in time that neither Freddy or himself were supposed to understand German. Therefore he just kept his mouth shut, and silently waited. And he didn't have to wait long. The Nazi looked at the Jap and shook his head.

"Nothing!" he growled. "Too much static. I could not even raise Admiral Sasebo's flagship. The air is full of nothing but whines and squeals."

At the mention of the name, Admiral Sasebo, Dawson jumped inwardly. And he could almost feel Freddy Farmer start at the mention of the name, too. Out there in the Southwest Pacific that Jap Navy man had "won" for himself the title of "Suicide" Sasebo. Losses meant nothing to him. To gain and hold an objective was all that mattered, regardless of whether the objective was important or not. Once on a Tokyo scare broadcast to the world, Sasebo had stated, "We will win because we are prepared to lose ten million soldiers, if we have to." And that was exactly the way Admiral Sasebo had fought his part of the war. He was a madman who never stopped to count the cost in troops, and ships, and planes, and equipment. In time, if he still held his high office, he would lose the war for

Japan by simply bleeding his country white. But though he constantly sacrificed thousands of his own forces, that did not mean he didn't inflict damage. He did. And so, if Admiral Sasebo was at sea, and on the loose again, it could well mean a lot of trouble, and then some.

"Perhaps you can make the contact later, *Herr Kommandant*," the Jap's voice cut through Dawson's thoughts. "But what about these two dogs. They speak nothing but lies. That's all they know. Nothing but lies. All Americans are stupid fools. I should have killed them yesterday when they were in the water."

Once again Dawson started inwardly, and in spite of himself he shot the Jap an agate-eyed stare. Fortunately the so-called Son of Heaven's follower was not looking at him, and so did not see that Dawson understood the words he spoke in German. Just the same, the realization that this slant-eyed, pint-sized rat had been in that tricky seaplane yesterday was a shock to Dawson. He recovered from his shock instantly, though, and longed for about five minutes with that double-crossing Jap in a locked room. He had a score to pay off, and he would have liked nothing better than the opportunity to do just that.

However, for the present, it was just so much wishful thinking as far as Dawson was concerned. Also, there were other things of far more importance than the item of knocking that Jap for a flock of outside loops. As a matter of fact, when the Nazi commander spoke again Dawson completely forgot about his private war with the Jap naval officer.

"That may be as you say," the Nazi said, addressing himself to the Jap. "These two may be young fools, like their countrymen. However, even fools can be useful. That is why I ordered you to trick them down into the water yesterday. Their plane was of the type used on American carriers. That proves that an American carrier force was not more than a few hundred miles distance from the point where you shot them down. But just exactly where? Is that force south of here and advancing through waters we control? Or have they spoken the truth, and is it north on some mission we know nothing about? We must obtain the answer to one or both of those questions, Honorable Comrade, you see?"

The Jap made a face and waved one hand in a careless gesture.

"I speak as a Japanese, and laugh in their faces!" he replied with a hissing note in his voice. "Where they are, or what they plan to do, is of no matter. They are doomed. The mighty forces of the Emperor will crush them. If they have a force moving north, Admiral Sasebo will trap them and cut them to pieces. And if

their force is already north of us, then Admiral Kusiro will shoot their planes into the sea, and sink all of their ships. Japan is too strong for her enemies. We have already proved that many times."

"Yes, true, of course," the Nazi commander said as though he were trying to soothe an upstart brat. "But unless we know everything, it may make it difficult for Admiral Sasebo's force. The American attack on Guadalcanal is to start soon. Perhaps it has already begun. If Admiral Sasebo is to wipe out any successes the Americans might gain, and annihilate their forces, and cut off all reinforcements, he must have knowledge of what is going on *elsewhere*. For him to run into an unknown enemy task force might complicate things a lot. At least it would bring about a serious delay in his own operations. If we can aid him in any way, we must. That was what I was thinking of yesterday when we surfaced and sighted their plane on scout patrol."

The Jap nodded reluctantly and spoke something in reply, but it was lost on Dawson's ears for the simple reason that his brain was spinning, and his head filled with roaring sound. *The Japs knew of the American plans to attack Guadalcanal!* That bit of news just about knocked him off his feet, and for a few seconds he could hardly breathe, much less think. And when his brain started functioning again, every thought was like a twisting knife buried deep in his heart.

The Japs knew of the American plan to attack Guadalcanal! Admiral "Suicide" Sasebo was obviously on his way with a huge task force to catch the Americans by surprise and wipe them out completely before sufficient reinforcements could be rushed to the Solomons. Sasebo's force was headed southward, and Admiral Jackson's task force was coming up from the south to intercept. Maybe they wouldn't meet. Maybe the Japs would pass right on by and leave Jackson's ships and planes searching an empty ocean. It might be a case of check and double-check, but the breaks were mostly on Suicide Sasebo's side. *He* knew what the Americans were up to, and the Yanks *didn't* know Sasebo's reason for moving southward from Truk. In fact, they didn't know *for sure* that Sasebo was *moving south*, to say nothing of smashing the American attack on Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

A hundred and one thunderbolts were crashing through Dawson's brain. He didn't even dare glance sidewise at Freddy Farmer's face for fear he would see there the expression of wild alarm he was struggling to keep from showing on his own face. And then, suddenly, he became conscious of the U-boat

commander speaking to the Jap again.

"... And we Germans have ways to make our prisoners talk, too," he was saying. "But I do not think that is best, right now. Tonight we will make a rendezvous with Admiral Sasebo's force. However, it is several hours until night. Also, even though we should get them to tell us what we should know, the radio might still be jammed with static. And so I think it is best for you to take them to Admiral Sasebo. Then he can do as he wishes. Meanwhile I will continue to patrol this area. And perhaps at the rendezvous I will have something interesting to report. Yes, I think the best plan is to surface, and launch the seaplane, and fly them direct to Admiral Sasebo's ship."



CHAPTER TWELVE

Helpless Heroes

A brief moment of tingling silence seemed to hover in the air right after the Nazi U-boat commander stopped speaking. Then the Jap made more of his punctured tire hissing sound and bobbed his head violently.

"Yes, a very good plan, *Herr Kommandant*," he said in the other's tongue. "I, myself, will fly them to the illustrious Admiral's ship, and obey his commands. He will learn all there is to learn, I can promise you. There is no one in all Japan so clever as the Honorable Admiral. And tonight he will receive you with praise. That I can promise, too. I have often heard it said that he admires you most of all your countrymen your Honorable Fuehrer has sent to assist us."

That last statement was proof that the slant-eyed Jap was no dope. He knew how to soft-soap the Nazi square-head type, and the feeling of uneasiness in Dawson increased considerably. He half wished the Nazi would change his mind and decide to keep Freddy and him prisoners aboard the U-boat. There was something in the Jap's face that didn't make him feel even a little satisfied. On the contrary, he wondered plenty *if* the Jap *would* fly them to Sasebo's ship! Neither Freddy nor himself had sold the Jap a thing, as they had the Nazi. Ten to one the Son of Nippon secretly regarded them as just two humans to slaughter at will, and with much pleasure. And so, steeling himself inwardly, and bearing down hard to keep any of his feelings from showing on his face, Dave waited for the next move in this game of life and death in which those favoring death had most of the chips.

"I am honored to learn that your Honorable Admiral thinks so highly of me," the Nazi said as his chest puffed out a little. "And the feeling is mutual, I assure you. Good, then. You will fly these two to the Admiral, and we will meet again tonight. We'll—"

The Nazi paused, frowned at his wrist watch, and then nodded.

"In an hour," he said, looking back at the Jap. "We will run submerged for an hour longer. Then we will surface, and if all is well we will launch the plane. In

the meantime you can lock them up forward. They will be safe, if *not* comfortable, in that empty stores compartment forward. Lock them up, and then come back and join me in an officer's toast to your Emperor, and to my Fuehrer."

The Jap beamed like a joyful rattlesnake and made a stiff, jerky bow from the waist. Then he quickly became the very, very tough little guy. He waved his gun at Dawson and Freddy and screamed an order.

"Go outside, dogs! We have no further use for you! Go outside and in the direction I order. Move, before I shoot you where you stand!"

The Jap spoke in English that time, and so, with a forced look of bewilderment on his face, Dawson turned and led the way out into the companionway. Perhaps Freddy took just a little too long to follow. Anyway, Dave heard the slap of the Jap's gun against his pal's head and a split second later the English youth stumbled against him in a desperate effort to remain on his feet. He succeeded, and a few minutes later they were shoved through a door into pitch darkness, the door was clanged shut behind, and the rasping sound of the twisting lock key grated on their ears.

"You hurt bad, Freddy?" Dave asked anxiously as he stood motionless in the dark.

"Fancy I'll survive!" Freddy replied bitterly. "The dirty beggar. Man! I never thought I'd ever be able to enjoy killing a man. But I'm sure I'd enjoy killing that filthy swine!"

"After me, you come next," Dave said grimly, and started putting one foot cautiously in front of the other. "I guess this place is empty, so we might as well sit on the deck and try to be comfortable. Come on over here, Freddy. We can use this bulkhead wall for a back rest. We *are* in a jam, Freddy!"

The English-born air ace didn't speak until both of them were sitting on the smooth steel deck and were leaning back against the bulkhead wall. Then he sighed, and groaned softly.

"Quite!" he muttered. "A blasted awful mess, too. It makes me ill to think of what they said. Man! Dave! The blighters *know* about our plans to attack Guadalcanal. I thought I'd choke when I heard that. That's bad, you know, Dave."

"You're telling me, son?" Dawson echoed. "It's worse than that. But it doesn't

help much to groan about it. What worries me is what's going to happen when that ten cent Jap dumps us in Suicide Sasebo's lap? We had that thick-headed Nazi believing us about our forces being way up north. I thought for a moment—that is, I hoped that—Aw, nuts! We couldn't hope to work a break *that* good!"

"We may yet," Freddy Farmer remarked after a long moment of silence. "If we could only just get this Sasebo to believe that there is nothing south of him, and that all our naval and air forces are way up north and about to strike at Japan direct, then—"

The English youth suddenly seemed to realize he was reaching for stars, and let the rest trail off into silence.

"And get him to change his plans and go high balling with his whole force north for another one of his pet suicide ventures?" Dave more or less finished for him. "Sure, pal, that would be tops. It would be almost as good as if we could dive right out through these steel plates and swim to the Carson and tell Admiral Jackson the exact location of Suicide's force moving south."

"Yes, absolutely!" Freddy grunted. Then, after a slight pause, he added, "And the truth of the matter is that I *could* tell Admiral Jackson where Sasebo's force is, *if* I could get to him."

Dawson gasped, choked, and gaped toward his pal in the pitch darkness.

"Whoa, pal!" he cried. "That clout on the head *did* send you spinning. Take it easy, kid!"

"Take it easy, nothing!" Freddy replied hotly. "I *could*, Dave. And if you'd used your eyes, you'd have learned what I did!"

"The—the location of Suicide's force?" Dawson asked incredulously.

"Exactly!" Freddy told him firmly. "At least what it was at ten o'clock this morning. It was One Hundred and Forty degrees West, and Five degrees North. I saw the position marked on the desk chart in that Nazi's cabin. And do you know what *that* means, Dave?"

"Well, I'll be a bowlegged son of a gun!" Dawson gulped out in awed admiration. "Kid Bright Eyes to the rescue again. Boy! I sure hand it to you when it comes to coming through in the clinches! Just like that he learns what Admiral Jackson's whole force wants to know. Holy smokes!"

"And a fine lot of good it does me to know, locked up in this blasted steel closet!" Freddy Farmer groaned. "But I asked you, do you know what that means? Do you happen to know where One Forty West and Five North happens to be?"

"Huh?" Dawson echoed. "Where?"

"I noticed it on the chart, of course," Freddy replied. "It happens to be a good hundred miles *west* of the area our planes have been searching. In other words, Colonel Welsh and Admiral Jackson are not going to find the Japs in the area they're searching. Sasebo is well west of them. So he didn't go south, as was reported. He moved west from Truk for almost five hundred miles and *then* turned south. And as of ten o'clock this morning he was heading for Jap-held New Guinea. And—"

"Jumping jeepers!" Dawson broke in with a gasp. "So that's it? He's going to slip through between New Guinea and New Britain and catch our attacking force on Guadalcanal from the south? Cut our supply lines to shreds, and then follow through with a main attack on whatever our boys have gained. Good night! That'll be a heck of a note, Freddy!"

"Quite, and definitely!" the English youth replied with a faint tremor in his voice. "Either that, or he'll go all the way around the western end of New Guinea, and split his forces. Half to cut off our forces on Guadalcanal, and half to make a sea and air attack against perhaps Darwin on the northern side of Australia. Who knows *what* that cunning devil has up his sleeve? And to think we know where his confounded force is! Man! I could shoot myself in despair!"

"Here, cut that out, pal!" Dave snapped. "Get that old chin up. We're still alive, and that's something."

"You wouldn't care to tell me how much, would you?" the English youth grunted.

"No, I guess not," Dawson said with a chuckle. "But you get the idea just the same. But, boy, oh boy! If we only could get word to Colonel Welsh and Admiral Jackson. Darn it, Freddy! We've got to, somehow. We've just got to!"

"No doubt of it," Freddy mumbled gloomily in the darkness. "But how? That's the stickler, old thing. *How?*"

"I don't know," Dawson murmured. "But maybe we'll get some kind of a break.

If we don't, we'll just have to make one, that's all. This Jap rat who shot us down, I wonder how he figures to fly us to Suicide's force?"

"That one is easy," Freddy Farmer sighed. "You'll see. Tied hand and foot, and jammed down into the rear pit of that seaplane like a couple of sardines, I fancy. No, I don't think I'm looking forward to that particular airplane ride."

"Yeah, like a couple of helpless sardines, probably," Dave murmured. "Yes, I guess I can think of more comfortable flights I've had, too. Oh, well, a guy can always hope."

And with that listless comment Dave lapsed into brooding silence, and Freddy Farmer joined him. For quite some time neither of them spoke. What was there to say, anyway? What was there to say that hadn't already been spoken? Absolutely nothing. And so it was better just to sit and keep one's thoughts to oneself. What the future would bring it would bring, and that was that!

After a long, long spell of mutual silence a sudden change in the movement of the U-boat told them both that the undersea craft was going up to the surface. Dawson grunted and sat up a little straighter.

"Up we go," he grunted. "So things will be happening soon."

"Can't say I'd be mad if said things were bombs dropping on this thing from a chance plane or two of ours!" Freddy Farmer growled. "The way I feel right now, I don't think I'd mind at all. Oh, blast it! I guess that gun slap from that Jap rotter did do something to my nerve. I feel in an awful funk, Dave."

"Swell, perfect, pal!" Dave said with a chuckle. "Keep right on feeling that way, and everything will be okay."

"Not much it will!" the English youth grated. "And what the deuce do you mean by that crack, anyway?"

"I mean that I've seen you like this before, and plenty!" Dawson told him, and squeezed his arm in the darkness. "And those other times you just hauled back and knocked 'em high, wide and handsome. So it's okay by me, kid. Very much okay. You'll get us some action, if I don't."

"Thanks, old thing," Freddy said with a faint huskiness in his voice. "And I am a rotter to try and drag you down, too. Sorry no end, Dave. I'll try and buck up and not be such a wet wack."

"Wet *smack!*" Dave corrected with a laugh. "Holy smokes! Aren't you ever going to learn to speak the language, huh?"

The English youth grunted, but before he could make any reply to that there came the final lurching motion as the U-boat broke surface, and even in their steel-walled prison they could hear the sounds of feverish activity. A moment or two later they could tell that the U-boat was motionless on the surface. And then more sounds, the whine and grind of turning gears, caused them to guess that the small seaplane was being hoisted up out of its hold hangar.

Suddenly, Dave began to chuckle softly. And Freddy Farmer peered at him in the darkness.

"What's wrong with you, Dave?" he asked, "What's so blasted funny?"

"I was just thinking," Dawson replied. "Remember that stuffed shirt ground major at the Broome field in Australia?"

"The one whose feet you dusted off with the prop-wash of the plane?" the English youth echoed. "Yes, I remember him. What about him?"

"I was just thinking," Dave said. "Maybe I gave that chump the right tip after all. Maybe he went dancing into his C.O.'s office with the real dope, and got tossed out for passing around such a cockeyed rumor."

"Yes, maybe you did at that," Freddy Farmer said soberly. "If Suicide Sasebo does strike at Australia, you will have given the tip-off days in advance, only you didn't know it. But I can't see anything to laugh about!"

"Okay, sober sides, I guess you're right," Dawson muttered. "But I sure could do with a good laugh, right about now. I—Oh-oh! I suspect here comes company. Watch it, Freddy. And hang on hard, pal."

"Right-o, Dave!" the English youth breathed. "Be right in there with you, old thing."

Freddy had hardly got the words off his lips when a key grated in the door lock and the door was kicked open with a crash. Pale light instantly poured into the room, and for a moment Dave and Freddy could see only blurred silhouettes in the companionway outside. Presently their eyes focussed to the change of light and they saw the Jap naval officer and two Jap seamen leering at them. The officer was dressed for flying. In his hand he carried his ever present gun. And

each of the sailors carried a coil of thin, tough line.

"Turn around, and face the other way!" the Jap officer suddenly hissed at them.

For a split second the two youths hesitated as red waves of rebellion surged up in them. But in that same split second they realized that any show of resistance would be the same as putting a gun to their heads and pulling the trigger. They were as helpless as a couple of caged sparrows, and to do anything about it would be plain, downright stupidity. And so they slowly turned around and suffered themselves to be trussed up hand and foot by the two Jap sailors.

And suffer they did, in every sense of the word. It was a joy to those two sons of heathens to have the opportunity to tie up two white men, and they went about their tasks with savage glee. And the Jap officer, standing to one side with his gun ready, took almost as much joy in the operations as they did. For Dawson and Freddy Farmer it was terrible torture to both mind and soul. The loops of the thin, tough line were yanked so tight that they felt like cords of white fire burning into their flesh. Then long before the two Jap seamen had completed the job the feeling of burning bands of white fire disappeared. There was just a dull, throbbing numbness in their legs and in their arms. And as the final fiendish touch the end of the line was looped about their necks, and drawn back tight and tied so that every time they moved their heads the loop bit into their throats and choked off their wind.

Finally, through the pounding in his ears, Dawson heard the Jap officer scream something in his native tongue. Then he felt himself being lifted up and slung across one of the Japs' shoulders like a sack of wet meal. And he could not keep track of just exactly what happened after that. All the bombs in the world were exploding in his brain. His lungs were on fire, and his thumping heart was pounding its way out through his ribs. He seemed to lose control of the movement of his eyeballs. They kept rolling back up into his brain, and vision was impossible. Everything was just a surging ocean of red waves. In a crazy abstract sort of way he wondered if he had lost consciousness. He decided he hadn't, otherwise he wouldn't be thinking such a jumble of thoughts.

Then, suddenly, instinct told him that he was falling. He tried to cry out in alarm, but there was no sound of his own voice in his ringing ears. There was just the wild, angry jabbering of Japanese. A tiny thought whipped through his brain to tell him that his Jap seaman had missed his footing and was lunging downward. And the instinct of self-preservation caused him to strain at his bonds. And that

was the very last thing he remembered. The whole world blew up in that instant and he went sailing off into a great void of utter silence and darkness.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Haywire Nerves

From a long way off came the faint rumble of sound. It grew louder and louder, and took on the steady, rhythmic beat of powerful engines giving of their best. Every so often a different sound broke through the rhythmic beat, but it faded out almost instantly, and the steady beat continued on forever—and ever—endlessly.

Seconds, minutes, and years dragged by, and then Dave Dawson was conscious of the fact that the rhythmic beat came from all about him, and that his body was absorbing the vibration of it. Not yet did it occur to him to try to move, or even to open his eyes. As a matter of fact, either of those physical accomplishments was far beyond his powers. And he continued to remain in a befuddled world of rhythmic beats, vibration, and darkness.

And then, suddenly, there was light all around him. But a few extra seconds ticked by before his half frozen brain could grasp the fact that his eyes had more or less automatically opened and that he was staring up at a light grey-painted ceiling and walls, and that up off to his left there was a round window through which light was pouring. He saw the ceiling, the grey-painted walls, and the round window, and although they registered upon his brain individually, they meant nothing to him as a whole.

More years dragged by, and the thought finally came to him to move his legs and his arms. He did so, but the pains that shot through his sturdy, youthful body caused him to gasp and groan, and relax completely to wait for the film of red to pass from his eyes. And when it did he saw the strained, anxious face of Freddy Farmer bending over him. The English youth's lips moved, and the words just barely seeped through Dawson's ears.

"Dave, old man, look at me! Speak to me, Dave! Are you all right? Oh, blast those devils! Dave! Come out of it. It's Freddy! This is Freddy Farmer. Your pal. *Dave!*"

A tiny spark was touched off in Dawson's brain, and the flame from it seemed to

start strength surging through him. He licked his lips, swallowed, and gulped. Hardly realizing he was doing so, he pushed himself up onto one elbow. Then Freddy caught him around the shoulders and eased him up to a sitting position.

"Thank God!" the English youth sobbed. "Good grief, Dave, I thought you were a goner for sure!"

"What—what happened?" Dave mumbled, and the effort to speak made his throat burn. "What happened? Did we crash—or something? Bail out—and forget to pull the rip-cord, huh?"

"That blasted Jap!" Freddy Farmer grated. "He slipped, and you went crashing down on the deck on your head. Man! I was sure you had been killed right then and there!"

Dawson blinked hard, put his finger tips to his temples and pressed as though he could push away the fog that clouded his brain.

"Jap?" he muttered thickly. "I fell on my head? What Jap, Freddy? What are you talking about? I haven't got a head. I've got *two* of them. Split right down the middle. And—Hey! What gives? What's this place? Where the heck are we? What in thunder has happened, Freddy?"

Freddy Farmer didn't answer, because he wasn't there. He had moved away somewhere. But he returned almost immediately and held a glass of water to Dawson's lips. The Yank ace drank greedily, and the cold water did wonders for the burning in his throat. It also helped to drive the fog from his brain, and give him more strength in both mind and body.

"Thanks, pal!" he gasped when he had drained the glass of its last drop. "You're a lifesaver, what I mean, kid. Thanks, plenty. Now, what in the world has happened?"

But even before Freddy Farmer could form the words with his lips, a little door in Dawson's brain seemed to pop open and vivid memory came rushing back to him.

"My gosh, I catch!" he cried. "We had been trussed up by those Japs, and they were carrying us up onto the deck of that U-boat! That Jap rat officer was going to fly us to the Suicide Sasebo's flagship. What happened? Did the dirty bums change their minds? And hey! We're not aboard any U-boat now! Or are we?"

"If you'll only shut up!" Freddy Farmer barked, but there was great joy glistening in his eyes. "Just keep that mouth of yours shut tight, and I'll tell you as much of it as I can."

"Okay, go ahead," Dave told him. "The lip is all zippered up, kid. Shoot."

"Well, they trussed us up, and carried us out on deck," the English youth began. "The beggar who was carrying you, though, slipped and went flat. He just dumped you off, and you landed on your head. I guess it was your helmet that saved your life. At least, saved you from a nasty skull fracture. However, you went out cold, much to the amusement of the Japs. And then—well, I blessed well hope I'll never have to live through anything like it again!"

The English-born air ace paused, and there were actually beads of sweat on his face. Dave gasped at him as he brushed them off with his hand.

"Then what, Freddy?" the Yank asked. "Oh! You mean because you thought I'd kicked the bucket? That my number had gone up?"

"Partly," the other replied. "But mostly because the Japs decided that you wouldn't be of any use to them in that condition. That Jap officer blighter was about to have you just tossed into the water for shark food."

Dawson gulped hard, and every drop of blood seemed to drain right down through his feet, and on out of his body.

"Sweet tripe, no kidding?" he gagged. "Jeepers! And there I was not able to do a thing about it. Boy, oh boy! Praise be to Allah, they didn't!"

"I never want to live those minutes over again!" Freddy Farmer breathed fervently. "I tried to call out and tell them something that would stop them, but that confounded cord around my neck was digging in so deep that I could hardly breathe. And then you, yourself, got them to change their minds."

"Me?" Dave echoed wildly. "What in thunder did *I* do?"

"You seemed to come out of it for a second or so," the other told him. "You opened your eyes, glared your worst at the Jap rat officer, and actually tried to push yourself up off the deck. Of course you barely moved, bound up as you were. But you certainly looked and acted quite the tough guy, old thing."

"Yeah?" Dawson echoed, and grinned faintly. "Well, that's me all over, pal."

Tough as they come—when I'm out cold! So I sort of saved my own life, eh?"

"Just about," Freddy Farmer nodded. "The Jap rat decided that he wasn't through with you, so he had the seaman pick you up again. I guess you had passed out again by then. And you stayed that way—lucky beggar. I also hope and pray I'll never have an airplane ride like that one! Heaven preserve me, please! I'm still not quite sure that I've got hands, and feet, and a neck. The blighters rammed us down in the rear pit of that seaplane so tight I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to breathe. You certainly missed something, Dave! You certainly did, old chap!"

"Yeah, and am I glad!" Dawson grunted, and glanced about him.

It was then he saw that Freddy and he were in an absolutely bare cabin aboard some kind of a ship. It was not until then that he realized that the rhythmic beat was the ship's powerful turbines driving it through the water. He glanced out the round-shaped "window" and saw cloud-dotted azure blue sky drifting by. Then he looked quickly back at Freddy, and the English youth nodded gravely.

"That's right, Dave," he said quietly. "Welcome to the flagship of Admiral Suicide Sasebo's force. And, good grief, Dave! It's a tremendous force! Three carriers of the Kaga class, a dozen troop ships, and scads and scads of cruisers, destroyers, and supply vessels. Even from the air they appear to take up the whole blasted ocean. Very definitely, a big force. But, as I was saying, it was an absolutely terrible ride. I think I fainted once or twice, myself. Just couldn't seem to hang on somehow. Then after years and years we sat down in the middle of this force and came alongside this carrier flagship. They let down a hoist cable and took us right up on board. I really was pretty hazy by then, and I don't remember just what followed, exactly. But it wasn't much. Yet, no, it was a whole lot, I guess you'd say. They took those cursed ropes off us both, anyway. Then they carried you, and half dragged me, down to this cabin, and kicked us inside. Ever since I've been trying to decide whether to pray you wouldn't recover and thus get out of it all, or to pray for you to recover, and carry on with me."

Dawson smiled and reached over a hand and pressed Freddy Farmer's knee. It was then he saw the ugly-looking red welts that circled his wrists. And also the circle of red welts about Freddy's wrists.

"Well, here I am anyway, kid," he said softly. "No rotten Jap rats can break up this old combination, hey, fellow? But how long have we been here?"

"About two hours, I fancy," Freddy said. "We got here about the middle of the afternoon, so now it must be around five o'clock. I don't know the time, exactly. They took my wrist watch, and yours, too. Souvenirs, no doubt. I hope the things refuse to run for them, the dirty thieving beggars. Gosh! How my hatred for them just grows and grows! I could—"

"Well, don't let it throw you, and blow your top, kid!" Dave cut in with a soothing note. "Going haywire won't help a thing. And at least we've got one thing to cling to."

"What?" the English youth grunted. "Each other?"

"Yes, that, too," Dave replied with a nod. "But that isn't what was in my mind. I mean, we're both still alive. If they didn't *want* us alive, we certainly wouldn't be here in this place. So it means that they figure we've got something they want. See?"

"Perhaps," Freddy said slowly. "Perhaps not, too. Our little talk session with the Nazi U-boat commander didn't cut any ice with that Jap rat officer. I wouldn't be at all surprised but that we're here just so's he and his dirty pals can take their time and fully enjoy torturing us and killing us. Gosh! A horrible thought, what?"

Dawson shook his head, and waved one hand back and forth.

"I don't think I'll buy any of that," he said. "This Sasebo is on a darned important mission. Much as he likes to see guys die, I don't think he'll bother much with a couple of guys named Joe. Nope, Freddy, we're here because they think they can gain something from us."

"And when they don't?" Freddy Farmer murmured, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Yeah!" Dawson breathed. "Maybe then the fun *will* begin. So it's up to us to beat them to the punch. To keep them on the ropes, and undecided what to do next. Maybe even get them high tailing north for a big killing that isn't going to come off."

"What a blasted faint hope, that last!" Freddy snorted. "I'm not even giving it a thought. If there is anything that we *can* do, or try to do, it's to somehow get one of their planes and go straight to Admiral Jackson's force."

"Sure, that would be nice, too," Dawson grunted. "But it happens to be all reversed now, Freddy."

"What is?" the other demanded. "What do you mean by that, Dave?"

"The whole darn situation," Dawson told him. "Yesterday we didn't know where this force was, but we did know where Admiral Jackson's force was. Today, though, it's the other way around. We know where the enemy is, but we don't know exactly where our forces are. There's a heck of a lot of ocean out there, Freddy. We could use up an awful, awful lot of gas and oil and get nowhere, and find nothing!"

"Yes, quite," Freddy grunted. Then, "Except for one thing, old bean."

"Such as?"

"Such as the radio that would be in the Jap plane," the English youth replied quickly. "If we could get a Jap plane."

Dawson chuckled in spite of the seriousness of the situation, and gave a little shake of his head.

"Leave it to the kid, here!" he breathed. "The firm's brains, that's what he is. But, kidding aside, you've got something, pal. I really think that maybe you have. With a Jap radio—and I guess one of them isn't too tough to work—we could sure tell the whole cockeyed world plenty. Boy, oh boy! Would that burn up Sasebo, to hear us telling the world about his force, where it is, and how many ships, and so forth. I bet he'd dive over the side, and commit *hara-kiri* on the way down!"

"Well, don't consider it as good as done," the English youth cautioned. "Stealing a plane in story books is quite simple, of course. But the real thing is quite something else. Just the same, though, I very definitely would like it that way."

"And while we're at it, let's shoot the works," Dawson said with a dry chuckle. "We'll not only swipe a plane, but we'll also swipe all of Sasebo's task force plans before we leave. And maybe even his samurai sword. Now, there is something that would sure get the guy's goat. And I don't mean perhaps!"

Freddy Farmer joined Dave in laughing, and then, suddenly, as their eyes met both sobered in a flash. All that had happened to them, and the terrific strain under which they were right then, was fast catching up with them. It was causing

them to become just a bit light-headed, to talk through their hats, and—and, if they didn't call a halt, send them haywire like a couple of babbling idiots. They saw that approaching breaking point in each other's eyes. And it straightened them up, and fast.

"Well, anyway, we got some of it off our chests," Dawson muttered, and stared down at his red welt-marked wrists.

"Yes, quite," Freddy Farmer echoed absently. "And I fancy it helped a little. But I wonder what, Dave?"

"And so do I, chum," Dawson sighed. "So do I!"



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Devil Eyes

A good fifteen minutes of silence settled over the two battle-scarred youths before it was broken. And when it was, it was not by either of them. On the contrary, it was broken by a third party. By an unusually tall, and well built Japanese Navy officer who opened the door of the empty cabin and came striding inside. Both boys were startled by his sudden approach, they were amazed by his huge size, and they also noticed that he was unarmed save for the samurai sword hung at his belt. But when they looked at his face, at his eyes, they both gulped impulsively.

The newcomer's eyes were plenty Jap. They were also even more than that. The first impression that came to Dave was that he was looking into a pair of devil's eyes, if ever a pair existed. They were more black than brown, and they had the sagging double upper lid that distinguishes a Jap's eyes from those of a Chinese. But there was still something else about them. A certain something that was in their depths. Call it all the hideous cruelty in the world reflected there. Or call it the true look of a born killer and savage. Or call it what you will. There was something there that made Dawson catch his breath, and go hot and cold all over. It was like looking down the muzzle of a rifle and watching the finger crooked about the trigger tighten slowly. In the next split second—

"Come with me, please!"

The words that fell from the Jap's lips were like rifle shots. Hardly realizing that they were doing so, both youths sprang quickly up onto their feet. The big Jap smiled broadly.

"Good," he said, and bobbed his close shaven head. "I can see that you have learned a little of the lesson you should have learned a long time ago. Come with me, and do not let there be any trouble, please."

As a warning gesture the big Jap patted the hilt of his samurai sword, and then stepped aside and jerked his head in a silent order for Dawson and Freddy Farmer to step by him and outside. They stepped out into a fairly wide

companionway, and as the Jap motioned for them to move off to the right, they saw that the far end of the companionway opened up into what was obviously one of the hangar decks of the carrier. They could see Zeros and Nakajimas, and a couple of other types that they could not make out at that distance.

They didn't have much time to study the parked planes they could see far ahead, however. The big Jap soon ushered them into a much narrower companionway off to the right, and then up a ladder. They came off the top of the ladder onto the broad flat flight deck of the carrier. It seemed covered from bow to stern with planes, with a narrow runway lane down the middle. Gazing at it, Dawson couldn't help but think of what a mess it would make if just a single plane taking off should skid to either side and lock wings with the long rows of parked planes.

"Or just a couple of well placed incendiary bombs!" he murmured absently to himself. "Boy! What a bonfire that would be!"

"Eh, Dave?" Freddy Farmer whispered at his elbow. "What was that?"

"Nothing, pal," Dawson sighed. "Just a little wishful thinking!"

At that moment the big Jap gave them a gentle push and nodded along the flight deck in the direction of the flight bridge and ship control turrets. The two youths obeyed at once, and as Dawson weaved his way in and out among the parked planes, close cropped Jap heads seemed to pop up from all sides and grin and leer at him. He paid them little attention, however. He was more interested in getting a look at the rest of the Jap force spread out over the surrounding waters. It was difficult, however, because folded wings and parked fuselages kept cutting off his line of view. He did sight the two other carriers for a brief instant—and sort of wished he hadn't. A three-carrier task force meant at least fifty other ships of different descriptions. And a surprise force that size could cause a lot, an awful lot, of trouble if it got the breaks. In fact, it might well change the entire course of the war in the far flung Pacific.

Fortunately for Dawson, he wasn't allowed much time in which to brood over that possibility. He and Farmer soon reached a point directly below the flight bridge. There the big Jap ushered them through a door and along a companionway, and up a couple of more deck ladders. Their little "walk" finally terminated in the well appointed quarters of none other than Admiral Suicide Sasebo himself. And the mad killer was there in the flesh, too, flanked on both sides by his runt-sized staff officers and aides. Short, overfed, bandy-legged and

squint-eyed, the whole lot of them. At first glance they looked like a bunch of cross-eyed street urchins dressed up for a cops and robbers masquerade.

If Dawson were to have seen that same picture flash across the screen in a movie theatre he would have fallen out of his seat with laughter. But there was no laughter on his lips now. Not even in the back of his thoughts. Not one single giggle, for each pair of those eyes fixed upon him were not the eyes of a street urchin, but of an inhuman savage who would gladly carve him to shreds for the sheer joy of it all. No, there was no laughter in Dawson, or Freddy Farmer, as the big Jap pulled them up to an abrupt halt. Truth to relate, there was only a lot of cold fear, and twice as much worry.

Suddenly to Dave's tensed senses there came a sound akin to that of somebody putting sheets of tin to a buzz saw blade. He jumped inwardly and then realized that the ear-rasping sound was the Jap behind him addressing his commanding officer in their native tongue. Impulsively he looked at the row of Jap figures to make sure his guess as to which was Admiral Sasebo was correct. And it was correct. The little runt in the middle of the row, wearing fewer decorations than any of the others, made movements with his head, as though somebody were working it with strings from behind, and then made some reply in a soft sing-song note.

As the echo of the sounds he made died away, he looked at Dawson and Farmer. And to their dumbfounded belief he smiled broadly, and executed a slight bow.

"Welcome, Honorable Enemy Gentlemen," he said in fairly good English. "It is a pleasure to have you aboard my ship. Be seated, please. I am about to dismiss my officers. Then we will discuss your little problem."

The Jap Admiral bowed slightly again, then half turned and looked at the officers on one side. He said a few words, bobbed his head, and then turned to the officers on his other side and spoke to them. All of them bowed way over, murmured something, and went single file outside. And soon the cabin was empty save for the two boys, the Admiral, and the big Jap officer.

With an effort Dawson tried to shake the cobwebs out of his brain, and get himself on the alert. But it was like trying to wake himself up out of the middle of a crazy, cockeyed dream. In fact, that's just exactly what all this business seemed like. Like part of some dizzy dream in which nobody acts his correct part. "Then we will discuss your little problem." What was going on here, anyway? And, "Welcome, Honorable Enemy Gentlemen!" Where did the guy get

that welcome stuff? For fair, somebody was just plain nuts. And Dawson was worried not a little that maybe he was the one.

"Be seated, Honorable Enemy Gentlemen, please. We have plenty of time. And in war it is a good thing to relax and be comfortable whenever one gets the chance. Yes, in those chairs behind you, please."

If Dawson and Farmer had been under a complete hypnotic spell they couldn't have obeyed more mechanically as they backed up until the chair edge hit them behind the knees, and then sat down. And like a couple of dazed puppets waiting to be moved around, they just sat there with eyes fixed on the Jap Admiral. He seated himself, and stared at them for a long time before he spoke.

"So you have very interesting news for me?" he suddenly said with a rising inflection of voice. "Well, I am interested. So tell me all about it, please?"

Dawson gulped slightly and tried desperately to bat his brains off the merry-go-round on which they were riding, and get them to function properly. If he ever was to play a game of wits, this was the time. But at that precise moment he couldn't have spoken his own name correctly for the life of him.

Freddy Farmer, however, rushed to his rescue. The English youth looked the Jap Admiral straight in the eye, and shook his head.

"Too late, now," he said quietly. "Neither of us knows where our force is now. It may still be up north off your Japanese coast, or perhaps it is now steaming back to Pearl Harbor."

"That is too bad," the Jap said without a single change of expression. "I was hoping that perhaps I could detach one or two of my destroyers to go meet them and sink them."

Both boys got the full meaning of the "one or two destroyers" crack, but both refused to rise to the bait. They simply shrugged and waited for the Jap Navy big shot to take the lead again. They thought they saw a faint flicker of anger cross his flat, shiny face, indicating that he was a little annoyed. But that's all the sign he gave. He stared at them each in turn for several more minutes, then seemed to fix his gaze on Dawson's face.

"You say there are *five* carriers?" he asked.

"Yes, five carriers and—" Dawson replied, and then stopped dead as the walls of

the room seem to come tumbling down around his ears.

He heard Freddy Farmer's startled gasp, and wished in that moment that he possessed a gun so that he could shoot his brains out. Of all the stupid, dumb fools, he took the prize. With his bare face hanging out he had walked straight into the Jap Admiral's trap, and had been caught cold. In short, the Jap had suddenly addressed him in *German*, and without thinking, fathead that he was, he had started to reply in the *same* tongue.

"And you Americans boast of being so very, very clever!" the Jap Navy big shot was now sneering at him. "Fools! Little children! You are all soft, and eaten away in the brain. You are finished. Do you not realize that?"

Dawson didn't say anything. He was mentally kicking himself too much to bother about speaking words. And God knows he had spoken too many words as it was—in the wrong tongue. Fathead of fatheads. Of course that Jap pilot rat had reported the entire conversation aboard the U-boat. Had mentioned, no doubt, that he and the Nazi had spoken in German so that the two prisoners wouldn't understand. But they had understood everything spoken. And now the Jap Admiral *knew* that they had understood. In short, he had only to add two and two to make a pretty sure guess that they hadn't spoken a word of truth aboard the U-boat, and had played dumb in an attempt to pick up information they might use if they ever managed to escape. And, to put it another way, the Jap Admiral had checkmated them cold when they had barely begun to sell him a load of phoney goods.

"Yes, Japan's enemies are so cleverly foolish!" the slant-eyed one continued amidst hissing sounds. "However, you are here under my watchful eye now. And no real damage has been done. So we will forget all else that has been said, and start over again."

The Jap stopped suddenly, and leaned forward a little over the desk at which he had seated himself.

"You were shot down after having flown from an American carrier," he said. "Now, what was the name of that carrier?"

"The Tokyo Express," Dawson replied quickly. "And the first stop is Tokyo, too, believe it or not."

The faint attempt to wisecrack was completely lost on the flat-faced Jap. Which

was of course to be expected, for included in the countless things that the Japanese people do not possess is a sense of humor. Even a joke that would send an Englishman into fits of laughter would sail right over a Jap's thick-boned head. So the Admiral simply wagged his head from side to side gravely, and made a little shaking motion with the index finger of his right hand.

"That is not the truth," he said in his soft sing-song voice. "The name of your carrier was either the Carson, or the Hawk. They were both in a task force sighted two days ago. You come from one of those carriers, so it is proved that that force has moved up into waters considerably north of where it was two days ago."

"That's what we've been saying," Freddy Farmer shot at him. "The Carson, the Hawk, and you can guess how many *other* carriers. But much, *much* farther north than you suspect."

The Jap started to wag his head again gravely, but at that instant an inspiration which might enable him to regain a little of the beans he had spilled clicked in Dawson's brain. He held up a hand to check whatever the Jap Admiral was about to say.

"Just a minute, Admiral Sasebo!" he cried out. "Think what you like, but do some *thinking*. The war for my pal and me is all over. Ten to one we'll never leave this ship alive. And how! The whole darn world knows what you Japs *do* to pilots you capture. Okay! We took our chances, and we lost. So all that's left is the chance to rub it into you a bit, because you're headed for a loss, too, see? Think I'm kidding. All right, then, get *this!* Get hold of that double-crossing flying ape of yours who shot us down, and ask him—*what direction was our plane flying when he shot us down!* Go ahead, ask him that, and he'll tell you *south!* And if he had his eyes open he probably saw us dump our gas hoping that the empty tank would keep us afloat longer. But it was punctured, so the plane sank in a hurry. But here's the point. Ask him about how much gas he saw us dump to empty the tank. If he can't tell you, *I can*. It was practically *a full tank!* So figure it out, Admiral, figure it out. We were flying south with practically a full tank. Flying *back* to our carrier? Not a chance! We were scouting out from our carrier trying to find out if your force, this force right here, was *trailing us up north!*"

Dawson emphasized his words with a violent nod of his head. And then he added just one more word jab for good measure.

"Okay. Throw us to the sharks. We're all washed up. But at least we've had the satisfaction of having the horse laugh on *you*. And what a horse laugh, as you'll soon find out!"

As Dawson got the last off his lips he instinctively steeled himself and waited for the Jap Admiral to start screaming his head off. However, if he expected the Nippon killer to fly into a tantrum he was doomed to disappointment. Suicide Sasebo simply stared at him expressionlessly for a long, long time. Then he spoke in his native tongue, but his words were addressed to the big Jap standing just in back of the two air aces. Yet he held them with his eyes all the time he spoke.

A few moments of silence followed his words, and then the big Jap spoke. A flicker of light, or something, seemed to pass across the Admiral's face. And then he spoke for the second time. The big Jap made hissing sounds, bowed low, and then took hold of Dawson's arm and Freddy Farmer's arm with fingers of steel, and turned them around and led them out into the companionway.

Bewilderment and a faint sense of uneasiness welled up in Dawson, for he had no idea what the two Japs had spoken to each other. And if only he *did* know! It would save so much for Freddy Farmer and himself. The first time Sasebo spoke he had ordered the big one to take the two prisoners down onto the flight deck, shoot them, and toss their bodies over the side. But he had only spoken thus to see if either of the prisoners understood Japanese. And when he realized that they did not, and the big Jap had made a polite suggestion, he had agreed at once, given the necessary instructions, and then ordered the two air aces to be taken away.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Missing in Action

With the measured steps of a man deep in thought, and very much worried, Colonel Welsh, Chief of Combined U. S. Intelligence, paced up and down the full length of the Carrier Carson's flight deck. He walked as a man who cared not where he was headed, because he knew that he would find nothing when he arrived there. Pilots and plane crews lounging in the crash nets that stretched the full length of the flight deck on both sides stopped talking as he passed, looked at him, gave a little shake of their heads, and murmured inaudible words of sympathy.

Suddenly the alarm system announced the approach of aircraft, the Carson's aircraft. Colonel Welsh stiffened in a halt, lifted his head and peered at the growing dots coming out of the sky to the north. Then he wheeled quickly, ran across the flight deck and hurried up aloft to the flight bridge. And there he came to a halt, gripping the bridge rail hard with both hands, and straining his eyes at the oncoming planes.

"Too bad again, Colonel," Admiral Jackson spoke quietly in his ear. "Those are the eight who went out on the last patrol. Here, look at them through my glasses, if you wish."

"Thank you, sir," the Colonel replied in a low voice, and fixed the glasses on the approaching planes.

A few moments later he lowered them from his eyes, and handed them back to the Admiral without any word. He focussed his naked eyes on the planes, and watched as they came up in line astern formation and circled the Carson until the leader got the flag to come aboard. Then one by one they slid down aboard to practically roll into the waiting hands of the plane crews. But as each pilot passed the flight bridge he looked up at Colonel Welsh, shook his head, and made a thumbs down gesture. And when the last pilot to come aboard had done that, and rolled on down the deck, Colonel Welsh gripped the flight bridge railing so hard his knuckles showed white through the stretched skin. And he had to swallow hard several times to stifle the groan of anguish that struggled for

expression.

"Let's have some coffee in my quarters, Colonel," the task force commander said gently. "The executive can bring us the patrol report there."

"Thank you, thank you very much, sir," Colonel Welsh mumbled, and followed the other off the flight bridge.

When they were settled in the Admiral's quarters, and had been served coffee, the Chief of Combined U. S. Intelligence glanced over at the Navy officer with a faint apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid I'm not acting the good soldier very well, sir," he said. "I hope you'll accept my apologies. But this is getting me where it hurts the most."

"I quite understand, Colonel," the other said quietly. "It gets me, too, to have pilots reported missing in action, whether I know them personally or not. You just can't help feeling it deep."

"And those two I knew so well!" Colonel Welsh breathed sadly. "I couldn't know them any better if they were my own sons. And in a way I'm directly responsible for whatever has happened to them. I was the one who assigned them to this carrier. As I told you, they had just completed a very dangerous mission in China. They had postponed leave to carry out the mission for me. And if any two in this war rate leave, they certainly do. But—well, it struck me I needed them badly on this job. They both have all what it takes, and—well, they performed more than one absolutely impossible miracle in the past. So I decided to order them to take a hand in this job. And—"

As the colonel paused he couldn't stop the groan this time.

"And they are the only two that we have lost," he finally completed the sentence. "If only I had an idea of what happened, I don't think it would be so bad. Death comes swiftly and suddenly in this war, so we constantly have to steel ourselves on that subject. If they were killed in action, then that's something different. But just plain missing—and when no other pilot has reported a blessed thing. Well, that is the part so hard to take. But forgive me for rambling like this, sir."

"Think nothing of it, Colonel," the Admiral said, and added a drop more of cream to his coffee. "Frankly, I've been giving the puzzle more than a little thought. For two days, now, we've combed every square mile of this area, and no pilot has seen a trace or sign of anything. Not so much as a thread of smoke on

the horizon. It has me worried, Colonel."

The Chief of Combined U. S. Intelligence stuck out his lower lip and gave a little half twist of his head.

"I'm very much worried, too, sir," he said. "If that reported Jap force is in these waters, it must be at the bottom of them. It certainly isn't in the area we've scouted. And that fact is what gives me cause for thought. A lot of thought. Technically, this area we're patrolling is Japanese-controlled. And yet, not a single Jap surface ship, submarine, or plane has shown its face. And I'm afraid, sir, the answer is that confounded Kawanishi flying boat that we shot down the other evening. It stands to reason that they must have sent out a radio report to their base before Dawson and Farmer nailed them."

"I'm afraid you're right about that, Colonel," the Admiral agreed with a nod. Then, as his brows furrowed in a frown, "But we were just off New Caledonia then, and headed east. We changed the course to north after darkness had fallen. And I'm positive we weren't detected during the night, nor have we been spotted since."

"But, unfortunately, the Japs are no fools," Colonel Welsh said grimly. "They are mighty clever, and have a way of accurately figuring things out for themselves. And they probably started adding things up when their patrol planes spotted no sign of us the next morning. It's possible that they outguessed us and sent word to the commander of this Jap force we're trying to hunt down. And he took measures to make sure that we wouldn't find him. He may have changed his course and moved far over to the west."

"If he did," the Admiral grunted, and rubbed one clenched fist on the arm of his chair, "then we won't find him before the attack on Guadalcanal gets started at dawn tomorrow. Even at top speed we couldn't get over to where he may be that soon. And, of course, it's only a guess that the force is over there. Also, it would be too risky. He might swing back along the northern New Guinea coast, and slip down past Lae. Or he may force his ships and cut around the western end of New Guinea, and strike at Australia from the north. However, if the Jap commander figures that we *are* up here looking for him, he'll undoubtedly take the double back route. That will get him to Lae by dawn. And when he gets there he is bound to get wind of our doings against Guadalcanal. Any way you look at it, we're in a bad spot. And that is not saying a thing about our forces taking part in the Guadalcanal business."

Colonel Welsh nodded soberly, but for a long moment he didn't say anything. He sat with his head slightly bent and his eyes fixed unwinkingly on the half filled cup of coffee he held in his hands. Presently he sighed, gave a little shake of his head, and looked up at the task force commander.

"Yes, you're dead right, sir, in everything you say," he spoke in a weary voice. "So I'll step to one side, sir, and let you have charge of things from here on. I thought sure we would catch that Jap force as a result of this search, but—well, Intelligence has been wrong before. No use weeping over it. We just didn't click this time. So go ahead, sir, and issue the order to abandon the search."

"Thank you, Colonel," the task force commander said with just the faintest note of relief in his voice. "I'm afraid we are wasting time way up here. And I'm mighty sorry, sir, about Dawson and Farmer. I sincerely hope that they will pop up again, just as you have told me they have done so many times in the past. At least it's some satisfaction to know that those two will take some beating before they'll give up. And a pair like them will never give up."

"Never!" Colonel Welsh echoed grimly. "And we can both hope, and pray. But may I ask you something, sir?"

"Why, certainly, Colonel," the other replied instantly. "I don't think you and I have any secrets aboard this ship. Go right ahead and ask."

"Your plans," the Intelligence Chief asked bluntly. "Just what do you plan to do now, sir?"

The Admiral didn't answer at once. Yet it was not because he was reluctant to speak. It was simply a case of wanting to choose his words first.

"The Solomons," he said, and glanced at the huge naval chart of the Southwest Pacific that covered all of one wall in his quarters. "By pushing things we can get within striking distance by early dawn. I think that's the thing to do. The only thing we can do. Get right down in there and do what we can to help the land forces."

"Yes, I guess that's best," Colonel Welsh said, and glanced sadly out one of the ports at the red ball of fire that was the dying sun balanced on the western lip of the wall. "But what if we get down in among those islands and that Jap force comes up on us by surprise? You'll be in mighty tight waters. And they're bound to send dive bombers over from their Lae base, too."

"Do?" the task force commander echoed in a harsh voice, as his chin came out in a fighting pose. "I'll slug it out with them until I haven't a plane left or a deck under my feet, sir! And I can tell you, sir, that my ships and planes will not be the *only* ones lost, if the Japs catch us with our bows to those islands. Our forces have *got* to take Guadalcanal! And that's all there is to that. We can't let them trim us this time. By God, no, sir!"

Colonel Welsh smiled, nodded, and lifted his coffee cup and held it poised in midair.

"To whatever happens, sir," he toasted. "And may we have all the best of it!"

The task force commander lifted his own coffee cup, and nodded, too.

"And we will, by God, sir!" he said through clenched teeth. "Just as long as we've got a ship floating or a plane flying! Amen!"

And the two high ranking officers drank silently.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Luck of the Doomed

"And now, the sixty-four dollar question," Dave Dawson got out in a bitter, puzzled voice. "What in thunder is the big idea? Go ahead and answer, Freddy."

"I can't even make a guess," the English youth groaned, and turned from staring out the empty cabin port. "All I can say is that I am absolutely and completely baffled. I don't understand it at all. What the deuce suddenly caused that Sasebo to have us herded back to this empty cabin again? After the way you raved at him, if he had drawn his samurai sword and chopped off your thick head, I could have understood. But to not so much as bat an eye, and then obviously order that big chap to bring us back here...? Well, it's quite beyond me. Quite!"

"You can say that again for me!" Dawson grunted. "But where do you get that chopped off your thick head stuff, huh?"

"Definitely!" Freddy snapped, and gave him a withering glare. "In future kindly remember that though you may wish to get killed on the spot, because you rile up some blasted cut-throat, *I* haven't the same desire to die!"

Dawson grinned and let it grow into a chuckle.

"Boy!" he breathed. "I kind of told him a thing or six, didn't I, huh? Oh, heck, Freddy, I'll admit it was taking a chance. But between you, me, and the flight deck of this tub, I've got a hunch I put a little bee in that guy's bonnet."

"I hope so, but I sincerely doubt it," Freddy Farmer said. "That bloke is nobody's fool, even though he may look like one. However, I sincerely hope you are right, Dave. You mean, about trying to make him believe that Admiral Jackson's force is up north off the Japanese coast?"

"Yes, that's what I meant," Dave nodded. "And I think he swallowed the bait, too. I'm almost willing to bet that before long he'll swing this task force about and start high-balling back up north. And send out some of his long range scout-bombers, too."

"But maybe he won't," Freddy Farmer argued. "So where does that leave us? I'll tell you! Penned up in this blasted cabin while Jackson's force is hunting for something that isn't there. And, good grief, Dave! Tomorrow at dawn is the time for the Guadalcanal attack. If this force goes sliding right on down by Jackson's position, there'll be the deuce to pay. You'll remember what Colonel Welsh kept pounding home to us? If he doesn't drive off this force, at least, the Tulagi and Guadalcanal attacks may turn out terrible flops. And at a terrible price, too. Gosh! Things are so blessed well mixed up I don't know what to think. Fact is, I can't think of anything but that we're prisoners here on this confounded vessel. If there were only some way we could escape and get in touch with Admiral Jackson's force."

"Yeah, if only!" Dawson grated with a frown as he twisted one clenched fist into the palm of his other hand. "I'd give my right arm, and maybe a couple of legs, just for a fifty-fifty chance to get out of this jam. And I've been thinking, too, Freddy."

"Thinking of what?" the English-born air ace demanded as Dawson lapsed into sudden silence.

Dave stared at him for a moment as though he hadn't heard, so engrossed was he with his own thoughts. Then suddenly he snapped his fingers and nodded abruptly.

"About where we are, right now," he said. "And where Admiral Jackson's force should be, if they've been carrying out the search according to schedule. Freddy! If we could only get away in one of those Jap crates up on the deck, I think I could find Jackson's force before the fuel gave out. And, of course, if we failed first to raise the force on the Jap radio in the plane. Freddy, pal! You and I are wasting precious time, cooling our heels in this place. Remember what I said? If we don't get a break, it's up to us to *make* one. Well, it's up to us, and now, Freddy!"

"Now that you've brought up the subject, I fancy that I could find our force, too," the English youth replied with a nod. "It would be blasted close, but I think I could find it if I *had* to. But so what, Dave, old thing? It all boils down to the same problem we've faced since that two-faced blighter shot us down. How in the world are we going to escape?"

"*Make* the break, as I just said," Dawson came back quickly. Then, looking steadily at his pal, he continued, "Make a break for both of us, I hope. But

maybe it'll turn out a break for only *one* of us. Get what I mean, son?"

"Yes, and go on," Freddy said quietly. "That doesn't worry me a bit. I'm a very lucky chap, you know."

"Thanks, and it's been nice knowing you, you bum!" the Yank air ace said with a grin. And then in a deadly serious tone he went on, "It might be curtains for one of us, Freddy, though I hope and pray not. However, you never can tell, you know."

Dawson ended the last with a faint hunch of his shoulders, and an adequate gesture with both hands. Freddy Farmer looked at him for a moment, and then snorted softly.

"All right, old chap, all right!" he finally got out. "What do I have to do? Get down on my blasted hands and knees and beg? What in the world are you driving at, anyway?"

"Just this, pal!" Dawson came right back at him, and stuck out his jaw. "Both of us, or one of us, anyway, has got to grab one of the Jap crates up on the flight deck, and scam. Now, hold everything a minute, and let me finish. I know that we are locked up here, and no way to get out. So we've got to make a way, such as this. We bang on that door, there, and shout our heads off. Somebody is bound to come. We tell them we want to make a deal with Suicide Sasebo. In short, if he guarantees that we'll be taken to Japan as special prisoners of war, then we'll —"

"Definitely, no!" Freddy Farmer snapped. "I wouldn't give that blighter the satisfaction of—"

"Clam up your yap, will you?" Dawson hurled at him. "For cat's sakes, let me finish, dope! I'm simply telling you what we're going to say, *not* what we're going to *do*! So just keep your shirt on, mug, and let me finish. Okay! We bang and thump on the door there. Some guy comes, and we give him a song and dance about how we're willing to swap military info for a square deal from Sasebo. It stands to reason that the guy will either go tell Sasebo on the run, or take us there. Okay. Remember that last trip?"

"What do you mean, do I remember that last trip?" the English-born air ace asked.

Dawson groaned and made the motions with his hands of twisting an invisible

neck.

"What do I mean, he says!" Dave grated. "I mean this, pal. To go see Sasebo we have to walk along the flight deck, and weave in and out among all those planes, okay. Supposing we suddenly duck under a wing, leap into a cockpit, and kick the engine into life, and—and away we go, huh?"

"I'm with you all the way, old thing," Freddy Farmer said quietly. "Of course you know that, what?"

Dave grinned, reached out a hand and slapped the English youth on the back.

"My pal, always!" he said, and meant it. "Well, that's what I mean, kid. Maybe we both wouldn't make it, but—doggone, it, Freddy! One of us has just got to make it. The way those planes are parked up there we could get off before they knew what the heck was going on! Am I right, or am I right?"

"Don't bother asking me," Freddy replied, "because I'm all for the idea. But there's one thing I think we'd better check, Dave, just in case we don't make it together."

"Shoot, pal," Dawson said instantly. "What's on your mind?"

"The approximate location of Admiral Jackson's force," the English youth replied at once. "I think we'd better agree where it is, or at least where we think it is. You see what I mean?"

Dawson nodded, and started to speak, but at that moment he experienced a crazy, daffy feeling. He felt as though there were a third person in the room, and as if that third person were listening to everything that was said, and—and chuckling up his sleeve.

"I don't think we have to worry about that, kid," Dawson replied. "I think we both know just about where Admiral Jackson's force should be. The big idea is, can we grab a plane and scam away from this tub? In other words, are you game, Freddy?"

The English youth didn't reply at once. He just stared at Dawson, and smouldering fires glowed in his eyes.

"And to use a thoroughly Yank expression," he eventually said, tight-lipped, "what do you think, eh?"

Dave grinned, and nodded happily.

"Okay, kid," he said, "I was only asking. Well—what are we waiting for, huh?"

The English-born air ace seemed to hesitate a brief moment, and then he smiled and nodded.

"I'll bite," he said. "Just what are we waiting for? Go ahead, old thing. Anything is better than this, what?"

Dawson hesitated, and shot Freddy a keen look, as though he was trying to check up and make sure that his pal was definitely in favor of the plan. Then he nodded silently, turned and walked over to the cabin door with one fist raised to pound against it.

But, miracle of miracles, before his knuckles had so much as touched the cabin door, he heard the key grate in the lock, and the door opened in his face to reveal the huge Jap officer who had conducted them to Sasebo's quarters that other time. Eyes popping, and mouth hanging open, Dawson stared at the huge Jap. The son of Nippon smiled, nodded, and made a faint gesture with one hand.

"Come with me," he said. "Honorable Admiral desires to talk with you again. Come please."

For a moment Dawson could hardly believe his eyes and ears. He gaped at the Jap and then looked at Freddy Farmer. A look of astonished disbelief was stamped on the English youth's face. Dawson looked back at the big Jap, and nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Lead the way. It so happens that we want to see the Admiral, too."

The big Jap smiled, and a funny look suddenly gleamed in his double-lidded eyes. It struck Dawson as though the man were enjoying some little secret—at their expense. However, he didn't give the Jap's expression more than a passing thought. Lady Luck was indeed smiling on Freddy Farmer and him. Things were working out even better than he had hoped. Just one more break and everything would be perfect. Just the chance to suddenly duck away from this big Jap and pile into the pit of one of those Jap planes up on the flight deck. Once Freddy and he were in the pit the rest would be a cinch. They'd go scooting down that narrow take-off lane before the dumbfounded Japs realized what had happened. Right! Just one little more break, and then it would be the Japs' turn to receive

some knockout surprises.

And so, with a fervent prayer in his heart, Dawson shot a last second warning look at Freddy Farmer, and then stepped through the cabin door, and out into the companionway. A couple of minutes later he was leading the way up the ladder to the flight deck. His heart was doing wild outside loops in his chest, and the blood was racing through his veins. And as he neared the top of the ladder he heard the glorious sound of Jap aircraft engines warming up. That made it better and better. Maybe ten minutes more and Freddy and he would be streaking away on a bee-line course toward where they believed Admiral Jackson's powerful task force to be!



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Satan Laughs

When Dawson reached flight deck level he slowed up his pace as though waiting for the big Jap to give him the order to continue on toward the flight bridge. As a matter of fact, though, that was not his real intention. He slowed up a little to give Freddy Farmer time to catch up closer, and, also, to take a quick furtive look around. What he saw caused his heart to pound harder than ever. Not thirty yards away, and right smack in take-off position, was a Jap Mitsubishi two-seater, long range "Karigane" MK-11. And what's more, its prop was idling over! And if that wasn't enough to make Dawson's heart sing with wild happiness, there was not a single Jap anywhere near it. Not even a member of the deck crew.

"Hot dog, hot dog!" Dawson whispered inwardly. "Almost as though we'd requested these slant-eyed rats to set the stage for us, and they had done it. An MK-11, no less. Boy, oh boy! Do Freddy and I know that Jap crate, and how! Lady Luck, you're my dream girl for life, and I don't mean perhaps!"^[B]

Hardly daring to risk it, Dawson shot a quick glance at Freddy Farmer just the same. And that one quick look was enough to tell him that Freddy had spotted the MK-11, and was simply waiting for him to make the break. In fact, Dawson was positive that he had seen his English-born pal give a faint nod of his head in a signal as their eyes met.

"You will walk toward the flight bridge, please!" the big Jap snapped and pointed. "The Honorable Admiral is waiting."

Dawson nodded, shrugged, and turned forward to start walking a little faster. But he took only six or seven steps; then he suddenly half whirled, ducked down fast, and went under the wing of a parked plane. As he came out on the other side of the wing he shot a quick glance back over his shoulder and felt like yelling with joy. Good old Freddy Farmer was so close behind that the English youth was practically running up his back.

But even as he snapped a glance back to make e that Freddy was right there with

him, Dawson was in high gear again. Like a broken field runner going absolutely haywire he dodged this way and that, and ducked under wings, or around parked planes. Every split second of the time he expected to hear the big Jap let out a scream of rage, but if there was a scream he didn't hear it. Nor, praise be to God, did any other Japs pop up in his path.

As a matter of fact nothing popped up to stop either of the youthful air aces as they zigzagged through the parked planes at top speed, and then reached the MK-11 and virtually hurled themselves into the pits. No sooner was Dawson in the plane than he kicked off the wheel brakes, and hand heeled home the throttle. The one thousand horsepower engine in the nose roared out its song of mighty power, and the two-seater fairly leaped forward along the narrow lane on the deck that permitted room for taking-off. With every revolution of the prop the plane picked up more and more speed, so that in no time at all the parked planes that formed the two sides of the take-off lane were little more than blurred streaks rushing past either wingtip.

No wild cries from the Japs, and no bursts of machine gun or pistol fire? Dawson was surprised by the absence of fire from the Japs for maybe a whole split second. And then he forgot all about it. The MK-11 had cleared the flight deck of the Jap carrier and was prop clawing upward. However, Dawson checked the climb instantly. In fact, he actually nosed the aircraft downward until the belly of the plane was practically kissing the tops of the long blue-green rollers of the Southwest Pacific. To climb for altitude would make him an even better target for the shipboard anti-aircraft guns that were bound to go into action in another second or two. Also, to climb would mean to sacrifice speed, and speed with which to get away from the whole darn task force in a hurry was what he wanted most. And so he hugged the wave tops, headed straight for an escorting cruiser, and went past it with his wingtips almost kissing the cruiser's mast top.

"Hey, not so close!" Freddy Farmer shouted in a moment of wild alarm. "Don't spoil our luck by ramming into one of these cursed things!"

"Just hold onto your hat, pal, and don't worry!" Dawson shouted back happily. "Pretty good we are, huh, kid? Guess those slant-eyes are still wondering what the heck happened. They haven't fired a single shot at us. Boy, we *are* good, I guess!"

"Well, don't make too much of it, old thing!" the English youth shouted with a new note of alarm in his voice. "Three of the blighters are taking off from the

very same carrier we did. Fancy they think they can get us in the air, and save gun shells. So keep right on going, old thing!"

Dawson gulped at that announcement and took a second or two off from his flying to sneak a quick glance back over his shoulder. And, sure enough, Freddy Farmer hadn't been kidding him! Three Jap planes were taking off from the same carrier. And his heart leaped up into his throat when he saw that they were Jap carrier Zeros. And the reason his heart leaped into his throat was because he knew that a Zero can catch up with an MK-11 any day in the week.

"Hang on, Freddy, hang on!" he thundered, and turned front again. "We've just got to get away from those Zeros. If not, then you've got to keep them at a safe distance with your rear guns. So I'll fly for us, and you fight for us. That's the way it has got to be."

"Right you are, Dave!" the English youth called forward to him. "I'll—Oh, good gosh! Dave! How about your radio? Has it got a mike?"

Impulsively Dawson switched his gaze to his radio in the front pit. And it was then that he had the queer feeling of lumps of cold lead bouncing around in the pit of his stomach. There were earphones for the radio, but no mike. The little hook at the side was empty. And the wire that ran down into the set wasn't there. It had been removed completely.

"Sweet tripe!" he gasped. "This darn set's no good for sending. Not even a mike. Hey, Freddy, have—?"

Dawson didn't bother to finish the rest. He choked off his words and twisted around in the seat instead. And when he saw the look on Freddy's face, and saw his pal sadly shake his head, little fingers of ice seemed to clutch at his heartstrings. Freddy's radio set was the same as his. Okay for receiving, but not a darned bit of good for sending.

And so it was Satan's turn to laugh now. They had stolen a plane, and had managed to get away from the Jap carrier, but what they had hoped and prayed for most had been denied them. They had been denied the chance to raise Admiral Jackson's task force on the radio and reveal to the Admiral the position and course of Admiral Suicide Sasebo's carrier force.

Yes, that hope was gone now. Their only chance of making any kind of a success out of this cockeyed venture was to find the Yank task force wherever it was in

that vast corner of the Southwest Pacific. They had to find that Yank force somehow, but—but what about those three Jap Zeros that had taken off in pursuit of them? Yes, what about *them*?

As that heart-chilling question pounded and hammered around in Dawson's head he turned in the seat again for another look at those three Zeros. They were in the air, now, but *climbing*. Yes, instead of coming straight after the MK-11 the three Zeros were heading up for altitude as though they were actually setting off on some routine patrol. Incidentally, were it not for the fact that the three Zeros were heading in the same direction as the MK-11, Dawson would have believed that Freddy and he had made their escape one hundred per cent successful. He knew differently, however. He knew darned well that the Jap pilot in each of the three Zeros had his double-lidded eyes fixed on the MK-11, and was keeping them fixed on it, too. But why the thunder were they climbing? Why didn't they come flat out so as to catch up with the stolen MK-11 as fast as they could?

"There's something blasted funny about this, Dave!" Freddy Farmer's voice cut into his thoughts. "We neither of us can use the radio, and those blighters back there are making no effort to catch up with us. I don't like it at all. In fact—but, good Heavens, that couldn't possibly be, I'm sure!"

Dawson took his eyes off the climbing Zeros long enough to look at his pal.

"What now?" he barked. "What do you mean by that last, huh?"

Freddy Farmer didn't reply at once, and the dark frown on his face told clearly that he was struggling with some very disagreeable thoughts. Eventually the English youth bit his lip and pointed at the little hook in his pit that should have a broadcasting mike hanging on it, but didn't.

"I—I wonder if the beggars *let* us escape, Dave?" he finally spoke in a hesitant voice. "Yes, I wonder very much if they didn't let us get away. After all, not a shot was fired. Fact is, I didn't see a single Jap on that flight deck try to head us off from reaching this plane. And it *was* square in position for a quick take-off, too!"

Dawson gulped, and his mouth seemed full of sawdust, and little cold shivers rippled through his body. He stared at Freddy, and then shook his head angrily.

"Don't be nuts, Freddy!" he snapped. "Why in thunder *should* they let us escape? You're crazy, pal!"

"Possibly," Freddy Farmer replied. "But you're forgetting that there are two sides to this business."

"And so?" Dawson echoed when Freddy stopped talking. "Out with the rest of it! What do you mean, two sides?"

"What the *Japs* want to know, of course!" the English youth flung at him. "Why do you suppose the Japs let us stay alive so long? Because they knew we were from some Yank carrier task force, and because they wanted to find out from us *where it is*. We made that thick-headed Nazi U-boat commander believe something that wasn't the truth. But Sasebo didn't swallow our story, Dave. Not one bit of it. So they tried a trick *to find out for themselves*. You see?"

Dawson didn't. In fact, he didn't see any part of it. But he didn't say anything for a while. He turned front, and gave half of his attention to his flying, and mulled over Freddy's most unpleasant words. A couple of times he glanced back at the Zeros. They had leveled off at around five thousand feet, and seemed to be coasting along a couple of miles behind the MK-11. And each time Dawson turned front a few more cold shivers rippled through his body. And the lumps of lead in his stomach did some more bouncing around.

And so little by little he was forced to admit that maybe there was something in what Freddy Farmer had said. Yet it still didn't make sense to him. Heck! How did the Japs *know* that they planned to escape? And darn it, why did the Japs let them get away without a struggle? Finally Dawson turned around and caught Freddy's eye again.

"Okay, okay, maybe," he said. "But tell me this, kid? How the heck did they know we would plan to escape? And why?"

"I can only guess, Dave," the English youth replied with a frown. "But I have a very strong feeling that it is the truth. Look at the facts, Dave. They had a pretty good idea that we knew where our task force was. They figured that we would head straight for it if we ever got our hands on a plane. Fact is, Dave, they knew we'd do just that because they *heard* us talking about it!"

"What?" Dawson exploded. "Heard us? What in thunder are you raving about?"

Freddy Farmer made a little impatient motion with one hand and leaned farther forward.

"Look, Dave," he said, "right after you went to town on that Sasebo he said

something to that other Jap. The other Jap answered him. Then Sasebo nodded, and spoke again. And *then*, with not so much as a how do you do, or why, we were taken back to that empty cabin. There we talked over our plans of how we might manage an escape. We agreed to give it a good try, and then what happens? Everything works out as smooth as can be. We're not stopped, an aircraft is in take-off position practically waiting for us, and not a shot is fired at us from any of the task force ships. But now two things we didn't count on pop up. One, neither of us can raise Admiral Jackson's task force because the speaker units have been removed from both sets. And, two, three faster Jap Zeros are trailing us, and making no effort to catch up! Why? Because they hope for *us to lead them* to Jackson's force. Then they can send the news back to Sasebo, and shoot us down. As the saying goes, old thing, dead men tell no tales. Sasebo will know where Jackson is, but Jackson won't know where Sasebo is. And knowing *where* the other chap is, so that you can sneak up on him in surprise, is half the battle with aircraft carrier task forces, you see?"

"That much, yes," Dawson replied with a frown. "Yes, you're selling me a fair load of goods, Freddy. But there's one thing you haven't explained. How in thunder did they *hear* us chewing over what we were going to do? Answer me that?"

"I can't prove it, unless you want to take us back to that Jap carrier!" the English youth replied in an exasperated tone. "But I'd bet anything on it. And I'm amazed that you haven't thought of it yet!"

"Okay, wonderful one!" Dawson growled. "Folks call me Dummy Dawson. So be big-hearted, and tell me the answer."

"A *dictograph*, of course!" Freddy snapped at him. "A dictograph put in that empty cabin while we were having our little chat-chat with Sasebo. Or maybe the confounded thing was hidden there all along. But it must have been a dictograph, and—and the beggars made all the arrangements *we* wanted!"

Dawson didn't say anything. He just sat stiff and straight as though he had been shot. Then he gasped, and clapped his free hand to his forehead.

"So help me, the guy must be right!" he mumbled. "The guy *must be right!* A dictograph as sure as the earth grows little apples. And me thinking that *we'd* pulled off something very bright. Holy smoke! We really are in a jam now, Freddy!"

"Quite!" the English youth replied, and glanced back over his shoulder. "If we lead those Zero pilots to within sight of Admiral Jackson's force, it might result in a terrible thing. Just the exact opposite of what we really want to do. And that's why those devils are hanging back up there, Dave, instead of coming down to do us in. They are going to follow us until Jackson's force is sighted. Then the beggars *will* come down, no fear!"

"What now, what now?" Dawson mumbled helplessly, and stared back at the Jap Zeros himself. "If we let them trail us to Jackson's position, who knows what may come of it? And if we lead them in the wrong direction, we'll run out of gas eventually, and be forced to sit down in the water. Then Jackson will not know that Sasebo's force is moving down on Guadalcanal by a roundabout course. And Jackson will not know that Sasebo *knows* about the attempt to take Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Jeepers! A choice of two things, and both bad!"

[\[B\]](#) *Dave Dawson With The Flying Tigers.*



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dead Wings

For another fifteen minutes Dawson stuck to the course he was flying and battled desperately with the problem of *which* of the two bad choices he should make. One moment he was in favor of leading the Zeros as close to Jackson's approximate position as he dared, and then jumping them and shooting them down. But in the next moment he would tell himself that that was like hoping for the moon on a silver platter. And what's more, it was a completely nutty idea for the very reason that neither Freddy nor he knew the *exact* location of Jackson's force. They could only figure out approximately where it was. For that reason they might well stumble on it by accident and the Japs sight it just as clearly as they did. And if that should happen, and he should wheel around to shoot them down, they could indeed give him the horse laugh. They had only to bank around and open their throttles wide, and the MK-11 would never catch them in a hundred years.

And so, with that decided, he would promptly consider the second bad choice. That of leading the Zeros in a direction that wouldn't even come close to the Yank aircraft carrier task force, and then sitting down in the water when the fuel was used up. As a matter of fact, the Zeros would be out of fuel long before then. So maybe the choice of leading the Zeros on a crazy wild goose chase out across the vast reaches of the Southwest Pacific was a good one to make.

"But, doggone it, no!" Dawson argued with himself. "Freddy and I knew something that can mean plenty to Colonel Welsh and Admiral Jackson. And to the forces attacking Guadalcanal, too. We've just *got* to get that information through, somehow. And that's all there is to it, darn it!"

Yes, that's all there was to it, darn it! Except for the one ever tantalizing word. The word *how*. How to shake off the trailing Jap Zeros? How to find Jackson's task force, wherever it was? How to do this? And how to do that? Dawson groaned in bitter anguish and pressed one clenched fist against his forehead, as though in so doing he might force open some little door in his brain, and find out all the correct answers. It didn't work out that way, however. And then, eventually, he felt Freddy Farmer tapping him on the shoulder and heard his pal's

voice in his ear.

"I say, Dave, old thing, I just thought of something. Maybe we can go these beggars one better, in spite of them, and come out on top, you know."

Dawson twisted around in the seat, and made a little impatient gesture.

"Then for cat's sake spill it!" he cried. "I've thought my brain ragged, but no soap. Have you really figured up an idea? Shoot it to me quick, pal."

"It's a wild chance, Dave, but I think we've got to take it," the English youth began. "First place, we can't lead these Zeros to Jackson's force. Also, we just can't lead them any old place until we run out of fuel. That would simply be the end of us, and Admiral Jackson would be none the wiser, see?"

"Of course I see!" Dawson growled as the English youth paused for breath. "I figured all that out for myself years ago. So what? Have you got anything better?"

"I think so," Freddy came right back at him. "Port Moresby in New Guinea, Dave. We still hold Port Moresby. There's a big air base there. And, of course, a radio station. If we can reach Port Moresby we can get them to flash what information we know to Admiral Jackson. At least we can give the alarm that Sasebo's force knows of the Guadalcanal attack, and will probably try to do something about it. That way, at least, the Guadalcanal forces won't be caught by surprise. Also they'll be on the alert in Northern Australia in case Sasebo does go all the way down there. But the big point is, Dave, these Zeros back there couldn't possibly reach Port Moresby with the fuel they carry."

Dawson thought that over for a moment or two. Then he nodded his head and grinned at Freddy.

"Brains the guy really has got!" he cried. "Take a bow, Freddy. I think you've hit the solution right on the old head. It'll be touch and go whether even we can reach Port Moresby from here. But it's a cinch those Zeros never will. Then, too, when they see us head south they may think we're heading for Jackson's force, and figure that Jackson must be on patrol off the New Guinea coast, which he isn't. Yup! Take a bow, Freddy. But it's going to be close. Plenty close. Just the same, though, there's another little thing in our favor. The time of day, Freddy!"

"What's that?" the English-born air ace echoed, and looked puzzled.

"The time of day, or I should say night," Dave told him, and jerked his head westward. "In about an hour it's going to be plenty dark. If we haven't shaken them off our tails by then, we can certainly do it in the darkness. And who knows, maybe then we can change course again and find Jackson sometime around dawn. There's nine hours gas in this air buggy, at least. So maybe everything will be okey-doke after all."

"Well, anyway, turn south, Dave, and let's keep our fingers crossed," Freddy Farmer grunted.

Dave winked, gave Freddy the old two-finger V-for-victory sign, and banked the MK-11 around until he was headed due south. True, his navigation depended only on the compass. And a Jap compass at that. However, he felt sure that if he kept on heading as he was going now he would eventually hit some part of the New Guinea coast. And that would be good enough. He'd find Port Moresby soon afterward, or—

"Or bust a wing in the attempt!" he finished the thought grimly.

And so, southward went the Mitsubishi MK-11. And southward, also, trailed the three Jap Zeros no more than two miles behind, and some four or five thousand feet higher up in the air. And for an hour the picture remained the same. There was nothing to be seen below but the rolling endless swells of that part of the Southwest Pacific. And in the air the three Jap Zeros tagging doggedly along. Ten thousand times, at least, Dawson twisted around for a squint at those trailing Zeros. And ten thousand times, too, he glanced at the last glow of the sun's rays that tinted the western heavens, and at the shadows of night racing up out of the east.

Soon, now, night would come with a rush as it always did in that part of the world. Soon darkness would be all about the MK-11, and he and Freddy Farmer could lose those trailing Zeros. Soon—

But at that exact moment he heard Freddy's wild cry of alarm and felt the English youth's fist thump down on his shoulder.

"Here they come, Dave!" Freddy cried. "Here come the blighters, blast them!"

Dawson instantly twisted around in the seat, and just as quickly cold fear clutched at his heart. It was true enough. The three Zeros had suddenly speeded up. But, more than that, they were coming down in a dive straight for the MK-

11. One look at the way those Zeros were piling down and Dawson knew that one of two guesses was true. And possibly both. The Zero pilots had decided that the two youths planned to shake them off in the darkness, after leading them astray. Or else they figured that the American carrier force was due south, and that they could finish off their "unsuspecting victims" and use the rest of the gas in their tanks to get back to their own carrier. It was one or the other, and maybe both. But down they came, anyway, and a spell of cold, helpless fear was Dawson's.

"Get set with your rear guns, Freddy!" he called out sharply. "I should have figured this. Those rats are tired of playing around, and I've got a hunch they're going to do something about it. Something not so good for us."

"I think so, too!" the English youth called back. "But let them try it, blast them. Frankly, I'm blessed well fed up with being tagged around. So let the blighters come. We'll fight them, if we have to. Jolly well right, we'll fight them!"

The words that poured from Freddy Farmer's lips were better than a tonic to Dawson. The cold fear left him at once, and instead he was filled with a fierce determination. Right! Let those Zeros pile down and get tough. He, too, was fed up with being pushed and shoved and tagged around. Doggone it, it seemed years since he had let fly with any bullets at the Japs. The last time had been as that Air Transport Command plane was approaching the Australian coast from India. Heck, yes! Since then they hadn't done a darn thing for their country. On the contrary, they'd been shot up, shot down, and kicked around by the Japs. So okay. If it was to be a scrap, then that would be fine, and nuts to the odds against them!

With a silent savage nod for emphasis, Dawson twisted around and squinted at the Jap Zeros for the umpty-umpth time. They were down almost on a level with the MK-11, and while two of them remained in wingtip to wingtip formation, the third Zero speeded up and came up abreast of the MK-11. Dawson stared at it narrow-eyed, ready to out-maneuver the Jap if he tried any smart stuff. And it was then he saw the helmeted figure in the pit put his radio mike to his lips, and motion with his free hand to Dawson to switch on his receiving set. For a couple of split seconds the Yank air ace stared in amazement. Then he snapped out of his trance and impulsively knocked up the switch of his receiving set in the front pit, and pulled the earphones down over his head.

For a brief instant or two he heard nothing but the hum of the set warming up,

and a little blast of static. And then he almost jumped out of the pit with surprise as he clearly heard the voice of the huge Jap who had been their "escort" back on the enemy carrier.

"Turn around and come with us, please!" came the astonishing demand. "Turn around at once, and return with us, please, or we will shoot you down into the water. I am warning you. You cannot escape. Turn around, and come back with us at once, please!"

Dawson turned around, right enough. His head, and *not* the plane. He looked at Freddy, wide-eyed.

"Well, what do you know!" he cried. "And what a hope that guy has. You heard him, Freddy?"

The English youth nodded, and yanked his own headphones off.

"Jolly well right, I heard the beggar!" he cried angrily. "And here's our answer to him. Get set, Dave!"

As Freddy shouted the last he grabbed his rear guns and fired a defiant burst straight over the wings of the Zero. He could very easily have slammed that burst straight into the Zero, but that would have been Jap stuff, and he couldn't bring himself to sink that low, regardless of the seriousness of the situation.

"There's your answer, you dirty blighter!" he howled as the Jap pilot almost turned his plane inside out in a frantic effort to get away. "There's your answer, blast you!"

The English youth shouted more things, but Dawson didn't wait to listen and admire. He had twisted back front and was sticking the MK-11 through a vicious half-roll to throw off the aim of the two Zero pilots behind flying wingtip formation. And it was the perfect maneuver in such a case, too. He did throw the two pilots off and caused them to open fire a split second too late so that tracers from their guns cleared the top of the twisting MK-11 by several feet.

"Catch them Freddy, catch them, kid!" Dawson bellowed as he hauled the wing screaming MK-11 up out of its mad dive. "Nail one of the tramps, and make it that much less uneven, kid!"

Maybe the English youth heard, and maybe he didn't. Maybe he had that idea all along. At any rate, his guns hammered out their chattering note, and Dawson

saw one of the Zeros seem to stagger and stumble in the air. By then he had brought the MK-11 around and up so that he could bring his own guns to bear. He stabbed the electric trigger button, and a great shout of joy burst from his lips as the staggering Zero suddenly became a ball of fire that hung motionless in midair for a split second and then fell down into the water, leaving behind a trail of oily black smoke.

Neither Dave, nor Freddy Farmer, however, took time out to watch the Zero flame downward to its finish. They still had a two to one fight on their hands, *and* against two planes that could fly rings around their MK-11. They had been lucky and had caught one of the Japs with his "flaps down," so to speak, but the other two were not going to be so easy. As a matter of fact, it seemed to Dawson that he had hardly slammed the death burst into that first Jap before one of the others was wheeling in at him broadside, despite the withering fire from Freddy Farmer's guns. The MK-11 shook and trembled as it was hit in a dozen different places. And suddenly Dawson felt as though he had been clipped in the chest by the tip of a spinning prop. Every bit of air was knocked out of his lungs, and black and red spots began to whirl and dance around before his eyes. Then, suddenly, the spots disappeared, and save for a dull ache in his chest he was all right again.

All right? He laughed harshly as that thought flashed through his brain. All right? Sure, except for the minor detail that the two Jap Zero pilots were maneuvering about to "box" the MK-11 in a deadly and fatal cross-fire. Yes, sure, he was all okay save for that minor little detail.

"Give it to them, Dave! Don't let the blighters get away with it! Fly their confounded wings off, blast them!"

The words had come from Freddy's lips, but as far as Dave Dawson was concerned they were just a waste of breath. He was well aware of the two Zeros closing in for a cross-fire attack. And he was well aware of the fact that he'd have to just about fly the wings off the Zeros in order to skip free of this air trap. As a matter of fact, the only thing he could possibly do was to play a long shot; to take a one in a million chance, and pray as he had never before prayed in his life. Take a long shot chance, and pray.

"Hold tight, Freddy!" he shouted. "I'm going to twist this baby plenty. I—"

He cut off the rest of what he was shouting because his chest was filled with sharp pains again, and his lungs felt as though they were breathing liquid fire. It

suddenly seemed to take every ounce of his strength to move the control stick, and to kick on rudder. But somehow he managed it, and he sent the MK-11 curving upward and around toward the Zero on his left. And at the same time Freddy Farmer let fly with his guns at the Zero on the right. Dawson's Jap saw him coming and, rather than chance the full fury of the Yank's fire, he pulled off and upward. In that same split second Dawson steeled himself to the effort, slammed the stick over, booted opposite rudder and brought the MK-11 around and up in the opposite direction. In other words he cut off his expected attack on the first Zero to cut in up at the Zero on the other side. As a result of that double maneuver, which was carried through with split-second accuracy, he not only broke up the two Zero plane attack, but forced each Jap pilot to careen upward and away.

Too late the two Japs realized what was going to happen. Instead of both charging straight in on the MK-11, they both were streaking straight at one another! Both Japs saw that a midair crash was about to take place, and both frantically tried to swerve off into the clear. And perhaps they might have succeeded if it hadn't been for the deadly aim of Freddy Farmer. The English youth's guns snarled out their song, and one of the Jap pilots was stone dead before he could turn off into the clear. And his failure to do so spilled the beans for the other Jap. He couldn't check his plane in time, and he flew straight into the other faltering Zero.

To Dawson's ears, and to Freddy Farmer's, came the loud crashing sound as the two high speed planes met about three hundred feet above the MK-11. And then the whole sky seemed to be filled with seething flame. Dawson cried out in impulsive alarm and slammed the nose of his two-seater downward. Glancing back up over his shoulder, he saw the mass of exploding flame that enveloped the two Zeros. Then there was even a louder explosion, and the air was filled with falling slivers of flame. Choking and gasping from the effort it caused him, Dawson hauled the MK-11 out of its mad dive at about wave crest height and flew, level while red and black dots danced around before his eyes again, and dull, throbbing pain flowed through his chest.

"Nice, Dave!" he heard Freddy Farmer calling to him. "That was the most perfect maneuver I ever saw. Man! Did you fool those two beggars. It was absolutely wonderful."

"I'll just take half the credit, kid!" Dawson forced himself to call back. "But for that sweet shooting of yours the stunt might not have worked. And—Oh, for

gosh sakes!"

Dave gasped out the last as he happened to glance at the instrument panel. One of the bursts of bullets from one of the Zeros had made a shambles of the instrument board. And the compass in particular was just a heap of junk. With the compass gone they would have to depend entirely upon celestial navigation. In other words, any hope they might have of continuing on to find Admiral Jackson's task force was completely gone. Because of the milling around in the fight they had, of course, lost all track of their exact position. And they would have to know their position exactly in order to set a true course for the area where they believed the Yank task force to be. And without the aid of the compass they wouldn't be able to hold to a true course, even if they could plot one. And so there was but one thing to do. They at least could tell the direction of south. And somewhere south of them was New Guinea with the Yank-held base at Port Morseby. So south it had to be, and in no other direction.

"Blast their good shooting!" Dave heard Freddy's voice close behind him, and knew that the English youth was looking at what had happened to the compass. "Well, south it is then, Dave. It'll be dark in no time, now. And at least we can tell true south from the stars. But, after all, we're blasted lucky. So I guess we can't kick much, what?"

Dawson nodded, and dragged air into his lungs. The pain of it caused him to wince slightly, silently. But he managed to speak the words.

"Go south, I always say," he grunted. "But keep the old fingers crossed, Freddy. And don't forget the praying, either. We haven't got the Japs to worry about any more, thank God. But we have got an awful lot of ocean to consider. And—yeah—a plane that maybe won't quite make it.

"Rot, Dave!" Freddy snapped at him. "You're talking like an old woman. Come off it. We'll make it, you'll see. Blast it, Dave, we've just got to!"

"Check, kid, check!" Dawson mumbled. "We've just got to make it, and how!"

And with a half-nod for emphasis he unconsciously put his free hand to his throbbing chest.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Flight's End

Darkness, and more darkness, and even more darkness. Constantly, forever, and eternally. And with it all the monotonous, nerve-pounding drone of the engine in the nose of the Mitsubishi. Ten million times it was all Dawson could do to refrain from screaming his head off, and diving right out of the plane into the black night air. It was the same minute after minute, and hour after hour. It was almost more than Dawson, in his condition, could bear. And as the night dragged on and on, tiny little fears began to mount up in the Yank air ace.

It had been but a few minutes after the three to one air scrap when the Southwest Pacific night had arrived with a swoop and a rush, and closed in on all sides. However, as though the gods were favoring those two youths a little, there were no clouds in the night sky. Above and stretching far off to all the horizons was a solid canopy of glittering and winking stars. And so it had been but a simple matter to plot a course south by the stars, allowing for a slight correction either way.

And so they had headed south at cruising throttle, and with a solemn, fervent prayer in their hearts that after the seven hours of darkness in that part of the world would come dawn and the definite knowledge that they were within sight of the New Guinea coast. Both realized that then would begin the most difficult part of the long flight. Though MacArthur's troops and planes were hammering hard at the Japs, the devils from the Land of the Rising Sun still held most of New Guinea. And, frankly speaking, the two youths could expect more trouble before they sat down on the Yank-held base at Port Moresby.

However, they had won out so far, and against great odds, so there was more than a little joy in their hearts as they went winging south. For a long time they chatted back and forth about this and that for no other reason than the pleasure of companionship. Eventually, though, they ran out of words, and save for a short sentence now and then they both remained silent.

As far as Dawson was concerned, that was perfectly okay. His chest was on fire, and it hurt him to talk. Also, there were little alarming spells of giddiness that

came to him every now and then. He didn't dare say anything to Freddy, because that would add just one more worry to the English youth's stock. So he kept his mouth shut, clamped down hard on the knife-like pains in his chest, and flew doggedly southward, praying for dawn as he had never prayed in his whole life before.

But the darkness dragged on and on until Dawson was ready to despair of ever seeing a dawn again. A numbness had settled in his left shoulder, except when he moved it. And when he did by accident, he had to shut his teeth tight to stop from crying out from the pain. A cold clammy sweat formed on his forehead, and the beads kept continually trickling down into his eyes to blur his vision, and caused him to imagine he saw all kinds of crazy things that didn't exist at all a split second after he had brushed the sweat from his eyes. Particularly he was seeing the lights of ships below. Or, at least, certain he was seeing them until he looked again. Of course, every time he "saw" the lights he knew perfectly well that any boat in that part of the Southwest Pacific, Yank or Jap, most certainly wouldn't be showing so much as a speck of light at night. However, what he imagined seemed so real that he was constantly sitting up straight and peering down over the right wing or the left.

If dawn would *only* come! If only there would come a thin pale line of light in the east to give him hope, if nothing else! If—

"I say, old chap!" Freddy Farmer's voice cut into his thoughts, and prayers. "Would you mind raising the shade and letting in a bit of light, what? I'm getting blasted fed up with this darkness. I swear we've had a solid week of it. I really do."

"Me, too, pal," Dawson replied, and struggled to keep his suffering out of his voice. "It almost seems as if somebody blew out the doggoned sun. Boy, if— Hold it! Am I right, or am I right, Freddy? Could that be the first grey streak there to the east, huh?"

"It not only could be, but it is!" the English-born air ace shouted happily. "Praise be to Allah! In a few moments now we should be able to get a look at where we are. I bet you anything you like that the New Guinea coast is just ahead of us, and that we'll see it soon."

"No bet!" Dave called back. "That's one bet I wouldn't want to win. And how, I wouldn't want to win it!"

As Dawson spoke the last a sudden thought came to him, and he caught his breath. The thought was: What if they didn't sight land within an hour or less after dawn? Supposing their drift during the night hours had been double or even triple what they had allowed for, and they were actually lost somewhere above the broad expanse of the Southwest Pacific? What if they were lost, and remained lost until the engine in the nose sucked up the last drop of high test, and then quit cold? There was a rubber raft in the MK-11, but Dawson knew in his heart that he would never survive a single day drifting helplessly on the sun-flooded waters. Yesterday, sure, or the day before—but not now. Not during this day that was now dawning. And so, please, God! Please!

The silent prayer remained on Dawson's lips as he watched the pale line of light low down in the east grow broader and brighter, until, as though invisible doors in the heavens had been flung open, the light of the new day came rushing westward, driving the shadows of night on ahead of it. In a matter of less than fifteen minutes the two youths had perfect visibility in all four directions. First, though, they peered southward. And to Dawson it was like receiving a mule's kick in the stomach. Nothing but dawn-tinted water as far as the eye could see. Not a sign of land. Not a sign of anything but water; endless rolling swells of it. A great sadness, a great bitterness welled up in him until he could hardly breathe. And there was the sting of hot tears at the backs of his eyeballs.

"No land—not a darn sight of it!" he heard himself mumble. "And I had hoped—oh gosh, how I had hoped! Darn it, there *has* to be land, or we just can't possibly make Port Moresby. And I can't—"

He let the rest trail off and stared bleak-eyed at the limitless stretch of water to the south. He wanted to turn around in the pit and say something cheerful to Freddy Farmer in back. Say any old thing that would take the sting out of what his pal must be thinking, too. But somehow he couldn't turn around. Somehow he couldn't even think of anything to say. He felt absolutely powerless to move. It was as though he were a dead man looking out across a dead world.

And then, suddenly, a bunched fist came down on his left shoulder, and he almost fainted from the pain in his chest as Freddy Farmer's wildly shouted words smashed against his ear drums.

"Dave, look! Off there to port! Dave, look, look, old chap! A lot of ships. A carrier task force. *It's Jackson's force, Dave! Jackson's!* There's our task force. Dave! It's a miracle, a blessed miracle! There's the task force!"

For one brief instant more Dawson couldn't move. Then he managed to turn his head, but he could see nothing but swimming lights and shadows. The pent up emotions within him had broken their bonds, and hot tears that he couldn't check filled his eyes and blurred everything. That made him angry at himself, and at everything else. And with angry motions he rubbed and brushed the tears from his eyes. And then when he took another look he saw what Freddy Farmer's sharp eyes had seen first. Far, far off to port, and so low down on the horizon that they looked like no more than a cluster of bugs on the water, were the two carriers, the destroyers and the cruisers and supply ships of Admiral Jackson's task force. Even though the distance was great, he could recognize them for what they really were. And a happiness such as he had never known flooded throughout his entire body.

"Jackson's force?" he heard himself echo weakly. "But what the heck? What's it doing over there? That's a night's steaming from the search area! Or—or have we been flying in circles all night long? It's—it's like a dream. A mad, crazy dream! I—"

"Dave, snap out of it, for Heaven's sake!" Freddy's voice cut short his mumbling. "Fly over to them. Fly over to them. *That's our task force!* Don't you understand, Dave?"

"Sure, sure!" Dawson called back, though every word seemed to burn holes in his lungs. "I see them, and I'm heading over. Just—just taking a couple of minutes out to enjoy life again."

"Wait, jolly well wait until you get aboard!" the English youth yelled. "Maybe you like being in this confounded aircraft, but I don't. Get us over there, quickly. The sooner we give our report to Admiral Jackson the better it will be for everybody concerned. Man, Dave, just think of it! We found Sasebo's force, and now we've found Admiral Jackson's. Imagine that!"

"Yeah, imagine that!" Dawson mumbled, as a spell of cold shivers started taking charge of his body. "Just the way you see it happen in the movies. Only—"

He let the rest die because the effort cost him too much, and banked the MK-11 around until it was heading full out for the Yank task force far ahead. And then it was he woke up to a fact that had been in the back of his brain for some considerable time. And what woke him up to the truth was sight of three Navy Grumman Wildcats streaking up off the flight deck of one of the carriers, and coming up and around toward them at top speed.

"Get set to wave and signal those guys somehow, Freddy!" he choked out. "We're in a *Jap plane*, you know. Only those guys *don't*. So stand up and wave, or hold your hands up in surrender, or something. Navy Wildcat pilots don't take chances. They've learned you can't against the Jap rats. So, for cat's sake, wave, or do any old thing to get them to hold their fire. Here, I'll help you!"

Dawson started to stand up in his pit of the MK-11, but before he was half-way up invisible steel claws seemed to tear his chest wide open, and he fell back into the seat gasping and choking for air. And countless dancing red and black dots filled his eyes. It seemed years and years before he could get air into his burning lungs, and drive the red and black dots away. By then the first of the three Wildcats was within shooting range, but Freddy Farmer was standing up straight, waving his arms, pointing at his American uniform, and yelling blue murder at the top of his voice.

The leading Wildcat, however, came boring in at terrific speed, and Dawson died a thousand deaths as he expected with each new split second to see the leading edges of the Grumman's wing start spitting out stabbing tongues of flame, and to feel the Wildcat's bullets and air cannon shells smash and pound their way into the MK-11.

However, the Wildcat pilot did not open fire. Instead he went sweeping past the Jap two-seater, staring at it hard. Then he circled around and came tearing up from the other side. As he drew abreast Freddy Farmer practically fell out of the MK-11 in his frantic efforts to signal the truth to the Yank Navy pilot. Dawson managed to lift his right hand, and wave, too. And then the two other Wildcats came up and took up positions close to the MK-11. And Freddy Farmer promptly went into his dance for their benefit, too.

Eventually the Wildcat pilots either recognized Dawson and Farmer, or else they spotted the Yank Air Forces uniforms that the two youths wore, and could see that at least no Japs were wearing them. Or maybe it was for some other reason. At any rate, the section leader nodded his head, motioned for Freddy Farmer to stop trying to throw himself out of the Jap plane, and then pointed over toward the carrier task force. That was all Dawson and Freddy wanted, and they both nodded vigorously in acknowledgment. Then, with a Wildcat on each side, and one just behind and a little above, Dawson guided the MK-11 straight for the task force. As he reached the flanking cruisers and destroyers, he saw the countless upturned faces on the decks, and also the Pom-Pom guns and the "Chicago Pianos" trained dead on the Jap plane. He grinned down at them

happily, but just the same a nervous shiver or two rippled through his burning and pain-filled body.

And then, finally, Dawson had the MK-11 banked around and sliding down toward the stern of the Carson as the carrier knocked off knots into the wind. That glide downward was the greatest agony of his life. Huge as the Carson was, the confounded thing seemed to dance and skip around before his eyes. Countless times the landing officer, with a signal flag in each hand, blurred right out of his vision. And once he almost fainted with fright when he got the cockeyed impression that he was heading the MK-11 straight for the Carson's superstructure.

The one thousand years passed by, however, and the Jap two-seater was down on the flight deck, trundling forward while deck crews hung onto the wingtips. And finally they managed to drag it to a halt. A choking gasp of unbounded relief burst from Dawson's lips. And tears of inexpressible joy made his eyes smart as he caught sight of Colonel Welsh and Admiral Jackson racing across the flight deck toward the Jap plane. Laughing and choking in the same breath, Dawson heaved himself up out of the pit, stepped out on the wing but missed his footing and fell sprawling on the wing. He slid off it feet first, so he was standing on the deck when the Colonel and the Admiral came up.

"Here we are again, sir," Dawson cried. "Just like a couple of bad pennies that—that—"

His tongue seemed to stick in his mouth, and the Carson seemed to spin like a top.

"*Dave!*" he heard Freddy Farmer scream. "Somebody—quick—catch him!"

"Here, Dawson, steady!" he heard Colonel Welsh shout.

"Good grief!" cried a third voice. "Look at his chest! Good grief. The man's hit bad. Here, somebody...!"

But Dawson didn't hear any more. The Carrier Carson turned upside down and smashed him on the head with its flight deck. Then there was nothing but complete silence and utter darkness.



It was a beautiful pink-tinted cloud that was carrying Dawson through a beautiful world filled with soft and soothing music. Never had he felt so rested, and so comfortable. So much so that he just couldn't be bothered trying to figure out where he was, or what had happened to put him there. Maybe it was Heaven. He didn't know, and he didn't care. If it wasn't Heaven, then it was certainly the next best thing. Whatever it was it suited him perfectly, and he was quite willing to stay where he was indefinitely.

However, that was not to be!

The pink cloud faded away and became a white bunk in some ship's whitewashed sick-bay. And the soft, soothing music faded out, and became the quietly coaxing voice of a human being. In other words, he slowly regained consciousness to find himself staring up into the face of Freddy Farmer, and into the face, also, of Colonel Welsh. And it was the Chief of Combined U. S. Intelligence who was speaking to him.

"Easy does it, son," the colonel was saying. "Try and hang on this time, Dawson. You're all set, son. Everything is fine and dandy. Not a thing to worry about. Just try and relax and be calm, son."

"That's right, Dave, old thing," Freddy Farmer echoed with a catch in his voice. "Gosh, but it's good to see your eyes really clear. You look fine, really. Feel a fair bit better, what?"

Dawson blinked, started to mumble a question, and then gasped as complete memory came flooding back into his brain like water over a broken dam.

"Hey, hey!" he got out. "What am I doing here? What are you doing here, Freddy? Sasebo's task force! Holy smokes, Freddy! Didn't you—?"

Dawson would have said more, but Colonel Welsh gently put a hand over his mouth, and shook his head from side to side.

"Now, now, son," he said with quiet firmness. "Try and realize what I'm telling you. *Everything* is all right, see? That Jap task force is spread all over the ocean, and a good many of its ships sunk, too. Now, try hard, Dawson, and really get hold of yourself. You've been raving out the complete story of what happened to you and Farmer for two days now. I'm trying to tell you that everything has been taken care of. Everything is fine!"

Dawson blinked again and tried hard to absorb the full meaning of the colonel's

words. But there was one part that just didn't seem possible.

"Two days, Colonel?" he echoed. "You mean that I've been like this, out cold for two days? Jeepers!"

"That's right," the senior officer said, and smiled. "Now, just relax and I'll bring you up to date, briefly. You went cold right after you landed that Jap plane on the Carson. So it was up to Farmer, here, to explain everything. When he had told the story we got busy at once. We figured out the course that Sasebo must have followed after you and Farmer took off. Well, our scout-bombers found him. We caught him with his planes on the flight deck. Thanks to you and Farmer, we were able to do a good job on him. One of his carriers sunk, and the other two badly damaged. The last seen of one of them it was on fire. Two troop ships were sunk, and the rest of the force sent flying for bases where they would be safe. In short, we certainly ruined him for a while. By the time his force can put to sea again there won't be a Jap left on Guadalcanal for him to reenforce. And by the way, *that* attack went off according to schedule. The Marines landed, and as usual they have the situation in hand. And now you're aboard a cruiser bound for Australia and a good spell in a hospital. Frankly, you haven't any right to be alive, Dawson. Did you know that?"

"And that's definitely true, old thing!" Freddy Farmer spoke up. "Good grief, Dave, why didn't you tell me you had been hit? And to think that all during that terrible night flight I didn't know a thing about it. You must have suffered something awful!"

"Well, it wasn't very pleasant," Dawson replied in a voice so weak that it surprised him. "I knew that I had caught a good one, but it wouldn't have helped any to tell you, Freddy. There weren't any controls in your pit. And we couldn't have changed seats in that crate. So the only thing I could do was to stick it out. But, boy! I was sure glad to sit down on that carrier. But, hey! How come we bumped into the task force, Colonel? We were trying to get south to Port Moresby, and—"

"And you were headed in the right direction, Dawson," the colonel interrupted with a nod. "In another twenty minutes you would have sighted land. But you ran across us because we had given up the hunt for the Jap force and had steamed full knots for the Solomons to slug it out as best we could *if* the Jap force did show up. It—well, maybe we can call it an act of God that you sighted us, and gave us the information that we so desperately needed. And—What's the

matter, Dawson?"

Colonel Welsh cut himself off short, and anxiously asked the last as Dawson groaned, and made a face.

"Matter?" Dawson echoed. "Plenty! One of the best sea and air scraps there's been in the Southwest Pacific, and I—and I slept through the whole thing! Why, doggone it, I—"

"And that'll be just about enough out of you!" Colonel Welsh said with more sternness in his voice than there was in his eyes. "You and Farmer had done your job, and a magnificent job you did, too, thank God! It was somebody else's turn to take a crack at the Japs. And, of course, I mean Admiral Jackson's pilots. So stop feeling that you were cheated, you young fire eater. Farmer, here, didn't take part in the scrap, either, so you've no complaints. In fact, Dawson, you can give thanks for a miracle every night for the rest of your life. Give thanks for this!"

The colonel paused, slipped a hand into his tunic pocket and took out a gleaming chunk of metal. And that's just about all it was: a gleaming chunk of metal.

"What's that, sir?" Dawson asked.

"All that's left of your pilot's wings," the colonel replied, and twisted the chunk of gleaming metal between his fingers. "It was driven by a Zero bullet right into your chest to within a fraction of an inch of puncturing your left lung."

"Huh, huh, sir?" Dawson gasped out. "You mean—? Holy smokes! A *second* time?"

"The second time, Dawson," Colonel Welsh said gravely, and placed the twice bullet-battered pilot's wings into their owner's hands. "For the second time they saved your life. Frankly, I'll never tell this story to anybody else because nobody else would believe it. But it's true. And there you are. A war souvenir you couldn't duplicate, not even if you lived to be a billion."

The colonel said some more words, but Dawson was only half listening. He was staring at his bullet-battered wings, and living over in memory all those terrible hours when his chest had been filled with searing flame. Then presently his vision blurred, and without realizing it he slipped off into blissful, contented sleep. And Freddy Farmer and Colonel Welsh smiled down at his peaceful face, and slipped silently out of the cruiser's sick-bay.

—THE END—

A Page from
DAVE DAWSON AT CASABLANCA

For the umpty-umph time Dawson checked his position and made absolutely sure that he was where he was supposed to be. And for the umpty-umph time countless fears shot through his brain to taunt him and jeer at him. He wasn't at the agreed rendezvous. His navigation was all cockeyed. He was a hundred miles north of the point. He was a hundred miles south. He was—

"Cut it out, fellow, cut it out!" he rasped aloud at himself. "This is a fine time for you to go haywire! You simply got here ahead of time. Your watch tells you that, sap. Freddy was held up, that's all. Maybe he ran into a bit of weather, or something. Maybe—"

Or something? But just exactly *what*? That was the question. Freddy Farmer could fly through the toughest weather made. He was that kind of a pilot. It was crazy to say that weather had held up Freddy. No. It was something else, not weather. But what? *But what*? Why wasn't Freddy Farmer here?

Dawson groaned, and shook his head as though to drive away the tantalizing thoughts. But that didn't do any good. He started stunting his plane all over the empty sky to take his mind off his thoughts. But that didn't do any

Transcriber's Notes:

Page 41: Changed someting to something

Page 52: Changed come to some

Page 188: Changed Inteligence to Intelligence

Page 199: Changed Frdedy to Freddy

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