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Sabotage in the Sky

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

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ERICH VON STRAUB resembled very little the stiff Nazi officer who had, so recently, clicked his heels and bowed shortly to the Minister of the Air in Berlin. Then his manner had been perfectly Prussian.

The Minister of the Air in Berlin had said, "Colonel, according to your record, you studied aeronautical engineering in the United States and you speak the language and know the country. We have a great deal of faith in you. I have had you report here to inform you that you are leaving, via Italy, with properly forged passports and birth certificates, for the United States."

"Yes, sir," said von Straub.

"The English and the French are depending on the planes of the United States to achieve their air supremacy. Already we have a sufficient number of agents at work in United States aircraft plants, but they are watched so closely that they can do very little. You, Colonel, have always been a man of resource and intelligence."

"Thank you, sir."

"You understand that unless this flow of superior planes is at least hampered, we cannot long hope to continue victorious in the sky. We believe that the best method of hampering this flow of planes is to influence English and French opinion

of them. Soon we will have the Messerschmitt 118D for pursuit. It has been brought to us that the United States has, in experimental condition, the one plane which will defeat the Messerschmitt 118D. One other plane is nearly equal to it. The British and French are trying to buy these two types of ship. If those planes convince the British and French that they are superior, the manufacture of the Messerschmitt 118D will be reduced in importance. But, Colonel, you are a resourceful man.

“We are not tampering with our production of the Messerschmitt 118D. We will depend upon you to keep the British and French from buying either of these two American planes and then, because 118D is a secret we will maintain with our lives, we will suddenly be able to take over the sky from the English, sweep their isles, down their retaliating bombers, and so bring victory to our glorious cause.

“If you can arrange to convince the English and French that these two American planes are neither safe nor fast, you will find yourself a hero in your own land. Failing that, you will deliver to us a complete plane of each type. Ample funds are at your disposal. The lives of your brother officers depend upon you, so work well!”

“Heil Hitler!” von Straub piously said, turning sharply and marching away.

But Erich von Straub, a man of resource and intelligence, did not at all resemble Albert Straud who had, very recently, been hired as an aviation mechanic by Beryl-Cannard Airlines. Albert Straud was obviously a Teuton, but then so are a large

percent of the employees of all aircraft companies in the United States. His blond hair was curly and his eyes were mild and of an innocent blue; he was of medium stature and only passingly handsome; his bearing had no suggestion of the military, but leaned rather into careless ease. He was cheerful and conversational and helpful and, in fact, lived up completely to the fine letters of recommendation he had brought—letters which had been taken from a Boeing man who had somehow managed to get himself killed in an automobile crash.

He stood just now, this Albert Straud, on the apron of the BCA plant's second hangar and scanned, with a fellow employee, the murky heights of the southern sky—for BCA is only thirty miles from Washington, DC, and shares Washington, DC's climate.

There was a flash of silver up there and a powerful engine became loud so suddenly that it sounded more like an explosion than an approaching plane. Abruptly the roar stopped. The silver became a low-wing monoplane, stabbing down at the field. And nearly every man on the BCA property froze, drop-jawed and unbreathing.

Planes landing there were too common to be remarked. But two things were different about this ship. One was that it was coming in upside down, and the other, that it probably contained one Bill Trevillian, absent from these parts for nearly four years.

Straight down the runway streaked the ship, the pilot seemingly wholly undisturbed by this reversal of the average state of scenery. And then, almost at the stalling point, when it seemed that he must inevitably crash, he snap rolled! And

when the plane's landing gear was under it where it should have been all the time, the wheels were also being rotated by an instantaneous contact with earth.

There was a furious geyser of dust at the runway's end and the field was full of a joyous bellow of power—and the silver ship nearly took off again, headed toward the hangars. Another cloud, then the sputter of a cut motor, and there sat the plane, parked neatly on the line, in between two fighting planes, almost touching wings on either side.

“Well, well, well!” said Albert Straud. “I have not seen that since the great Udet. Any idea who the pilot might be?”

His companion, a stocky fellow with a wise eye and a mouth full of tobacco, namely Greasy Hannagan, spat and drawled, “You evidently ain't never seen Bill Trevillian before, buddy. Him and Udet used to pick handkerchiefs out of the breast pockets of each other's Sunday suits with their wing tips.”

“Bill Trevillian? Oh, yes. The racing pilot. I should like to know him.”

“You'll know him all right, buddy. You and me is goin' to be his repair crew. He's up here from Mexico to take charge of the BCA 41 Pursuit.”

“Ah. So they've been waiting for him before they tried it again.”

“Yeah. They been waiting for him. Hello, Bill, you old scatter-wit!”

“Lo, Greasy. You wouldn't be putting on weight, would you?”

“Hell,” said Greasy, “what's the difference? Ain't like it used to be, conserving the payload. How you been?”

Bill Trevillian had eased half out of the pit and sat now on the turtleback, his long, booted legs dangling, while he untangled himself from his radio helmet and oxygen mask. He was good-looking in a sleepy sort of way, very tall, very languid, always looking for something upon which to lean his obviously weary soul. Down in his eyes there lay a watchful spark of humor, and upon his lips there always lingered the ghost of his last smile and the beginning of the next.

Bill slid down and looked at Greasy. "Been a long time, huh?" he drawled.

"Four years," said Greasy. "Where you been?"

"Oh," said Bill vaguely, "France, Africa, Mexico. Lots of the best bars, Greasy."

"I hear you were practically rebuilding the Mexican air force," said Greasy.

"The report," yawned Bill, "has been grossly exaggerated. Where's the boss?"

"Cannard is over at Operations," said Greasy.

"You my crew?" said Bill.

"Sure. I hadda lick six guys when we heard you was goin' to work for us again, but I got it, no matter how hard I tried to get out of it. This here is the guy that's been workin' with me. He's a whiz on engines. He quotes poetry to 'em or something. Name of Albert Straud."

Bill looked at Straud and nodded, instantly reserved, not because he saw anything to distrust about Straud, but because Bill was very shy.

"Very pleased," said Albert Straud with a short handshake. "I hope I can please you."

“Please the plane and you’ll please me,” said Bill. “Now listen, Greasy, this is *Irma*. She was built out of four planes and a truck, and she runs exclusively on tequila. Cold cream her, and take the wave out of her tach, and tighten up her left aileron control. She’s fast, but she’s temperamental, and she’s so jealous of me that she tried to kill the last guy that flew her.”

“Okay,” said Greasy, spitting hugely on the tarmac. He then put his hand on *Irma*’s turtleback and probably would have said something bawdy to her, but a roaring engine suddenly made all speech impossible.

Heads went up and the plane came down. It had cut in to the field past the usual high-tension wires. Evidently it had been flying ten feet above the housetops, for no one had seen it or heard it until it verticaled into the field. Now it shot outward, snapped into a bank which brought its nose to the wind, and slashed with cut gun down the long stretch of concrete.

Suddenly the ship skidded to get away from the runway and, leveling out, began to float for a landing. And with one voice, spectators gasped, “The wheels are up!”

Like a bird with its feet tucked up against its body, and seemingly with no effort to put them down, the plane closed the few gapping inches between itself and earth. The engine stopped completely. There came a rending scream of lacerated metal, and dust ballooned skyward, completely hiding the plane.

A crash siren wailed. People began yelling and sprinting. Cars with men on their running boards curved out toward the

dust. A fire engine, with asbestos-clad “hot papas” gleamingly apparent upon it, jangled and clanged toward the crash.

But few knew exactly where, in all that dust, the plane had stopped or just how badly it had wrecked itself. It had come to rest about a hundred yards from Bill, and as he was to windward of it, all was plain.

Fearing that the small white tongues of fire might come dancing out from under the cowl at any instant, Bill loped to the side of the ship and wrestled with the hood until he got it open. And by that time it was certain that the plane would not burn.

Two black hands were lifted to black and opaque goggles. The dripping black face became startling as soon as the goggles were raised, for there were white areas, then, about the eyes. A fine spray of oil from a broken line was still bathing the pilot, but the slippery hands could not seem to get any grasp on the belt. Bill unhooked the belt and helped the pilot out.

The danger was over. The ship was only slightly hurt. And the sight of those two white-rimmed eyes in that jet face made Bill—unfortunate Bill—grin.

“Go ahead and grin, you big ape!” snapped the pilot.

And then Bill—poor, unfortunate Bill—*did* grin. The pilot was a girl. And her voice had so much challenging ferocity and she looked so funny, standing there about five feet two and threatening him, that Bill guffawed. And after all the nervous tension of expecting to see somebody fried alive, he couldn’t stop guffawing. He sank down on the wing, while fire

engines and ambulances—all disappointment now—yowled to a halt and raised more dust.

Bill kept on laughing, for the more he laughed the madder she got, and the madder she got the funnier she looked. No one can glare properly when completely inked with oil.

She stomped away to the ambulance, and when the intern tried to help her in she angrily thrust him aside and, taking the sheet off the stretcher, began to wipe her face. She was getting primed for battle and her big sky-blue eyes were full of the lust to kill. But some helping hand had already thrust Bill away from the plane, and so her quarry was lost. Grimly vowing nothing short of the Chinese rat torture, she hung on to a car and so was taken to Operations.

Bill was still chuckling as he finished his instructions to Greasy. And then, “Leave it to a woman, Greasy. No wheels.” And again Bill was laughing.

“Maybe something happened to her wheels,” said Greasy.

“Oh, that’s not possible,” said Albert Straud quickly—a shade too quickly. But he rapidly amended that error. “I have been hearing that those L97s were very good pursuits.”

“L97?” said Bill. “What a flock of new ships there are that I don’t know anything about at all!”

“It’s an X job,” said Greasy. “Newest thing in pursuits.”

Straud was already too interested in *Irma* to hear.

“The only thing,” added Greasy, “which’ll come close to it is this here BCA 41 Pursuit.”

“What’s a dame doing with a hot crate like that? And an X job, too?” demanded Bill.

Greasy would have answered, but a messenger came from

Cannard asking Bill to come over to the office, and so Bill, forgetting about it, slouched along after the boy.

Cannard was surrounded by silver airplane cigarette lighters and a photo-mosaic of the plant and mahogany furniture and Persian rugs and expensive cigars. It was super-modernistic and indicated the affluence which had descended upon BCA with the breakdown of international diplomacy.

Cannard was a lean, nervous fellow with a trick of stabbing people with voice and eyes, of answering questions before they were asked, and getting angry at things which didn't exist, and pointing with pride and flaming with indignation only split seconds apart. He was the soul and nerves of BCA, and he seemed to think that BCA planes flew only because his own willpower held them up, despite anything his engineers might say or plan.

"Hello, Trevillian. Have a seat, Bill. Glad to see you back. Sit down and have a cigarette. Well, how was Mexico?"

But before Bill could answer that, Cannard was making a wide circuit of the room, pointing to production and profit charts and laying out BCA business the way a machine gunner lays out an enemy charge.

Bill knew all about this. He sat down on the arm of a chair and slumped into it (he never was known to sit straight in a chair, but always across it) and swung his battered boots indolently, looking interested through force of habit, but really wondering if Mamie's up the road still put out a good hamburger.

"So there you have it," said Cannard. "Hundreds of planes ordered. Six new ships experimental. Millions rolling in. And

the tooling of the plant may bankrupt us. And the British and French are aching to see our 41 tested, and you are the man who is going to do it.”

“What I can’t savvy,” said Bill, swinging his battered boots and gazing sleepily at his cigarette, “is why you sent all the way to Mexico for me. Aren’t there any test pilots left or did they all drink themselves to death?”

“Bill, you know pursuits. For years and years you’ve known hot ships. You’re aces. You’ve got a name. It’s an asset.”

“And the real reason?” said Bill.

“You’ve trained the pursuit pilots into the last wrinkles in three armies. You’ve slammed the hottest planes ever built to first in the hottest races ever flown. You know all there is to know about pursuit, stunts, fast ships—”

“And now the point,” smiled Bill.

“Well”—Cannard nervously leaped into his chair and shook a finger at Bill—“the point is, we’ve lost two test pilots in a month. You’ll find it out quick enough, so I’ll tell you.”

“Thought a salary like three thousand a month looked grossly exaggerated!” said Bill.

“But they weren’t as good as you are—”

“Both killed on the BCA 41,” said Bill.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Why, you are offering me three thousand a month to test it, aren’t you? And a bonus of ten thousand for successful demonstration to foreign buyers!”

“Trevillian, we’ve always been friends. Bill, you were brought up with BCA. We know that you—”

“Aw,” said Bill, “I know already that I’m the best flyer that

ever flew. I'm half-eagle and half-balloon. I've got ailerons for thumbs and flippers instead of toes. But listen, Cannard, if I test BCA 41 I'm just an ordinary son of a gun that sometimes can tell the difference between a prop and a hangar—and if you expect miracles—”

“No, no, Bill! It's a swell ship. It's okay.”

“Then,” said Bill, swinging his battered boots, “why did it kill two men?”

“Well—hell's skyways, Bill, you always were the orneriest drink of water to talk to in the whole game! Be human! I'm on a spot. We've got to test BCA 41. Okay. We've got to sell her because our BCA 35 is already obsolete. The Messerschmitt 109F can fly rings around it. But we were tooled for thousands of them, and we've got to have a ship to replace it. Unless we're in production on BCA 41 in one month, we're broke. There's the honest story. Our bombers have had three cancellations because Lockheed suddenly trebled production and sucked in the orders that should have been ours. We're in debt to here, understand? And if you won't test BCA 41 we're sunk!”

“That's it, appeal to my old loyalty to BCA, Cannard. Answer me one question straight.”

“Sure. Sure, Bill.”

“Cannard, do you ever recall—now answer this honestly—do you ever recall telling the truth once in your whole life?”

“Aw, now, Bill!” For Cannard was alarmed at the way Bill was moving toward the door.

“I haven't refused, have I?” said Bill.

“You'll take it?” Cannard cried.

“I'll take it,” drawled Bill.