

**L. RON
HUBBARD**



**The Dive
Bomber**

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Once the Tops

LOOK here, Mr. O'Neal, I can't let you kill yourself with that ship!"

Lucky Martin said it earnestly and loyally and, as he always did, he meant just exactly what he said. And, as Number One test pilot in the United States, Lucky Martin's opinions on the subject of ships was not commonly thrust aside.

But the instant he uttered those words he knew that he could have said nothing worse. No profanity could have goaded O'Neal into the rage which swelled him out to the red bursting point.

"So, you too!" roared Big Tom O'Neal. "And I thought you were my friend. I know now. You've been talking about it, you're the one that started it. . . . Who the hell built this ship, anyway?"

"You did," said Lucky Martin, in despair.

"Who tested the first bomber the Navy ever bought?"

"You did," gulped Lucky Martin.

"Of course I did, but you and all the others are yammering about how old I'm getting. I'm forty-six, see? Forty-six isn't old! I've got my transport, haven't I? I passed the last Department physical, didn't I? And I'm the oldest test pilot in the business, ain't I? And who owns O'Neal Aircraft Company? I ask you that!"

“You do,” said Lucky very miserably.

“There, you admit I’m competent to test my own ship before these people.”

“Sure . . . but—”

“But what, you whelp?”

Lucky sent an appealing glance to Dixie O’Neal and she needed no urging to intercede. Dixie, knowing that one of these two men would have to test the ship and loving them equally, she threw her strength on the side of the one who might be expected to come out best—Lucky Martin.

“Dad, you’re too old for grandstanding. You ought to know better. Nobody questions your ability. Lucky is here to do this work and you know what they said about your heart. Don’t try the gravity test, please, Dad. You know that’s how men get killed. They go out like . . .”

Big, blustering, ungainly Tom O’Neal, renowned for a stubborn disposition, took this as a new affront. Seeing that Lucky and Dixie had united forces, instead of bowing gracefully, he let his anger get away from him entirely.

He blasted them with a voice three times louder than a Cyclone in a dive. He told them they were impertinent, that they were hardly dry behind the ears, that their opinions carried less weight than a Duralumin girder and that their skulls were filled with the purest of ozone.

He was very unjust. Lucky Martin had not come by his own reputation without ample merit and, as everybody knew the length and breadth of the Atlantic seaboard, Dixie O’Neal was as bright as she was beautiful, which savored of hyperbole.

Stung by the fact that he *was* getting old and that he was no longer considered the best in the business, Tom O'Neal forgot that his prominence was at present wholly based on his ownership of this big plant, and upon his cunning in designing of fighting ships for the Army and Navy.

Through the office door they could all see the restless crowd which stood on the edge of the field—a crowd which waited in the full expectancy of seeing a man die that day.

Tom O'Neal settled the argument by picking up his helmet and goggles and, glaring at his daughter and his future son-in-law, stalked out toward the waiting dive bomber.

Commander Lawson stopped him for an instant and shook his hand. "Hope it goes all right, Tom. Lucky off his feed?"

"Damn Lucky," growled O'Neal. "He says I'm getting too old."

"But out of respect for Dixie—" began Lawson.

"Damn Dixie!"

Scandalized, the kind-faced, portly naval officer blinked his sea-faded eyes at the aircraft ahead, and went two-thirds speed astern and out of the slipstream which was beginning to blast back from the prop.

Lucky Martin, looking down in spirit and rather hopeless, loafed out of the office, hands in his pockets, helmet buckle dangling beside his square jaw.

He was six feet tall, but his shoulders were so broad that he looked to be of average height until he walked through and towered over a crowd. The only thing which marred his looks was a scar running from his chin to his ear, put there

by a shed wing which had almost torn his head off before he could get out of the plummeting fuselage. The scar marred his beauty, but infinitely increased the glamour which hung about him.

His was a profession in which men are often killed thoroughly. But unlike those test pilots who merchandise their danger, Lucky had very little to say and a great deal to do. He did his job efficiently and well and if it had not been for the scar he would have passed anywhere for an especially good-looking boxer or sailor or ditch digger or a cop or movie actor.

O'Neal kicked the gun with the heel of his hand and sent the dive bomber skidding around into takeoff position. With a triumphant glare at Lucky, O'Neal pushed the stick into the panel, took his heels off the brakes and went away from there like a shot silver arrow—which might or might not fall in one piece.

“He’s a brave man,” said Lucky in appreciation, trying to appear calm and light a cigarette, but unable to make the match and smoke connect.

“He’s a damned fool!” said Commander Lawson.

“Is there any difference?” replied Lucky.

“None,” said Dixie, coming up and trying hard to keep the tension out of her husky voice, obeying the flying code by being excited at nothing.

The group of officers, mechanics, civilians, pilots and a couple of state troopers who had come down from the highway above watched the stubby little ship snarl skyward for altitude.

Once in a while somebody sighed explosively and immediately

looked embarrassed. People tried to talk about things which didn't matter, only to find that they didn't matter after all. Restless and expecting the worst, but hoping for the best, the crowd stared until necks ached and the dive bomber became only an occasional sparkle of wings in the dazzling blue of the cloudless sky.

Dixie frayed the corner of a small red handkerchief and, without taking her eyes from the faraway, droning flash, reached out and took hold of Lucky's arm as though to steady herself.

"He's all right," said Lucky, finding his throat dry.

"Sure he is," said Dixie, never once losing sight of the ship now ten thousand feet above them.

"It's a good plane," said Commander Lawson. "Took all its other tests in top shape. But I don't think it can stand . . . I mean, sure it will. The Navy needs a dive bomber like that. Never did have a good one. Wings always folding back on them. Takes real stamina for a ship to stick in the groove and come out without losing anything but its bombs. A ten-thousand-foot dive at terminal velocity is too much for any . . . I mean, sure it will."

"You bet," said a strange fellow Lucky had not so far noticed.

"You know Mr. Bullard, Martin?" said Lawson.

Lucky looked sideways to find a man who was as tall as he was but who weighed at least two hundred pounds more. Bullard's fat looked like it had been hung on him roll by roll. His brows bulged over small, quick eyes. His jaw protruded loosely, hiding his collar and tie. His paunch looked as though he had moored a blimp to his belt and let some of the helium

out. A giant who rumbled rather than talked, who grinned eternally, Bullard possessed a heartiness which was too studied to be casual.

“Hello,” said Lucky, looking back up at the ship.

“The great Lucky Martin,” said Bullard, taking the pilot’s hard palm in the fat folds of his own and shaking it. “Well, this is a pleasure. I hear you’re to be the next boss in case anything happens. . . .”

Lucky looked steadily into the shifty eyes. “What did you say?”

“I said you’re sure Lucky, you sure deserve that name. Is this the pretty lady you’re going to marry? Well, well, Lucky is putting it much too mild. Always good politics to marry the daughter of . . .”

The crack of Lucky’s backhand against the fat mouth jarred the otherwise silent field.

Bullard’s eyes glowed redly, but he grinned and bowed and scraped. “I didn’t mean any harm, Mr. Martin. I’m sorry I said it, though it did . . .”

“He’s coming down!” yelled a mechanic named Lefty Flynn.

Forgotten was Bullard. The song of the dive bomber’s engine had been a soft whisper before. Now the sound began to rise in pitch and volume, to a hoarse roar, upward to a rasping snarl, and higher still to a shrill, hammering scream which stabbed down and bludgeoned the field.

The dive bomber had gone over the hump. Nose pointing straight at the earth, eighteen thousand feet down, engine on full, building up to terminal velocity when the resistance of the wind equaled the downward drive of the wide-open throttle.

From a dot against the blue, the ship swiftly became a silver cross inverted. Larger and larger, doubling in size with each passing second, the plane was hurling itself toward the checkerboard of earth, to seemingly certain destruction.

But this was not dangerous. The buildings shook with the flood of sound, ears deafened and closed. But this was not the worst. In a moment O'Neal would pull out and then the danger would come.

To jerk a ship level from a downward speed of seven miles a minute or more would put a strain of nine times the plane's weight on the wings. From two hundred pounds, the pilot's weight would be instantaneously stepped to eighteen hundred pounds, every ounce of which would be bent on crushing him into his pit. Men's brains came loose in their skulls when the pullout was too sharp. Wings came off when the gravity increased to eleven. Over that men became a senseless, bleeding mass, smashed into their cockpit.

"He knows what he's doing," prayed Lucky into the din.

"The ship can take it," whispered Dixie.

Three thousand feet up, still howling straight at the earth, the dive bomber was due to level out.

Lucky would have given ten years of his life to have been in that plane instead of O'Neal. Up there it was too loud and hectic to think. Down here it was terrible.

The plane's nose pulled up slightly, fighting the inertia which strove to dash the silver wings to fragments against the dusty earth.

Abruptly the ship snapped level.

For an instant it sped straight out toward the horizon and

then, as though a bomb had exploded between the struts, it flew into countless bits of wreckage which sailed in a scattering cloud about the fuselage.

“Her wings!” yelled Lawson. “Bail out! Good God, he’s trapped!”

They could see O’Neal’s head. He raised one hand. He strove to pry himself out of the plunging coffin which, with renewed speed was darting straight down again.

He might have made it if he had had another thousand feet.

Belt unbuckled, blasted back against the seat, O’Neal stayed where he was, half out of his pit, until the gleaming fuselage vanished into the earth, leaving a spreading cloud of twisted metal fragments to mingle with the hovering dust.

The silence which ensued was cut only by the soft patter of wreckage settling on the field.

People broke free from the paralysis of horror and began to run toward the plane. The crash siren screamed and an ambulance leaped toward the spot where no ambulance was needed.

Dixie tried to follow but could not. A mechanic’s wife gently put her arm across the girl’s shoulders and turned her face away from the lazy, curling dust.

Lucky was standing on the edge of the pit, looking down through the smoke. The banks had caved, quenching any fire, burying O’Neal.

Lucky wiped his hands across his face and slid over the shifting clay, searching for the cockpit.

But to Sell to Another Country

A week after the funeral, Commander Lawson called at the silent O'Neal Aircraft plant.

He found Lucky Martin thumbing through cluttered files in the main office. Dixie O'Neal was sitting on the window seat, looking out across the field. Her dark eyes were sad and her face, in startling contrast to her jet hair, was as pale as ivory. Her small hands twisted nervously at a scrap of paper.

Lawson shook Lucky's hand and greeted Dixie and, although he was friendly enough, Lucky could sense a certain reserve, the inflexibility of an officer who has a duty to perform.

"We'll go ahead on another diver as soon as I get financial affairs straight," said Lucky, running harried fingers through his curly and unruly brown hair. "I'm a lot handier with a stick than I am with an adding machine."

"Aren't your clerks . . . ?"

"There are no clerks," said Lucky, waving his hand at the empty outer room.

"But certainly O'Neal's engineers—"

"I'm the engineers," said Lucky.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"We're strapped for cash, and I couldn't sales-talk the bankers. I guess I'm better behind a panel than behind a desk."

“That’s unfortunate,” said Lawson, squirming slightly, but still trying not to look gray and severe.

“But I think we can swing it,” said Lucky with a hopeful grin. “You know doggone well your Navy couldn’t get along without our dive bomber. The whole new fighting technique is built around this ship. While I don’t expect you to advance anything, your support and okay would certainly help me smooth things over with the bankers. O’Neal left a couple of thousand, but that’s all.”

“But good heavens, Martin, you can’t mean your other contracts failed to bring you in money. There’s that Army pursuit job you built and—”

“Money all gone to satisfy old accounts. Money expended on the development of a new metal. The steel companies wouldn’t help, you know. They need volume before they can develop anything. We’ve got enough spare parts we used for testing and enough experience on this job to make another one like it. Dixie—”

“After all, Miss O’Neal, you’re the boss around here now,” said Lawson. “What do you think of this idea to build another one?”

Dixie faced the commander for an instant and then, gradually, the vitality faded out of her again. “What’s the use? Dad would have wanted Lucky to carry on. This dive bomber was a ten-year dream and three years of labor . . . but . . . Lucky could get a job with Eastern Air if he wanted. He could . . . I’m sorry. Of course we’ll go on.”

Lawson shifted uncomfortably again. He cleared his throat two or three times. “As a matter of fact . . . er . . . Martin,

there's no need of your wasting further time on the dive bomber."

Lucky came out of his swivel chair and braced himself with flat hands against the blotter and papers. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Damn it all," said Lawson, wishing he was back on a bridge and in uniform, "I hate to have to tell you this. We saw the dive bomber. You claim it to have pursuit ship qualities. You claim it has a long-range cruising radius. You claim speed. You claim it will hold together in a twelve-thousand-foot power dive better than any ship ever before built."

"Certainly we claim it, and we'll prove it. Something went wrong, Commander. Something's haywire about that ship, but we'll straighten it out."

"Martin, that thing is a killer, and will always be a killer. It's an engine with ears tacked to it, horsepower without wings. The Navy will have nothing further to do with it. Your next ship might hold, but what about the production ships? Our men are valuable. We can't risk—"

"See here," begged Lucky. "One try doesn't mean failure. Other ships—"

"There are other ships on the market which *will* hold together in a power dive. Take Miss O'Neal's advice and quit before you're killed, Martin."

Lucky sat down suddenly. But he was by no means beaten. Calmly he said, "Commander, I'm going to build this ship if I have to rob a bank, and I'm going to sell it to the Navy and you're going to buy a round hundred of them on the first order."