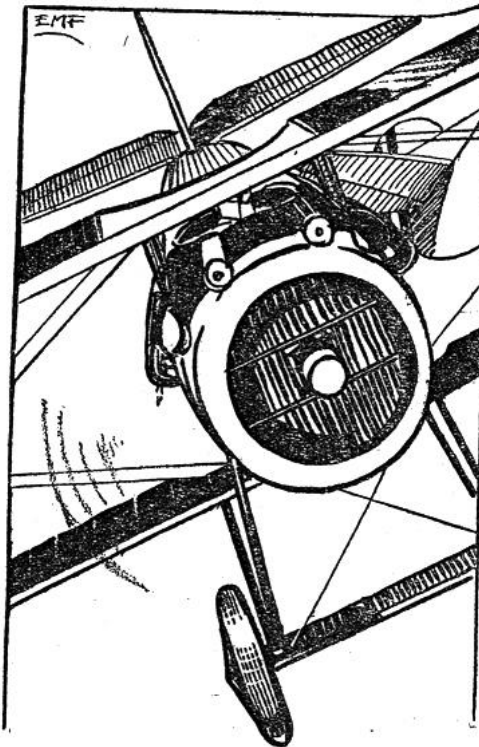
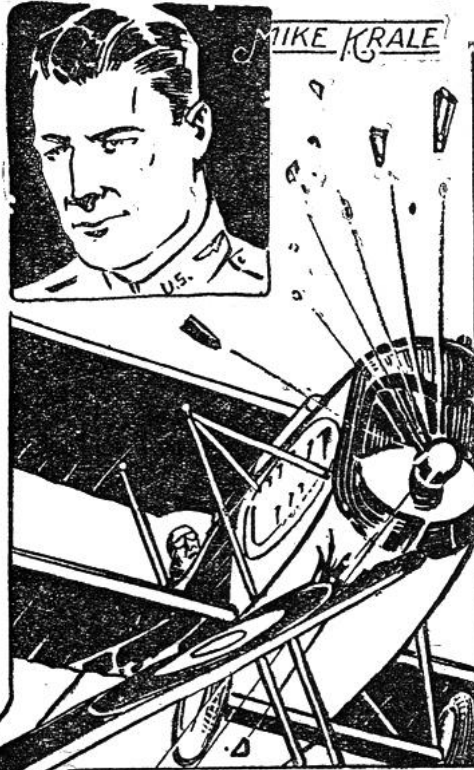


# Seven Minutes to Live

*A Flyer Lives On Borrowed  
Time—And Makes Pay-  
ment in a Frenzied Sky!*

By **ORLANDO  
RIGONI**

*Author of "We Die But Once,"  
"Ice from Hell," etc.*



*The Fokker beat off its blades on the  
top of the Spad's wing*

**I**T was that goofy report that had started everything. Mike Krale, lean shoulders humped over the bar in the canteen of the 57th Pursuit at Crepy, cursed softly to himself and drank his whiskey neat.

He cursed everything in general, but in particular, he cursed the fuzzy-faced shavetail at 4th Wing, down at Nanteuil who had nothing better to do with his time than figure out a man's chances for life. That swivel chair hero had, by mathematical manipulation, produced statistics to show that the average life of a pursuit pilot in a dog-fight was exactly seven minutes.

Up until the time that those grim figures had leaked out, things had run along smoothly. The men of the 57th had drunk their liquor, played their cards, and

tooled their crates out across the lines. To all of them, as individuals, death was something distant, remote. It might come today, or it might not come for a year.

But now they had something definite to go by. They had proof of their chances to live, and that proof was something to frighten even the bravest of them. They knew, now, that they were allotted just seven minutes to live. Seven minutes of screaming, battering hell, and then—

Krale cursed again, and felt the raw liquor course down his lean throat. To hell with figures! Hadn't he been flying and fighting for over a year? Hadn't he won a captain's bars by bringing down three enemy planes in one mad flourish? Hadn't he chalked up fifteen victories on the tally board in the crate shack? No, those figures didn't apply to him. He had lived through a hundred times seven minutes.

But other men hadn't. Krale knew that. The men of the 57th knew it. The shavetail's figures were cold and hard, and damning. Seven minutes was the allotted time. That fact jittered the nerves of the men. It disturbed them, and fear crept into their eyes. Of them all, the big, swaggering, loud-mouthed Bull Cannon, who could kill a man with a blow from his big fist, was the most disturbed.

"There he is," Bull voiced his sentiments freely, he pointed a thick, shaking finger at Captain Krale, "stands up to the bar like God Almighty. He's lived a year—lived high on time sliced from the lives of other men."

Krale heard the words, and a slow fire crept through his blood. He turned slowly from the bar, setting his glass down with such force that it was smashed to splinters. His blue eyes turned green, and little splashes of flame smeared the pupils.

"What do you mean, Cannon?" he demanded in a tense, soft voice.

"You know what I mean," Bull raved

on. "I mean that we're each allotted seven minutes to live on the average. You've lived a year. In order to balance the scales, other men have died in a minute."

"You're playing loose with your figures, Cannon," Krale said, standing with legs spread and hands hanging like weights on his long arms.

He realized the logic of Bull's reasoning, and it troubled him.

"How else could you figure it?" Cannon croaked. "You got six minutes from Dooly who was blasted down yesterday before he could get his Vickers unlimbered. You got five minutes from Kline, who went down burning over Fismes when the Boche jumped us. You got four minutes—"

**K**RALE gulped. What he had to do with the length of his life, was nothing. It happened that his number wasn't up, that he hadn't been marked by the grim reaper during the past twelve months. He resented Bull's inference that he was living on time borrowed from other men.

"You're a liar, Cannon. I've asked for nothing. I've taken nothing. If I'm alive, it's because I shoot faster, or straighter."

"Or maybe you just pick the easy spots," Bull sneered. "Maybe you figure to go on living on part of our lives. Maybe you figure to get a few minutes from my allotted time, but you won't, damn you!"

Krale tried to dodge the blow, but the bar was in his way. He caught it on the neck, and felt his whole, long body stiffen at the impact. He put out his hand, and shoved it into Bull's face with such force, that Bull was hurled to the floor.

Bull leaped up, grasping a chair as he crouched to his feet. He swung the chair above his head, intending to hurl it at the skeleton form of Captain Krale. But at that instant, Lieutenant Lemp leaped out and

tried to grasp the chair.

Lemp was young, smooth-faced, and blond. He was too young to have fear, and too brave to have sense. He had been consigned to the 57th for the express reason that Krале was there to look after him. Since he liked Krале, and owed him something for teaching him how best to fight, Lemp meant to save the captain any bodily harm.

But Lemp missed the chair. It swung up in a high arc and crashed into the swinging lamp. The kerosene exploded in a sheet of flame! The lamp dropped toward the hunched head of the astonished Bull Cannon.

Without thinking, Lemp hurled himself at Cannon, knocking him out of the way of the falling lamp. But the lamp fell upon Lemp, smearing his clothing with fire. There was a wild commotion as the men rolled Lemp on the floor to extinguish the flames. Then, the huge form of Cannon was bending over the kid.

"Thanks, pardner," Cannon said in a shaky voice. "I reckon I owe you something for that. You had no call to do it. Some day I'll pay you back."

"Skip it," Lemp grinned, rubbing his scorched body, "It wasn't anything to brag about."

Cannon stumbled out of the canteen, and Mike Krале took Lemp by the arm.

"Listen, you young fool, I'm not nursing you to have you killed before your time. God knows, if the figures are correct, you've got little enough time to live. I've promised your dad I'd take care of you and I will. I've kept you out of the hot patrols because I don't figure you savvy your wings well enough to make a real fight. I don't want you killed in a barroom brawl."

"I wasn't killed," the kid retorted, "and I could fight in the Dawn Patrol, too, if you'd let me. I didn't come here to sky

ride, I came to fight, and I'll take my fighting where I find it."

With that, Lemp stalked out, and Krале watched him go with a mingled expression of exasperation and love. He *did* like the kid. He was good material, but too eager and senseless.

The next morning, Captain Krале legged to the line with grim lines marking the corners of his wide mouth. The scene in the canteen the night before was still fresh in his mind. He glared at the men, swarming over the Nieuports, and in his mind revolved that one phrase, "Seven minutes to live!"

He found Cannon crawling out of dungarees at the tool shack.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" he asked stiffly, "Have you decided you'll live longer jamming grease?"

"That's my business," Cannon growled, and shambled toward his own crate, pulling on his teddies.

Krале legged into his Nieuport and his practiced eyes read the instruments swiftly. He jabbed the throttle up the brass and the muttering Gnome snarled into a wild thunder. He throttled down. Jerked a look along the line. They were all ready—ready to spend a part of those precious seven minutes.

**K**RALE signaled the chocks and kicked the Nieuport down the runway. As his trucks cleared the ground, he noticed something wrong with his plane. At first he blamed it on a cross-wind. His left wing kept tucking under and he had to fight the stick to keep his ship trimmed.

He swung the stick slowly from side to side. Watching the ailerons, he noticed they worked smoothly.

Still his left wing sagged. They were over Cotterets, when he decided to turn back. Hell, he couldn't fight with a

cockeyed crate! He signaled Cord, the man behind him, to take command, but Fate decreed otherwise.

Just as Krале swung out of formation, six blood-red Fokkers dripped from a ragged cloud, like clots of flame. Krале heard the scream of the Mercedes and skidded wide in a flat turn. Grimly he hunched down, and kicked his Nieuport back to meet the Jerries. He couldn't pull out now—not in the thick of the fight.

He glared through the sights and caught red in his rings. With a swift, almost vicious movement of his thumbs, he snapped the trips. The Vickers jumped and growled like mad dogs. Dogs that dripped flame from their smoking muzzles!

**H**OLES appeared in the belly of the Fokker, but it pulled free. Krале cursed, and forgot his sagging wing. A growl rippled from his long throat. This was the game he liked. Seven minutes in a dogfight were worth a score of years on earth.

At the same instant, Spandau lead hammered into his pit, bit slivers from the cowling and spat them in his face. The slugs drummed into his panel, slogged into the crashpad right by his ear. With expert skill, he kicked the bar, and pulled in the stick. A half loop and a roll would put him on the tail of his executioner. But Krале forgot his sagging wing. Instead of a half loop, he made a sloppy vrille. The Nieuport slid off at the top of the climb and sluiced down into the path of the screaming bullets!

Krале sucked in his breath. This wasn't fighting, it was suicide. Another Fokker hammered in on his left, and Krале tried to make a right vertical to pull away. But his left wing failed to bank, and he skidded flat almost into the very prop of the screaming Mercedes.

A little confused and bewildered, Krале pulled out with his wings trailing ribbons of cloth. Grimly, without looking back, he streaked for home.

A fog had slid in off the Marne, veiling the landing field. Through rifts in the fog, he could see the runway. His left wing bit down again and he slid into thin soup. He kicked the rudder hard over, with the stick against the cowling and righted himself. He was flying by instinct. White floss swirled about him. He made a wide turn and burst through the fog a hundred feet from the ground.

The field flew up at him. He was in the rough. He gunned the Gnome and it roared full out. He muscled up a dozen feet, found the runway, and came down crossways of the wind! His trucks hit the ground drifting. There was a rending, tearing jolt. A stay wire snapped. A cross brace splintered like matchwood. A wheel ankled under and he slid to a stop!

The crash truck roared out upon the field as Krале climbed from the pit. The chief mech jumped off the running board.

"What the hell, sir? Where's the flight? Don't tell me they're all gone—all washed out?"

Krале's lean jaw bulged, and his blue-green eyes snapped. He read in the chief mech's words but one meaning. Either the flight had been washed out completely, or else he had run away.

Well, he had run away, he told himself fiercely.

Without answering the mech's questions, he squinted at his wings. The wings were cockeyed. The angle of incidence on the left wing had been changed to zero. Some dumb greaseball had put him on the spot. He swung on Sergeant Little, the chief mech.

"Who trimmed my ship, Little?" he snapped.

"Lawson and Dice," Little answered,

puzzled. "I checked it myself later, sir."

"All right, take a look at that wing alignment. Somebody put me on the spot."

"Better have a drink on that one, sir." Little's thick face grew red. "We're fighting a war, not committin' race suicide."

Krale had a sudden thought. "Did anybody else fool around the ships when you were tuning up my crate?"

"Well," the mech scratched his head, "I think Bull Cannon was there, sir. He was cleaning his guns himself. Why should he want you rubbed out?"

"For no good reason, I guess," Krale snapped, as he legged toward the canteen. He certainly needed a drink. A faint suspicion was flickering in his mind. He had lived more than his allotted seven minutes. He had lived a year on borrowed time. Bull Cannon had been just scared enough by the shavetail's figures to want to help Fate get rid of Captain Krale, so that the average would have a broader spread. Bull might be afraid that Krale would borrow some time from him before the mad dance was done.

**K**RALE bellied up to the bar, and ordered cognac. The stuff was bitter to his lips—burned like acid in his stomach without giving the desired effect. He cursed softly. Everything was goofy—crazy—just as this mad, devouring war was crazy.

He heard the rest of the ships cut down with moaning Gnomes. The flight trailed into the canteen with McCloud and Mosby missing. They eyed him suspiciously. He resented their blank stares. But Bull Cannon didn't stare, he talked.

"So you ran out," Bull said acidly, the words seeming to froth from his thick lips. "You got caught in a hot spot, and raced for home to avoid the seven minute tieup. But McCloud didn't escape—didn't run

out. He burned out after one minute of hell! You got six minutes from him, Krale. And another three from Mosby, who went down with a mouth full of bullets!"

Krale stiffened. He could feel his pulse beating in his head. His lean fingers gripped the bar hard.

"That's a lie, Cannon!" he shouted. "A damned lie! I came back because my crate had been tampered with. You screwed my wings out of line yourself, Cannon. You figured to have me killed because you have a cockeyed idea that I'm stealing time from better men."

"Bull wash!" Cannon snarled. "You're trying to cover up your act of cowardice with talk. Before you accuse me of anything, get the proof!"

Krale was conscious of the blank eyes of the men pinning him against the sloppy bar. He felt suddenly uncomfortable, frustrated. With an effort, he shoved himself away from the bar, and stumbled outside.

Maybe the rest of the men felt like Bull did. Maybe they all believed he was living like a leech upon dead men's flesh. Well, he wasn't. He took his chances and made his kills. He had run out today for a good reason. If they didn't want to believe that, then to hell with them.

He stopped at the crateshack and ordered Little to put his plane in order. Then he went to the village. He needed a change of liquor.

At dusk he went back to the tarmac at Crepy's back door. He legged past the major's shanty and the canteen without turning his head. He went straight to the line and inspected the repairs on his ship. Everything was perfect. He told himself fiercely that if Bull wanted to rub him out, he'd have to think fast, he wouldn't be caught napping again.

For three days nothing happened to indicate that Cannon still harbored his

illusions. Marlin, a veteran, and three rookies were shot down during those three days, with a total of eighteen minutes fighting among them. Krale's jaw bulged at that report. He was still alive—and there were ten more minutes of borrowed time added to his life.

He almost came to believe the crazy setup himself. The men who made up his flight, eyed him suspiciously, and three of them transferred to other patrols. But Bull didn't transfer. He stuck grimly to the Dawn Patrol as though waiting for something to happen.

The kid, too, got in his hair. The kid pleaded for a place on the dawn flight. Krale argued him out of it. He was still too green, still too dumb. Krale pointed out the fate of the three rookies who had died in the past three days, but the kid insisted that he wasn't afraid to die. Hadn't Krale lived a year?

That night an emergency order came. The field siren screamed the warning. A Zeppelin was heading over Crepy toward Ostend for a raid on London. It was up to the 57th to stop it. Krale piled out of his bed and shuffled into his clothing. He raced to the line, and gave his Nieuport a cursory examination before legging over the side.

He was the first off the line. He circled up—up—up! Zeppelins fly high! The rest of the flight was trailing like a broken snake. Ten thousand feet they climbed—twelve! They broke through a smattering of cumulus and then Krale saw it.

That first swift vision took his breath away. It was mystic—beautiful. Like the ghost of war itself, the great silver bag was like the accumulated ghost of farm boys from Flanders, of shepherd boys from Trieste, of blacks from Africa, and of toughs from New York. A strange, throbbing ghost of war, carrying death in its secret womb! To destroy such a thing,

was sacrilege. But it had to be destroyed. Babies, lying asleep in a far city, to whom war was but a forming memory, demanded it. Women with moist eyes and empty arms, demanded it. All of the helpless who were no longer safe from the greed of Mars, demanded it.

Krale blipped his engine and zoomed over the silver shadow. He cut his engine and moaned down for the first try! He had two twenty-pound bombs in his pit. One would be enough. As he cut down across the Zep, gnats swarmed about him. Black gnats, spitting' fire, from one great eye. Fokkers protecting the death ship!

Krale hunched down as the Spandau lead whined, about him. He was over the Zep. Now was the time—now! He let go one bomb, and cursed as the death pill missed the target! He had been gliding too fast, crossways over the bag. He pulled out of the dive, and climbed back up.

The Fokkers swarmed upon him, like wolves upon a scrap of meat. He laughed at them, a deep, throaty laugh that held nothing of mirth. Spandau tracer laced a fence about him. He zoomed up—up—up! He gunned the Gnome to the last ounce of power as he reached the top of that crazy climb. Then it happened!

**H**IS ship began to tremble like a boat grating across a reef! The sheen of the Gnome blipped and blurred in his eyes. He felt himself rattled against the sides of the pit like a stone in a box. A grim fear touched him. Something was wrong with his prop—he had lost a blade, or part of a blade. The vibration threatened to wrench the Gnome from the cradle.

Krale knew at that instant, that his life span was balanced upon a hair—a hair that might bend or break with the next wrench of the mighty engine. But he wasn't done. The Zep was below him. If he had to go, he'd go in one wild blaze of glory!

Down he dived, with a dozen Fokkers probing for his heart. The air became a mighty harp, with Spandau tracer for the strings. He heard nothing, saw nothing but the silver shadow of the Zep sliding into a cloud bank.

He screamed so close to the giant bag, that he could see the pigmy gunners scrambling about frantically upon the little platform on the top of the bag. Then he dropped his last bomb.

There was a flash of flame! The very heart of the sky was ripped out by that explosion. Krale's crippled ship was tossed up like a leaf and he fought the controls like a madman. Then he was whirling down with conked engine and riddled wings.

Nothing mattered now. He had done his job. Grimly, he pushed the stick against the panel and stood the Nieuport on its nose. He knew his chances. A Nieuport wasn't a Spad. You could dive a Spad to hell, and pull out, but a Nieuport—

Down he screamed with the air pressing against him like a wet rag. Down—down—down! Struts jumping! Wings chattering! Fabric whipping against the ribs. The torch flares on the tarmac, rushed up to meet him!

Then there was a rending, tearing! His right wing crumpled at the tip and the fabric whipped off. He gripped the stick hard, and held it over, but the Nieuport was too far gone for aileron control. The world became a whirlpool, sucking him down. He could see the bleared outlines of the field. Desperately, he gunned the Gnome. The ship jerked and trembled with that awful vibration, but the trick worked. The spin stopped long enough for him to crash in on a wing, and smear to a stop.

Again the crash truck came to mop him up, as he limped from the wreckage.

"It's getting to be a habit, ain't it,

Captain?" Little yawped at him as he jumped off the truck.

"And a damned uncomfortable one," Krale bit back. He decided not to mention his prop troubles right then.

"Never mind about the ship, sir," Little grinned. "We got four new ones this morning. Damned nice. Got your name scratched on one already."

The spotlight from the crash truck was shining on the wreckage of the Nieuport. Krale examined the prop and his jaw bulged. He could see the whole thing clearly. A section had been cut from the tip of one blade, and then glued loosely in place so that the heavy pressure of the air could work it loose.

Krale knew that if he should make any more accusations without proof, the men of the 57th would laugh at him. They would say he was getting jittery because his time was almost up. Krale felt certain this was another of Bull's tricks, and he realized that he had to find some way to get back at Cannon, or quit flying.

Krale trudged away, his mind a froth of thoughts. He discovered that he had been wounded in that mad flight. His arm was stiff and sore. He had the medico bandage the arm, and for the next three days he stayed on the ground.

But on the fourth day, he knew he would have to take out the Dawn Patrol, or admit that he was afraid. He awoke early, with a strange foreboding of evil. It was still dark when he legged into the cookshack for his coffee and brandy. The grey mist was like a moist hand touching him as he strode to the line.

The four new ships were in the center of the line. Krale inspected his ship thoroughly. He tried the controls and they worked perfectly. He inspected the wiring and the guns. From prop to tail and back again he checked the ship and found nothing wrong. Perhaps Cannon had

gotten over his foolish notion, that Krale must die in order that others might live.

Little, the chief mech, was always on the line early. Krale called him over. In spite of his inspection of the Nieuport he still had an uneasy premonition that there was something wrong with the crate—a feeling that some trick had been planted there to destroy him.

“Whose ship is that standing next to mine?” he asked Little.

“Bull Cannon’s, sir.”

“Help me change the positions of these ships,” Krale ordered.

“What the hell, sir? Something wrong?” Little’s big mouth sagged open.

“I don’t know—yet.”

The planes were changed around, and Krale breathed easier. Now, if there was anything wrong with that ship, Cannon would pay the penalty of his own invention.

**I**T WAS getting light now. The Dawn Patrol was straggling across the field with helmets dangling from numb fingers. Suddenly, above the haze of the tarmac, came the throbbing of huge motors!

Gothas on a death trip!

There was a mad scramble as the men rushed for their planes. A Gotha was a prize worth having. The thunder of the twin 220s seemed to drop down upon them like derisive laughter. Krale forgot the flight at that moment. He forgot Bull Cannon, and the shavetail’s figures. He was thinking of those giant ships upon their errand of destruction. That errand must never be completed.

Krale leaped into his Nieuport, and gunned the Gnome with a swift jab of his thumb. The Nieuport leaped down the field, snarled up into the air. Not until he was a thousand feet up, did Krale remember Bull Cannon.

He jerked a look over his shoulder, a

grim tenseness about his mouth. He glared past the spinning Gnome, past the crouching Vickers, right into the pit of the ship he had traded to Cannon. Then his mouth fell open. A gasp of rage and fear gurgled from his working throat.

**C**ANNON wasn’t in that ship. The man in that screaming ship was Kid Lemp! Krale understood the play. The kid wanted excitement and in the confusion of that takeoff, he had gotten away in the ship intended for Bull Cannon!

Far below, like shadows on the line, he could see two men waving their arms wildly. It was Cannon and Little. Krale tried to motion the kid down, but he knew that his efforts were futile. At last the kid had a chance to fly in a real fight, and he wasn’t going back.

Krale cursed and shrugged his shoulders. He hadn’t the time to be wet-nursing a brainless kid now. He watched the Nieuport. It handled normally. Maybe there wasn’t anything wrong with it.

He zoomed above the clouds and the sky turned into blue grass. The Gothas were like lumbering giants in that sky, but the Gothas weren’t alone. A flight of Fokkers rode their backwash! At the sight of the Nieuports, they dropped down out of the fluff clouds.

Krale forgot the kid then. He winged over, and sent the Nieuport screaming across the sky to turn the Gothas. The first giant made a sloppy turn and settled lower. Krale hammered a burst into the second of the three big birds, and a growl of joy left his tight lips as fire flamed from the right engine. The left engine pulled the ship into a spin, and the flames devoured it.

The Fokkers struck then, like poisonous reptiles with fangs that reached across the sky. Thin, white, wispy fangs that touched a Nieuport and cut the pit in half. A Fokker shuddered and stood still in

the air. Calmly it turned over, dumping a dead man from the pit before it began the death plunge.

Diving, rolling, zooming, the Fokkers drew the Nieuports up—up—up! Krale followed them, pumping lead in short bursts. The fight drifted east, until it was over the lines. Another Nieuport went down in flames, and a Fokker followed into the smoke trail, guided by a dead man.

Krale looked about him swiftly. There were four Nieuports left, not counting the kid, and five Fokkers. In that swift appraisal, Krale saw Lemp caught between the fire of two Fokkers. He gunned his Gnome and hurled his Nieuport over to pull the kid out of the death spot!

**L**IKE a man gone mad, he goaded the Nieuport to the last ounce of power. The kid was a fool, but a lovable fool, and Krale had to save him. He sluiced around under the belly of the first Fokker and fed it lead. The German lifted and Krale followed him up.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat-tat.*

The Fokker shook, and lost air as the Mercedes choked. Again Krale hammered the trips and cut the right wing back from the longerons. The Fokker went down. Krale planed off and kicked the bar. He glared below him for a sight of the kid, and stiffened at what he saw.

The kid had pulled out of the trap, and was lashing back for a try at the other Jerry. But Krale saw something else, too. Out of the west a black spot was coming with thunder bulging its arrival. In the pit of that ship, which was one of the cast-off Spads of the 57th, was hunched the big, powerful form of Bull Cannon!

Bull was waving madly for Lemp to let the Fokker go. Krale's eyes squinted. There was something wrong with the kid's ship, then! What it was, he couldn't say.

So far, the kid had flown it without mishap.

The kid wasn't paying any attention to Bull's frantic signals. He was upon the tail of that Fokker, and he meant to make his first kill!

Cannon was above the kid and a little ahead of him. He could see everything plainly. He could see Lemp's face, staring like a white mask at the rings. He could see his hands clinging to the stick. He could see his thumbs resting on the trips like black sticks of wood.

Then the black sticks of wood snapped down. Krale stiffened. There was a short snarl from the Vickers. Tracer whipped out from the arc of the kid's prop, buried itself in the tail of the Fokker. But that short burst was soon over.

With a curse of dismay, Krale saw it happen. He saw the kid's ammo belt rattling from the carrier box, and he saw the belt jerk tight and stiffen—saw it buckle in the slots and jam the guns! He saw the thin steel wire that had been fastened to the belts. That wire had been drawn up along the cabane struts and across the top wing to the left aileron. As the belt fed through the breech of the gun, the wire had tightened, pulling the left aileron up against the snubber, and finally jamming the guns. Cannon had planted that trick, and it had gone astray!

The kid's plane began a mad roll. Krale could see him fighting with the crippled stick, and Krale could see something the kid couldn't see. Another Fokker was sluicing in on the kid's tail, to blast him out of his pit!

Krale couldn't get back to knock that other ship down in time. He stalled his crate and screamed curses. But Bull Cannon was pounding up alongside the kid. He couldn't get a shot at the Fokker, either, but he could do something else, and he did that.

**B**ULL CANNON, knowing that death must complete the maneuver, kicked his bar, tugged at his stick, and hurled the old Spad into the narrow space between the kid and the Fokker. There was a wailing crash, as the Mercedes on the Fokker beat off its blades in the tip of Cannon's wing.

Cannon's plane was thrown around by the impact, and his own screaming prop barely missed the stricken Fokker.

Wide-eyed and gasping, Krale watched the Fokker fall. He watched Bull Cannon's uncontrollable plane whirling down in a hopeless spin, and he was mumbling words to himself.

Bull Cannon had owed the kid a debt.

He had paid off that debt with the ink of disaster, and the mark was burned indelibly in Krale's lean head. He pushed up his goggles and fisted his eyes. Damn his eyes! He couldn't see well.

But he could see well enough to discover that Lemp had broken that wire and was nursing the Nieuport toward home. The dog-fight was over—over?

"By damn no!" Krale screamed into his thundering engine. It wasn't over. Cannon must not die after what he had just done. His wild action had wiped out the past. The kid had meant more to Krale than his own life. Cannon had saved the kid.

**K**RALE shoved the stick against the panel, and held it there. The Nieuport

screamed down—down—down toward the little blotch of wreckage that marked the spot where Bull had crashed in. With his Gnome pounding, his wires screaming, his wings rattling, Krale bellied across that spot, and turned back into the wind for a landing.

Bull was crawling from the twisted mass of wire and wood and rags. He blinked up at Krale.

"You shouldn't have come down here, Captain. They'll—they'll pick you up. I didn't deserve anything from you. I can see I was wrong now. I was trying to steal time from you, Krale. I guess I was a little nuts. I guess I was trying to be God Almighty himself. But when the kid got that plane, after Little told me about the switch, well, I figured my time was up anyhow."

"Forget it, Bull," Krale said softly. "What's past is past. We're starting over, you and I. We'll let the shavetails figure their pencils to the stub, but you can't scratch down life in black and white. The length of a man's life has nothing to do with minutes and hours and years. You and I have lived a long time in the last few minutes. We've gotten older and wiser. Climb on that wing while I pull you out of here. The kid might want to thank you, personal."

If Bull made any answer it was drowned out by the sudden thunder of the Gnome, as the Nieuport plane slogged across the bumpy ground.