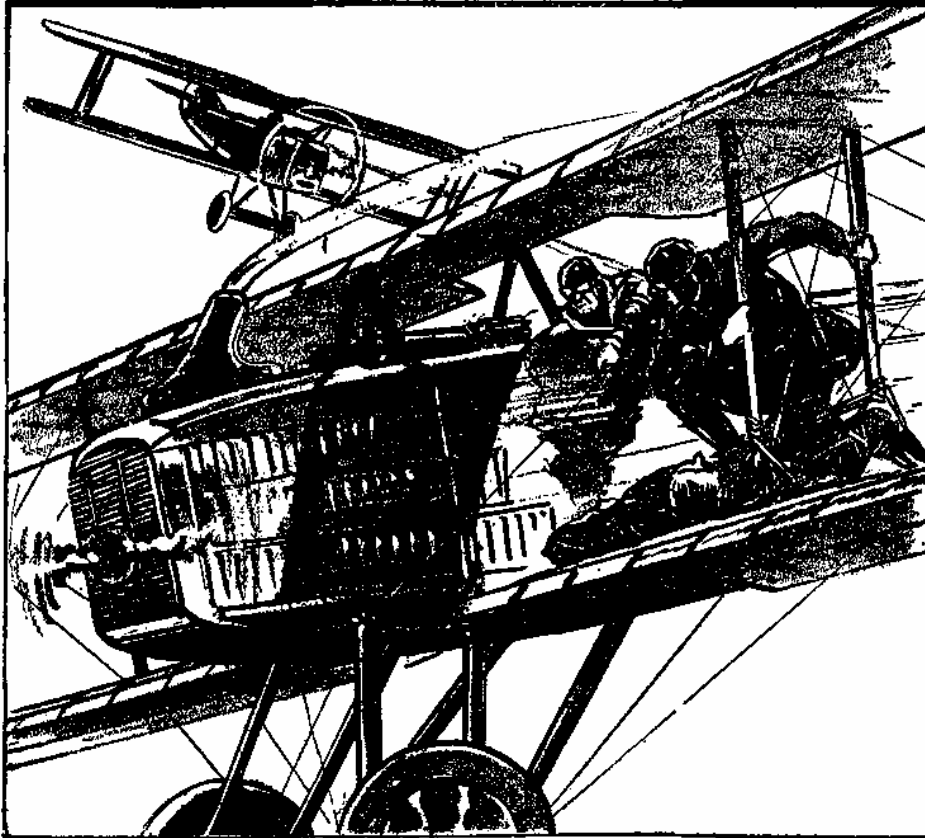


# Gallows Flight



*It Was a Matter of Obeying Regulations—or Rescuing a Buddy! Major “Bing” Carlton Makes His Choice in this Pulse-Stirring Air Yarn*

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**O**N the top of a low hill overlooking the German airdrome stood a gallows, the thin wisps of fog curling about it like ghostly fingers. As a chill wind swept the hill, the chain clanked dismally as if it already encircled a neck.

In the guard-house on the German flying field, a seriously wounded American pilot huddled on a hard cot, waiting for the dawn that

would bring with it an ignominious death at the hands of a man whose insane hatred of Americans caused him to ignore the code which demands that a prisoner of war must not be executed. The pilot rolled his head back and forth and moaned drearly, for even in his delirium he knew that a secret which meant much to the Allies must die with him.

But back across the lines, Major “Bing”

Carlton had sworn that no pilot of his should ever swing from von Graffen's gallows.

In the cold, foggy murk of predawn, Major Bing Carlton jolted open the door of the medical officer's shack by thrusting one beefy shoulder against it. He stood blinking in the light, a stubby finger scratching at the quarter-inch black stubble that ornamented his jutting chin. The blouse of his faded uniform, guiltless of buttons, gaped widely over his bulging, hairy chest.

The dapper, immaculate Captain Tanger, who had spent the night in a poker game and had not yet gone to bed, turned to gaze disapprovingly at the skipper.

"If you'd shave now and then, Bing, you'd look almost human," he insulted his superior officer, and ran his hand complacently over his own smooth, pink cheek.

"I've got other things to do besides look pretty," the major growled, without a flicker of his blood-shot eyes. "I leave that to staff officers and bellyache specialists. Say, Doc, you're a good friend of mine, aren't you?"

But Tanger was wary. "Not if you want to borrow more than ten francs, I'm not," he grinned promptly.

**C**ARLTON did not return the smile. He looked grim and worn as he stood there, his short, powerful figure balanced on widespread legs. He hadn't slept for two nights, and he looked it. He moved over to the desk and sat down on the edge of it.

"I'm crossing the lines in about twenty minutes," he said without preamble, "and I thought you might like to go with me. But don't get me wrong, Doc. Your job's prescribing pink pills for bellyaches and hang-overs in this outfit, so don't think that I'm giving you orders.

"But if you want to help save my skin, and the neck of one of my men, why—" His voice trailed off into silence. It was not easy for Bing Carlton to ask favors, even from his best friend.

Tanger swung around, the humor fading from his eyes. "Spill it, Bing," he commanded tersely.

"Well, you know that we've been ordered to locate a masked battery of guns that have been wrecking transportation and delaying troop movements for the past week. That battery has to be silenced by this afternoon or there'll be triple

hell to pay; and so far, we've failed.

"Wing headquarters has sent Colonel Hoffman up here, an old buzzard who has never been closer to a war than parade ground, and he's all set to crawl down my neck."

Carlton frowned. "He's one of these birds that thinks Army Regulations were handed down direct from Heaven," he continued. "Confound him, he may be a good soldier, but he's not human. He's licking his whiskers and just waiting for the moment when he can relieve me of command for smashing his ruddy regulations to blazes. He has the authority to do it, you know."

"What are you going to do about it—and where do I come in?" the doctor questioned perplexedly.

"Yesterday afternoon," the major resumed, "Flight 'A' was on patrol, scouting for those infernal guns, and they ran into a flock of Jerries. Jim Nelson was forced down near von Graffen's drome. He cracked up his ship. The point, that he'd evidently discovered the location of that battery. He was wagging his wings in some sort of a signal when the Jerries hit, and now von Graffen has him.

"Nelson is the only man who knows where those guns are, and I'm going after him. But there's even more to it than that."

**H**E leaped up and began to stride up and down the floor. His eyes were beginning to smoulder murderously.

"This outfit may not live by the precious regulations, but at least we stand by each other, and we get results. Now, von Graffen is a sort of monomaniac in his hatred for Americans, and he's not taking any prisoners. The louse has erected a gallows on the hill-top just above his flying field, and whenever he captures an American, he hangs him the following day.

"Thinks that hanging them will get our goats, probably, but it's a damn poor psychology, if you ask me. I've sworn that he'll never hang one of my outfit; but if I don't get over there on the jump, Nelson will be dancing a jig on thin air thirty minutes after daylight.

"Here's where you come in, Doc. Nelson cracked up his bus, and there's no question but what he was badly injured. He may even be unconscious, but that won't keep von Graffen

from stringing him up. The man's mad, I tell you. I've got to get Nelson back across the lines alive so that he can report the location of those guns.

"I want you along to patch him up, if necessary, so that he'll have a chance to stand the trip over here without cashing in. I'm starting in five minutes. How about it?"

Doctor Tanger gasped. "Good lands, man," he cried, "you haven't got a chance to go over there and take him away from under the nose of von Graffen. You're crazy. You're overdue for the observation ward right now."

"All right, I'm crazy then," Carlton retorted stolidly. He stared at the wall a moment. "But I've got a plan, Doc. If I don't get Nelson back here alive, with the information concerning those guns, it's my neck. But that's not altogether the point. I'll not stand by and see one of my boys hanged as if he were a criminal.

"I'm going over, save that kid and hang von Graffen on his own gallows—or by Heavens, von Graffen will hang me!"

The doctor sighed, looked longingly at his bunk, and rose to his feet. "You're crazy; you're a sap; you're a damned fool!" he rasped fiercely, "but I'm just sap enough to go with you! Wait till I get my bag and I'll be on your tail, Bing."

Bing grinned suddenly; then both men swung around as the door opened, and Colonel Hoffman bustled in, his white whiskers bristling ludicrously like those of a terrier.

"Major Carlton," he shrilled, "I have just learned that you intend to cross the lines. Such a proceeding is unheard of, sir. It is strictly against regulations to—"

"Regulations?" retorted Carlton with the inane blankness he knew so well how to assume. "Never heard of 'em."

**T**HE colonel spluttered indignantly. "I tell you, sir, it is against regulations for a commanding officer to risk his life in a useless and suicidal attempt to rescue a man who has been taken prisoner. In fact, sir, the whole plan is an admission of incompetency, and I feel that it is my duty to relieve you of command at once. Regulations, sir, demand that—"

For a moment Carlton seemed to expand in stature till he towered above the colonel. Deliberately, knowing full well that he was

signing his metaphorical death warrant, he thundered:

"Regulations be damned. I'm not a parade ground soldier and you can't make me one. I know you'll break me, and good luck to you; but I'll save that kid from hanging, I'll get the location of those guns, and I'll put von Graffen where he'll never hang another Yank. I don't claim to be a good soldier; but I sent that boy across the lines and I'll bring him back. Write that down in your rule book!"

**H**E whirled fiercely on Doctor Tanger. "Doc, this is a showdown, and my finish. Forget what I said about going with me and keep out of it."

Before either man could speak again, Carlton flung out through the door and trotted across the field toward the two-seater that was warming on the deadline.

But the M. O., picking up his bag, was on the major's heels, chuckling gleefully.

"As long as I'm going to be a blamed fool, I might as well go the limit," he grinned. "I always did have a yen to thumb my nose at a staff colonel. How many years in Leavenworth do you suppose we'll rate for this, Bing?"

Carlton grunted unintelligibly, but there was a grin tugging at the corners of his set mouth. He drew an automatic from his pocket and thrust it into Tanger's hand, and tossed a length of rope into the cockpit. He made sure that the two hand grenades were handy in his pockets, and climbed in behind the stick.

With Tanger fumbling at the safety strap in the rear cockpit, he read his instrument board, jazzed the throttle, and motioned for a grease monkey to jerk the chocks.

The big two-seater trundled awkwardly forward as the major struck the throttle, but took the air in a graceful zoom. She climbed slowly, and at seven thousand the pilot straightened out for the lines. The cold, gray dawn was already routing the darkness in the upper air, and the doctor shivered miserably as he ducked low beneath the coaming.

Carlton, however, was apparently impervious to cold. It had not occurred to him to wear a flying jacket, and he breathed deeply as the cold air struck his half-bared chest.

But in spite of the growing light, the fog was thick and visibility was low. The propeller blades seemed to rip the gray wisps to shreds and fling them back as the ship hurtled on under full gun. To the doctor, it was like flying blind in a limitless void, but Carlton was supremely and arrogantly confident of his ability to reach his destination.

There were twenty minutes of steady flying, during which he did not take his eyes off the clock, compass and tachometer. Then he cut his ignition and put the nose down in a shallow figure eight; but it was not until the altimeter hand hovered at five hundred that the fog thinned sufficiently for him to glimpse the ground. With a grunt of satisfaction he saw that he had not miscalculated, and by stretching his glide, he landed gently in a field that was enclosed on three sides by trees.

**H**E sprang out, followed by Tanger, who was numb and stiff with the cold. Apparently they had not been observed, and Carlton pushed his way impatiently through the underbrush, fearful that he might be too late. He knew that von Graffen would not delay the execution a moment longer than necessary.

He knew also that the German was a power in the Imperial Air Force, half-mad though he might be. It would be a simple matter for him to execute prisoners of war and explain to higher authority that they were spies.

On the edge of the woods, the two Yanks paused. The hill was deserted, although there were activities at the German drome. Hard-boiled as he was, the major shivered a little as the clanking of the gallows chain came faintly to his ears, and he wondered if his own neck might not be stretching in that chain before the morning was over.

Then he shook his massive shoulders, shrugging off fear and uncertainty. He turned and explained his simple plan to the doctor in a few terse words. When he was certain that the M. O. understood, he ran lightly forward and climbed the hill, taking full advantage of the scant underbrush and the fog which still hugged the ground in wavering wisps.

Within thirty feet of the improvised gallows there was a heap of boulders, and Carlton crouched down behind these, examining his

automatic, making certain that the pins of his grenades could be pulled with a snap of his strong teeth.

**H**E had not long to wait. A procession began to move up the hill from the flying field. Nelson, hanging limply, was being half carried between two German soldiers, while four other heavily armed men followed. Behind them came von Graffen to witness the pleasant spectacle of a Yankee pig kicking in the chains while he strangled to death.

Bing Carlton chuckled when he saw that there were only seven of the enemy. One against seven was just about even odds according to his arithmetic—when that one was Bing himself. That the top of the hill was in plain view of the flying base bothered him not at all.

When they reached the gallows, Jim Nelson managed to draw himself erect, although his face was deathly pale and he swayed on his feet. His escort lost no time in lifting him to the platform and fastening the noose about his neck.

Somehow, the American's face twisted into the semblance of a grin which infuriated von Graffen, and Carlton, crouching tensely behind the rocks, felt his heart leap. Desperately wounded, almost dying on his feet. Nelson was showing them how a Yank could take it.

"We'll see whether von Graffen can grin when the noose is around his own neck," Carlton muttered grimly. He could have shot the German from where he crouched, but that was too easy a death.

**A**T that moment a commotion broke out from the edge of the woods; a shout, the sound of a shot. With one accord the Germans turned in that direction, and at a sharp command from von Graffen, three of the soldiers trotted down the slope to investigate. Carlton waited until they had nearly reached the foot of the hill; then he rose quietly to his feet, his pistol aimed at von Graffen's stomach.

"Get 'em up!" he said in a deadly monotone, and the remaining Germans whirled upon him.

His finger was trembling on the trigger. "Tell 'em to drop those guns, von Graffen," he snapped, "or I'll let your innards out."

The German hesitated, choked with rage.

Then at a look in the American's eyes, he barked a trembling command, and the three soldiers dropped their rifles. Recognizing the major, Nelson threw the noose from around his neck, but staggered and fell. Carlton instinctively tried to catch him—and in that moment the three Germans had snatched up their rifles again and were menacing him with leveled, saw-toothed bayonets.

Elated at the turn of events, von Graffen leered at him. "I did not expect to have the pleasure of hanging two Yankees in one morning," he said suavely. "You will drop your gun at once, or I will have you shot first and hang you afterwards."

Carlton swore luridly to himself at having been caught off his guard, but his stolid face was impassive as he surveyed the German. With the bayonets at his throat, there was nothing to do but drop the Colt. But his mind was working swiftly.

"Perhaps you'd like my grenade, too," he said, tugging at his pocket before the Germans could search him. He took out the little bomb and dropped it to the ground, but no one noticed that the second grenade was concealed in his capacious palm. With a swift movement he held it behind him, hoping desperately that Nelson was not unconscious. He almost cheered when he felt it grasped by the Yank's eager, shaking fingers.

Tanger, having created a diversion at the edge of the woods as instructed, had slipped away, and the three other Germans were returning. There was no time to lose. Trusting that Nelson would be able to use the grenade at the proper time, the major thrust out his arms in an unexpected gesture, and knocked two of the bayonets aside, ducking under the other one. His fist lashed out with all the weight of his stocky body behind it, and a German hit the ground so hard that he bounced.

**W**ITH the deceptive speed for which he was noted, Carlton side-stepped a bayonet that slashed viciously at his stomach and felt it graze the skin. But now the other three Germans were almost upon them. Casting a glance over his shoulder, the major groaned as he saw that Nelson seemed to be lapsing into unconsciousness, the hand that held the grenade doubled under him. He called the man's name in a sharp, vibrant voice.

Nelson raised his head, then let it fall.

With a bellow like that of an enraged bull, the major lashed out with fists and feet. But the Germans were all about him now and he could not look in all directions at once. A rifle butt came in forcible contact with his head. With the world turning black before his eyes, he whirled blindly, felt his fingers sink deep into a throat, and gripped fiercely.

He lifted the German completely from the ground, but again a crashing blow descended upon his unprotected head, and he pitched forward to the ground. A moment later, when he fought his way back to consciousness, he found that his arms had been bound behind him, and the noose was around his own neck.

**H**E lurched to his feet on the platform of the gallows, staring wildly about him, sick with the thought that he had failed. He didn't mind death so much; but he had failed to save Jim Nelson; he had failed in his last chance to learn the location of those guns. He would hang there, an example of his own folly, for every flyer who crossed the lines to see.

The Germans were standing in a little group, grinning at him, while von Graffen had stepped forward to throw the bolt with his own hand. His face black with rage, Carlton shifted his weight, intending to kick the German in the face before he died, when he noticed that Nelson, lying unheeded on the ground, was holding the grenade to his lips, fumbling at the pin.

He waited tensely, saw the pin jerk loose. But the half unconscious man still held the whirring bomb, while von Graffen's hand was slowly drawing the bolt that would send the major to his death.

"Throw it, Jim! For God's sake, throw it!" Carlton yelled, and with an instinctive movement. Nelson rolled the bomb from him, straight into the midst of the Germans. Before they could escape, it exploded with a deafening roar, and the Boche were hurled aside in a mangled heap.

Von Graffen had escaped. And now, with his face a fiendish mask of hate, he leaped again to the bolt; but the American's heavy boot shot out, catching him under the chin, and he was sent reeling back.

The explosion seemed to have temporarily

aroused Jim Nelson, for he dragged himself to his feet, climbed to the platform and fumbled the ropes loose that bound the major's arms. Von Graffen was reaching for his Luger when Carlton threw off the noose and leaped upon him, knocking the weapon from his hand.

"Now, we'll see how you like a rope necktie," he grunted. The German had fallen to his knees, but Carlton jerked him erect, flung the noose over his head.

**T**HE major shot a hasty glance towards the flying field where armed men were rushing out, and his hand grasped the bolt that would send von Graffen into eternity. But he did not draw it. Twice his fingers tightened, and twice they relaxed. Then he swore luridly at himself.

"What the devil is the matter with me?" he raged. "Me, the toughest *hombre* in the air force getting yellow livered. Von Graffen, I guess I'm not cut out for a hangman—I'll leave such as that to apes like you. But I'll catch you in the air some day, and when I do, I'll ride your tail to the devil!"

He bent swiftly and caught up the body of Nelson, who was again unconscious. Flinging the man over his shoulder, Carlton raced down the hill in giant strides.

Behind him, the Germans began firing wildly, rifle bullets snicking about him and tearing at the turf at his feet. From somewhere a Maxim went into furious action, and he stumbled and fell as a stream of bullets raked his leg agonizingly. Closer and closer the bullets drew to him, flinging showers of earth over him, but in that instant. Captain Tanger leaped out and dragged him to safety.

**C**ARLTON recovered almost instantly, picked up his burden, and again they dashed toward the plane. By the time they reached it, the Germans were breaking through the trees, but Tanger snatched the major's pistol. With a gun in each hand he blazed away, causing the Germans to fall back. The major had already got the unconscious Nelson on the wing, and the doctor snatched a moment to look at him. He nodded in satisfaction.

"He'll make the grade, all right. You couldn't kill that boy with a battle axe," he yelled, and an

instant later they had the pilot lashed to the wing. As the major whirled the prop, the doctor sprang to the rear cockpit and depressed the muzzle of the Lewis gun. What he didn't know about machine-guns was a whole lot, but a feeder was already in the breech, and he blazed away with reckless abandon, again causing the Germans to seek shelter.

The motor, which had not had a chance to cool, caught almost instantly, and the big plane shuddered forward, the major catching it as it went by. Slamming the stick to one side and ruddering violently, he taxied into the open and took off after a short run, in a zoom that almost caused the plane to slip back on her tail. The wings gripped the air, however, as the slipstream whipped back, and the ship thundered skyward.

But that was almost her last zoom, for she roared up directly into the path of two D-7 Fokkers, and Spandau bullets raked her viciously from nose to tail-assembly. Although his two-seater was skimming the treetops, Carlton coolly took a chance and allowed the plane to roll over on one wing in a vertical bank. The branches swished dangerously close, but the maneuver took them momentarily out of range.

Not for long, however. In the effort to keep from crashing into the trees, they met another Fokker head-on. Spandau tracers blasted furiously, and the big ship quivered to the impact of lead through the fuselage and cowling. The windshield disappeared as if it had been wiped away by a ghostly hand, and only shreds remained.

The doctor was spraying the air in wild bursts, without doing any apparent damage, but the major was at his best against odds. He gripped the trips of his guns, rocked the plane gently with the stick, and the German pilot's face disappeared in a hideous, bloody mask. The Fokker ripped instantly into the trees and was shredded into fragments.

**C**ARLTON had managed to gain a few hundred feet of altitude when the other Fokker smashed in from the side—the side on which the unconscious Nelson was lashed to the wing. Tanger's gun had jammed, and he did not know how to free it, so all he could do was watch helplessly while the tracers drew closer and closer

to the fuselage. He drew his pistol and fired futilely, the feeble popping of the weapon drowned in the roar of motors and machine-guns.

But Carlton was watching also. He hurled his ship about in a strut-cracking vertical bank; but the pilot of the Fokker anticipated the move and whirled with him. And still the Spandau tracers sought for a vital spot in the American ship.

Suddenly the doctor gave a yell of alarm, for the bullets had gnawed at a strut and were slashing at Nelson's body. The pilot saw it, also, but too late. Nelson jerked convulsively as the stream of bullets hit his leg.

The major jockeyed out of range, but the damage had been done. An artery in Nelson's leg had been cut.

If Nelson died, then it meant that the location of those guns might not be discovered, or at least there would be a fatal delay. But to his credit, the major wasn't thinking of that. All he could think of now was that one of his pilots was dying, and he could do nothing to prevent it.

**B**UT he could avenge Nelson's death. Without helmet or goggles, with powder smoke and oil blackening his face, he looked like a fiend as he hurled his ship over in the effort to meet the Fokker head-on.

But the doctor was staring at that stream of blood that gushed out upon the wing, and all his professional instincts were aroused. He forgot that he was high in the air, with a horrible death reaching hot fingers for him. With a furious oath, he flung off the safety strap and reached for his bag.

In that moment he knew that he was desperately afraid, but he did not hesitate. He fumbled in his bag for a tourniquet and found none. He caught up a roll of gauze, but the wind whipped it from his fingers and sent it back in a long white streamer that tangled in the tail-assembly. Almost losing his balance, he grabbed out and secured one end of it.

Gripping the end in his teeth, he put his surgical scissors in his pocket and straddled out over the cockpit coaming. His fingers sank into the fabric until they ached with the strain. He crept out on the wing, the wind tugging viciously at him; and once when he opened his mouth, he nearly burst with the air that rushed down his

throat. For a moment he hung to a strut with his eyes closed, sick with the awfulness of his position.

Again the Spandau bullets came, this time raking across the small of his back, coming within a fraction of an inch of tearing the vitals from his shrinking body. But once again his professional instincts came to his rescue, dominating him; and somehow he managed to reach the helpless man. He caught his own leg around a strut, leaving his hands free.

And as he began to work the fear slipped away from him, and his long, slender fingers became sure and steady. With swift motions he twisted the strip of gauze around Nelson's leg above the knee, inserted the scissors, and twisted with all his strength. More than life itself depended upon stopping that crimson death stream.

At that moment, Carlton pivoted his ship. The bullets from his twin Vickers shot out in an unerring stream, and the stricken Fokker reared upward in a half loop. The pilot was hard hit, but he was still fighting. With a desperate effort he slammed the stick forward, and as the ship reeled down, the bullets from hot gun muzzles raked the side of the American ship.

One of those bullets slammed through the doctor's shoulder, and he swayed backward until his legs were hanging off in space. He could feel himself slipping, and was powerless to stay himself.

**I**T was at that moment that Nelson opened his tortured eyes and stared straight at the doctor. Tanger sucked in his breath in a sort of sob, realizing that he had not finished his job. It aroused him to a superhuman exertion, and as he slipped off into space, his right hand caught and held. The slipstream blew his body almost straight out, but a sudden bank flung him back again, and once more he wrapped his legs about the strut.

"Have you fixed up in a minute, old man!" he yelled, but the words whipped soundlessly from his lips.

He bent to his tourniquet, tightened it with firm hands and tied it.

But his brain was reeling; the earth seemed shooting up to meet him. He did not see the major take a desperate chance, rake the top of the Fokker

with his undercarriage and send her crashing into the trees below. Unconscious of what he did, he wrapped his arms around the strut, and let the blackness of oblivion close over him.

**W**HEN Doctor Tanger returned to consciousness, it was to find himself on a cot, with the sound of voices in his ears. He was not much interested, but he couldn't help hearing. He opened his eyes to see the unkempt figure of Major Bing Carlton, with Colonel Hoffman standing near him.

"Well, that's the way it happened," the major was saying grimly. "Nelson will live, thanks to the doc here, and he was able to tell the location of the guns. Now you can break me and be damned."

Then Carlton shook his shaggy head. "But what I can't understand," he muttered disgustedly,

"is why I didn't go ahead and hang von Graffen when I had the chance. Land knows, he deserved it."

The little colonel wagged his head solemnly. "As things turned out, I believe we can forget your insubordination, Major," he piped. "But as for the reason you didn't hang von Graffen, it was because it was against regulations, of course."

Bing's teeth were white against his blackened face as he grinned. "Have it your own way," he grunted.

"Regulations, the devil!" Captain Tanger croaked unexpectedly from his cot. "It was just because the major happens to be a white man, that's all."

The colonel's reply showed that he was almost human. "Have it your own way," he echoed—and grinned.