

Enemies as Hosts in Wartime

An Extraordinary Adventure with an Airplane and a Well-Placed Archie Shot, and Some of the Consequences

This story, by Captain Hall, which will appear in the October number of U. S. Air Service, describes a fight in which an anti-aircraft shell lodged between the cylinders of his rotary engine—but failed to explode. Captain Hall was with the British Army for fifteen months; with the Lafayette Escadrille from June, 1917, to February, 1918; wounded and brought down in No Man's Land, June 26, 1917; resumed active service, Sept. 15, 1917; transferred to U. S. Air Service, February, 1918; wounded, brought down and captured, May 7, 1918. Certain omissions in the story are indicated by asterisks.

By JAMES NORMAN HALL,
(Author of "High Adventure.")

EDDIE RICKENBACKER, Eddie Green, and myself—all pilots of the 94th Pursuit Squadron, U. S. A.—were on alert duty at our aerodrome at Toul. It would be impossible to forget that fine Spring morning—May 7, 1918, to be exact—when, as the result of a combat and a series of bizarre accidents which happen only in the air, I found my plane tumbling completely out of control at a point about five kilometers back of the enemy's lines. We took the air in response to a telephone call from an infantry observation post. An enemy formation was reported approaching our lines in the vicinity of Pont-à-Mousson. After a twenty-minute search we sighted it, five Albatross single-seaters, north and west of that town.

At that period the 94th was equipped with a new and untried plane, the new Nieuport, type 28, single-seater, rotary motor, lower wing, ailerons, a machine gun, and a fuselage built by the French Nieuport Company. It was a splendid little craft—for pleasure purposes. It climbed rapidly, manoeuvred well, and was better than the Spad for acrobacy. But it had been rejected by the French Government as being not strong enough to weather the tremendous strain to which fighting planes are subject in combat.

The United States Air Service had been compelled to accept them as plane equipment for the 94th, but newly arrived at the front, for the French were not then able to live up to their agreement to furnish American pursuit squadrons with Spads, their best type of combat machine. All of which explains the "series of bizarre accidents"; for had we been flying trusty old Spads I should not have had to cool my heels in a kriegs-gefangenen lager, "ground-flying," after the fashion of aviator prisoners of war.

The combat started at 14,000 feet. Having the advantage of the enemy in altitude, we attacked immediately, they being compelled to dive further into their own lines because of their inferior position. While diving vertically upon the enemy nearest me, the fabric covering the upper surface of my upper right plane burst along the leading edge, throwing the plane completely out of balance. Compelled to leave the combat immediately, I turned toward our lines, which could be seen in the distance, but oh! so unalterably in the distance.

The wide rent in the fabric of the wing increased in size under the steady encouragement of the wind. Other strips ripped loose and flapped and fluttered out behind. Enemy anti-aircraft fire was brisk and increasingly accurate during that precarious journey homeward. Owing to the damaged wing I was unable to manoeuvre.

It was a moment of intense excitement. All airmen have known similar ones when their hopes of safety hung in a balance jauntily swaying back and forth, with old Godfather Chance jiggling the scales in a purely vindictive mood. Look-

ing behind and below me I saw my former quarry become huntsman, climbing toward my level for all he was worth. Occasionally he would pull up and fire a burst in my direction. Then he would lose speed, fall off on a wing, nose down to gather speed and repeat the manoeuvre. But he was yet too far distant and too far below me to make accurate practice, and I knew that I was in no great danger from him till he could climb to my level.

The bark of the Archies was really omniscient. When those dogs are on the scent, and one's old bus is worn out and incapable of swift flight, how vicious they seem, and how they snap at one's heels!

Suddenly I felt my plane give a violent lurch. The motor spilled forward, wrenched partly loose from its bed, and down we went, plane and pilot, toward that inhospitable land bounded by German trenches. It was not until afterward that I learned the reason for the sudden descent. A small incendiary shell from a quick-firing gun had struck my engine. It stuck there, and failed to explode, but ended for all time the delicate functioning of that marvelous little Rhone motor.

I wondered in that peculiarly objective way which is the most amazing thing to reflect upon afterward, what the result of this adventure was to be. I believed at the moment that I didn't much care, for I had read many stories of the treatment by the enemy of allied prisoners of war. Death seemed a preferable fate.

The suspense was not long drawn out. Aerial troubles bring intense anxiety, but they have the merit of passing almost with the swiftness of thought. I remember the elemental roughness of Mother Earth's welcoming embrace, a shock of pain in legs and head, and then, despite my fear of German prison camps, the great surge of joy at the consciousness of being alive. After all, life is sweet, and a few moments of illuminating experience taught me how much more truthful one's instincts are than professed beliefs.

I thought that I wanted to be killed, but nature knows what is good for us and doesn't take any stock in our melodramatics. At any rate, she very effectively overruled my impulse, if I really had one, to let matters take their course. She merely gave me a fleeting but vivid glimpse of a green field spinning up to meet me. And I gave a violent pull on my control stick in an effort to save myself from a too-hasty contact. The result was that I did not crash hopelessly, and now have behind me an experience which is, in a melancholy way, some compensation for the loss of freedom.

Seeing German soldiers rushing from all sides toward my machine, I expected rough usage, and scowled in what I thought must be true Hauptmann fashion, hoping to overawe them. This was a needless effort. One of the first men to reach me said: "You are hurt,

Sir-r-r?" in good German English. I told him that I was, a little, whereupon he immediately called two others. They lifted me gently out of my seat, and carried me to a dugout at the edge of the wood. * * *

A good many soldiers followed me down into the dugout. I felt uneasy when I saw no officers among them, thinking: "This is where I lose my few possessions, and Lord knows when I'll get a new outfit of clothing." However, although they could have taken everything from me in the absence of their officers, and no one any the wiser, no attempt was made to do it. Instead of that, an elderly German orderly brought me a cup of hot coffee from a compact little kitchen adjoining the mess-room. * * *

An ambulance man came, and in a jiffy he had my right leg in splints and carefully bandaged, and my head bound up, (both ankles and my nose had been broken in the fall, the right ankle rather badly.) Then I was given a German cigarette and began to think: "This is not going to be so bad as I expected." The soldiers cleared out in a hurry upon the arrival of an officer. He saluted with a stiff little bow from the hips, as Germans always do, told me in English that he was sorry, but "fortunes of war," and so on. Then he asked if I would let him see my papers. Luckily I had nothing but 800 francs in money—it was the first of the month—and my identification card. At least I thought I had nothing else, although I thought I had a typewritten sheet of squadron orders in my trousers pocket. In a moment of unguarded leisure I chewed this up and swallowed it, my stomach receiving the morsel not gladly, but in a spirit of admirable resignation. The officer kept the card, returning my pocketbook and money, accepting my word for it that I had nothing else.

About half an hour after this several other officers, aviators, arrived. Each of them saluted and bowed in the same smart, soldierly, but rather odd way. Then one of them said that they had had the honor—a nice way to put it, I thought—of fighting with my patrol that morning, and that my two comrades had returned safely. Without any apparent bitterness, he added that, as a result of the combat, a pilot of their squadron had fallen in flames and was burned to death. (This machine was brought down by Eddie Rickenbacker, needless to say, a fine chase pilot.) He inquired about my injuries, and told me that the nearest hospital was at some distance. If I could endure the delay they would be glad to have me lunch with them at their squadron headquarters which was not far out of the way. I accepted with a good deal of reluctance, not feeling in a company mood, but brightened at the thought of what had just been happening. This might have been a conversation among friends in front of the Café de la Paix in Paris.

As they carried me to their car, I felt

more like a pampered Back Bay baby going for an airing in the Boston Public Gardens than a prisoner of war. They left me in the car at the side of the road, while they went over to have a look at my wrecked machine. This gave me a moment for collecting my thoughts.

I had often been warned that a prisoner must be very much on his guard. I had heard that a favorite German ruse with a captured aviator was to take him to a squadron mess, wine and dine him, particularly the first, so that he might forget his caution. Then when he was sufficiently mellow, they pumped him dry of information and sent him on his way, feeling well repaid for their liberal expenditure of good Rhine wine.

Sometimes, so I had been told, they tried browbeating a good deal depending upon their estimate of the captive. I hoped that this latter would be the method chosen with me. It is hard to be suspicious of courteous and hospitable treatment; but one can easily meet an attack which is a straightforward attempt at "bulldozing." I knew, of course, that prisoners have their rights and cannot be forced to talk.

I had a homesick moment while sitting there, waiting for them, thinking of the uncertain future, aware that I had made an attempt at escape, and that for me even the question of escape was out of the distance. I heard the faint drone of rotary motors, a sound high-pitched, familiar, terribly saddening under those circumstances. It could come, I knew, from the craft of only one squadron, the 94th.

Soon I saw them, flying very high, almost directly overhead, the motors humming drowsily. They were moving unconcernedly on, tipping up now and then in a steep bank, making jaunty earth-scrutinizing changes of direction which told me that they were perhaps searching for some trace of me.

I wanted to shout, to wave my hand, to pull myself by my boot tops away from the solid earth. If only I could have reached up far enough to tighten my fingers around a tail skid, I felt that I could hang on long enough to be carried across that little strip of enemy ground. Then I could have dropped into the Moselle where it flows through friendly territory. But they were miles above me, and so I sat there watching them, helpless and sick at heart. * * *

It was a ride of about fifteen kilometers to the aerodrome of the German squadron. I learned that these officers belonged to a combat group lying directly opposite our own sector of the front. Mars-le-Tour, the town near which they were stationed, had been a place of considerable interest to us. * * *

Evidently they were equally curious. Had it not been wartime, and had I been in a more comfortable frame of mind, we might have had a most interesting chat, comparing notes as to time and place of combats. Some of them spoke French and others English, so that there was no difficulty in conversing. But I had to keep clear of the subject, lest I should disclose, even approximately, the location of our squadron. My German hosts, or captors—I hardly knew in which light to consider them then—respected the difficulty of my position and asked no embarrassing questions. I could, however, talk quite freely with my opponent of the combat, an experience somewhat unique for two enemy airmen. We chatted informally and pleasantly of our encounter and compared notes as to our feeling at the times when we were pursuer and pursued. * * *

While we were waiting for lunch one of the men sat down to the piano and played some French music, songs which I had heard in our own mess only a day



Captain Hall's Wrecked Nieuport in German Hands at Pagny-sur-Moselle (Snapshot Taken by a German Officer.)



Captain Hall Just After His Capture. Behind His Right Elbow, the German Pilot He Was Attacking.

two before. For a moment I was tempted to let my preconceived notions of the Germans go to the deuce, and talk as one human being likes to talk to another. I wanted to let down the barrier of reserve, as they seemed ready to do. Then came the suspicion: "This is doubtless a part of the game. First the mellowing influence of music, then that of wine, and then the indiscreet disclosures." These ever-ready suspicions may seem a trifle ridiculous; but it is far better that a prisoner of war be too cautious than not cautious enough. Furthermore, American aviators were rareties on the German side of the lines at that time, and I knew that the enemy were mighty curious about the plans and the organization of our air force.

Well, the wine proved to be café au lait! First we had a roast, then a salad, dessert, and the coffee to wind up with. No wine, no liquors of any sort. * * *

Everything was open and above board in so far as I could judge. None of the officers felt it his duty to act as a self-appointed intelligence officer. I was even informed beforehand that one acting in that capacity was coming soon to see me, so that I was ready for him when he did appear.

He was a man of about 45, erect, soldierly looking, with a pleasant face, not at all the Prussian type of official I had expected to see. He greeted me in a jovial sort of way with: "Well, Hall, tell us all about it. What are you people doing over there?" I thought to myself: "Watch your step! That hearty, last-name sort of greeting does very well in America, but it isn't a German practice." However, it certainly seemed natural enough, and I decided that I could meet apparent friendliness with apparent friendliness without damaging the allied cause greatly. So I said, "All right, Major; you know how we Americans love to brag. Ask me whatever you want to know."

He began by asking me what my belief was about the treatment I should receive at the hands of my captors. "Now, tell me frankly," he said, "haven't you expected that your ears would be cut off, or your tongue slit—something of that kind?" I said that I had heard some pretty damning things relative to the

German treatment of prisoners of war, but I knew that there were good Germans as well as bad ones, and was relieved (subtle flattery) to find that I had fallen into the hands of the decent ones. * * *

It was now my turn to answer or to refuse to answer questions. However, I was first told by this officer what he knew, or thought he knew, of the movements of our troops and the organization of our air force; what squadrons were on the front, what others were soon to be there, and so on. He told me also of the movements of British and French squadrons, and showed me photographs of allied aerodromes along the Meuse and Toul sectors. * * *

He told me that he knew exactly where my squadron was located and how long it had been there; but evidently he did not, for he was anxious that I should either confirm or deny his statements. Finally, weary of persistent questioning, I said: "I'll tell you what I'll do, Major. I will leave the matter to these officers. Supposing one of them to be in my position as a prisoner, questioned by one of our intelligence officers. If any one of them will honestly say that, under such conditions, he would be willing to give the location of his squadron headquarters, I'll tell you where mine is."

Although I would have found a way out of it, it would have been awkward not to have fulfilled this promise had there been occasion for doing so. But these pilots were gentlemen. All of them said that in my place they would do as I was doing.

The Major was a decent old fellow, and didn't question me any further. On several later occasions he sent greetings on to me by other American aviators who passed through his hands.

After the examination, my airmen hosts—they had proved to be hosts after all—ordered their car, and the Major and an officer from group headquarters went with me to the war hospital at Jarny, not far from Metz. * * *

I must not forget to speak of another courtesy extended me by the pilots of this German squadron which, I believe, cost the pilot who did it his own freedom. It is a practice among airmen at the front, in case of the capture of an enemy pilot, to drop a message giving this information on his own side of the lines. I had asked for this might be done for me, adding, for caution's sake, that they might throw it out anywhere between Verdun and the Vosges Mountains. They replied that they would willingly deliver such a message, and they did.

Some Americans from my own group,

captured later, told me that the note was dropped and received, and that the German pilot who carried the message was shot down in our own lines by an allied aviator who knew nothing of his mission. Since returning to France I have heard from other members of my group that the German aviator who dropped the message was shot down and made a prisoner two or three days after he had delivered it. Major David Peterson, the man best able to give me the facts of the incident, has since been killed in an airplane accident, and I have not been able to get the exact truth of it.

On the way to the hospital I discovered that I had left my flying helmet and gloves in the dugout near the field where I fell. I spoke of this in some by-the-way fashion. I think I said that the helmet had a sentimental value which made me sorry to lose it. Two or three days later one of the pilots came to the hospital to see me, bringing both gloves and helmet. Not only that, he also brought two snapshots which he had taken on the morning I was shot down, one of my wrecked machine and one of myself, sitting in a motor car belonging to their squadron, souvenirs which are precious to me.

One glance at them carries me in a moment over the months and the miles to Pagny-sur-Moselle, and recalls vividly my last adventures in the war. To get these he had to make a journey of about thirty-five kilometers. On several occasions the German pilots from Mars-le-Tour flew very low past my window at the hospital, waving to me as they went out or returned from patrol. They were sportsmen and gentlemen, and I should be glad to meet them again.

So much for my early treatment at the hands of the Germans. There followed six months of captivity, first at the German war hospitals at Jarny, in occupied French territory, and at Saarbrücken, Rhineland; then in the prison camps at Rastatt and Karlsruhe, Baden, and at Landshut, Bavaria. The rest of the story may be told briefly in the words of a fellow-aviator, likewise a kriegs-gefangener: "Wonderful people, wonderful country, and, oh! such exquisite soup!"