

CHAPTER 42

OUR SECOND PLANE

On Friday, October 18, at 4 p. m. we were brot to a high pitch of excitement when a Rumpler was spotted by our men sailing along just above the tree tops. Without command from Lieutenant Brush we swung the gun around and began firing point blank. The enemy had slipped up unawares and was flying so low that the range section could not furnish the required data. Let us return to the thrilling incident.

The plane is coming on. Sgt. Miller, the iron-monger, points his double Lewis in the invader's face. What is wrong? A shell jams. Miller curses the luck while we swing our piece. The enemy flies over our position. We can see two men in the fuselage. Why do they not use the machine gun, the barrel of which is protruding over the edge of the observer's pit? The plane is now flying down the field. Sgt. Miller opens up at last and tracer bullets make a path to the Rumpler.

We fire again. The range is estimated, but the explosions are deadly near. Why does not the enemy land and avoid destruction? In another moment we would surely find the mark. McHenry shoves in the shells on the fourth second and Thompson pulls the lanyard with repeated vigor. Sgt. Fleck is estimating the firing data, for now confusion has gripped the range section. The

plane turns and makes an attempt to reach the line. Our white puffs are telling. Another second and the plane would be blown to bits. Suddenly the pilot points the nose of his plane downward forty-five degrees and makes a hurried landing within our lines.

We later learned that a fragment of a bursting shell case had penetrated the gasoline feed and forced the aviator to land. Two men were captured; an Austrian Captain and a German sergeant. They had ascended over their lines an hour before to observe their own camouflaged positions and had lost their way. Once estray they groped about for guidance, but instead of friendly advice they were accorded a hearty reception and a shower of steel.

We never knew why the observer refused to use his deadly machine gun. Sgt. Miller's accident and our delay in swinging the gun gave the enemy an excellent chance to fire a few healthy rounds.

The next morning an aero squad salvaged the captured plane and on their return to the rear stopped at our gun position. Many bullet holes had penetrated the checkered wings and it seemed to us a miracle that neither pilot nor observer had been killed or wounded.

Our Battery received official credit for this second and last plane a week later; and now the Battalion was credited with five planes which set a new record for anti-aircraft work. One plane in 10,000 shots was the old record; we brot it down to one plane in 500.

Considering the difficulty of aircraft work this is a good average and later Colonel Perkins, Commander of air forces, Second Army, A. E. F., mentioned our work especially in an official communication to General Pershing.