

Errand for Q-74

By Malcolm Taylor

CHAPTER I

FROM his seat in a British observation plane, Capt. Raymond Imhof, U. S. Army Intelligence, and his R. A. F. pilot looked down through the night at Coblenz, five miles below. Although the big raid by several hundred British bombers was still in its earlier stages, the defenses of the Rhineland city had already been so crippled that the attackers were running in lower and lower over their targets. Imhof knew the timetable of the raid and checked its progress with the clock on the instrument panel.

"This is the eighth wave at work now, I make it," he remarked. "If they're on the dot," the pilot corroborated. "They usually are in these shows."

"Head south," Imhof bade. Danforth swung the plane and Imhof studied the terrain ahead carefully. In the whole blacked-out Rhineland, as far as eye could reach, only three objects stood out clearly visible; burning Coblenz and the rivers Rhine and Moselle, whose confluence it marked. In spite of the darkness, the winding courses of these streams showed plainly for leagues and leagues, marking out the enclave of land in which Imhof was interested. Except for Coblenz at the tip, this enclave, like all the rest of the country, was plunged in total darkness.

With his eye, Imhof measured distances across the enclave, checking lengths and directions and angles by the curves of the Rhine and Moselle. In his pocket was a large-scale, detailed German-made map of the area, but to consult it would mean using a flashlight, and the least gleam of light was inadvisable. The map was for use only in case of absolute need. Imprinted on his memory was a safer one, not so detailed, but clear and accurate enough to let him find in the blackness below a certain place that he had picked as ideal for his purpose, a place, besides, that he knew well from of old.

"The eighth wave's packing up," Danforth announced. "Ours must be nearly over Belgium by now, scouting home."

THE "our" was a reference to the wave of bombers that the observation plane had tailed most of the way from England. Its occupants, having arrived over Coblenz with some time in hand, had then stayed out of curiosity to watch the bombers at work. Now, however, they were turning to their own special task. They had not come to Coblenz to act as observers of the great raid. The bomber crews were their own observers and would report on returning. Imhof, indeed, was not returning. His duty was quite different. He was on a secret Intelligence mission into Germany and would shortly be parachuting down to land in enemy territory. Battered, burning Coblenz was no more than the beacon, the tortured flare, that had helped guide him toward his destination and that soon, he planned, should help him effect his landing unobserved—but unsuspected as well. Otherwise, his work in Germany would be rendered much more difficult perhaps impossible.

The idea of making use of a massed night bombing raid by the R. A. F. to mask his landing had been Imhof's own. So far it had worked out perfectly. The entire attention of the defense was concentrated on the bombers. In any case, no listening post or detector was likely to register his descent. For he planned to sweep down from his present altitude of 26,000

feet in a long, silent glide to his objective, which was well away from Coblenz and the raiders. When the plane was low over the place where he wanted to land, he would bail out. No swiveling light, if it did chance to swing his way, would reveal his descent. He had pretty well safeguarded against that by having his parachute dyed black.

The bombers would still be hammering Coblenz long after he landed. Before the all-clear he would have made his way to the outskirts of the city and be waiting to enter. The distance to cover was not great and he knew the country well. After graduating from Cornell a decade earlier, he had studied for three years at the University of Bonn, farther down the Rhine, and had spent a whole summer vacation touring that river

and its larger tributaries up to the Swiss frontier.

"A BIT more to the right, Danforth," he directed. "O. K. Straighten out and hold it." He took a final check.

"Let's go!" Danforth nosed the plane down and throttled back the engine, and their flight rushed to the silence of a glide.

Down and on, down and on swept the plane, right in line with the objective.

"Fine!" Imhof approved. "Could not be better."

At 10,000 feet he disconnected the oxygen pipe, checked his parachute and rip cord again against the coming jump and ticked things off for the last time on a mental list—papers, money, rations, compass, etc. Everything ready, down to the last item.

"Soon as I jump you cut and run for home, Danforth," he directed, turning to the pilot as if to reinforce his words, to give them the weight of a command. Imhof knew that there were plenty of youngsters in the R. A. F., but this pilot of the Night Fighter Command who had been assigned to fly him over Germany, either did not look his years or was really under the age limit. Either way, Imhof felt a certain responsibility and wanted his pilot to get home safely. But also, for urgent reasons of his own, he did not want the observation plane to be brought down anywhere near Coblenz.

He disconnected the intercom and got clear of headset and microphone with their wires. Nothing remained now but to shortly open the emergency panel, preparatory to his jump.

All at once the plane bucked, staggered, slowed an instant, as if it had run into denser atmospheric pressures, while lines of flame streaked by like a flight of burning hailstones or a meteoric shower.

But the lines of flame were tracer bullets, and the plane, splintered in a dozen places, dropped like a stone, spinning as it fell. Imhof, his head whirling with the motion, turned instinctively to Danforth, but one glance was enough. Danforth sat slumped in his seat, his head lolling back as if he were gazing at the stars, his hands still clutching the wheel, but inertly, making no movement to right the plane, like the hands of one dead or unconscious.

(To Be Continued)

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