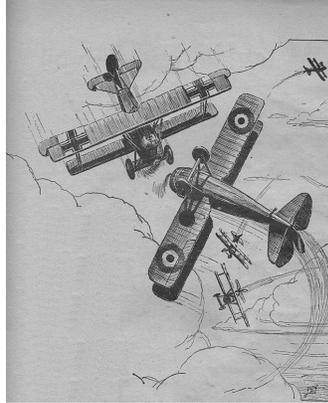


# The Cursed Squadron

A “Jack Sharpe” Mystery by William Skelly

**“Four pilots had been assassinated in the air during the sortie of their fifth kill. The 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit was cursed! But Jack Sharpe was on the case, and something seemed fishy about the ghastly Hun and his ultimatum: NO MORE ACES.”**



## Chapter I

### The Specter's Revenge

THAT black Fokker DVII must have been flown by an ace. The wings were unpainted lozenge, and the tail feathers were white, but the man in the pit had a heart the color of his fuselage, and damned good aim. It drifted into the sights of Charlie's SPAD. Charlie already had a few bullet holes in his wings from the Fokker's Spandaus, and he was running low on fuel. But now his position was perfect, and he was at such close range that there wasn't a chance of a single bullet missing. All Charlie had to do was fire and the Fokker would be gone. There was a moment's hesitation, but then his gloved hand clamped down on the trips. His Vickers erupted, sending twin streams of .30 caliber lead right into the Fokker's fuel tank. It took just one burst and the Fokker exploded into flames and spun out of view.

*I had to do it, Charlie thought, I just had to. It was me or him... Charlie started to scan the skies for Huns. They had cleared during the dogfight, and he was alone. I tried to get out of there. I tried to out-manuever him. I even fired a warning shot, but he still opened fire the first time he got anything close to a good position... What if...*

Charlie started looking around for Huns more frantically. The skies were still empty. His squadron must have all made it back by now. He knew he had to be alone, but what if... “I had to do it!” Charlie shouted into the thin air. “He gave me no choice!” The air was freezing, and even Charlie's wool-lined altitude suit couldn't keep the chill at bay. He had already started losing feeling in his feet and hands. A different chill made beads of sweat start forming on Charlie's forehead.

Suddenly, there was an earth-shattering crash. Splinters flew into the SPAD's wings and cockpit. The roar of the explosion was so close it blew out Charlie's eardrums, and the shockwave slammed his head into his windscreen. He stole a glance behind. His empennage was gone! The SPAD dipped down and began to tumble to the Earth, and the world started spinning around Charlie. "I had to do it!" he screamed as the remnants of his SPAD plunged downward. Everything was getting dimmer by the second. The noon sun faded away, and the last thing Charlie saw before he blacked out was a pale blue blur that darted across his field of view.

## Chapter II

### The Headless Hun

JACK Sharpe was sitting in the back seat of a squadron car from the 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit. All the driver of the car knew was that Sharpe was to replace their recently killed flight leader. The 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit was stationed at a quiet section of the Front -- quiet until recently, so there was little to see along the battered road. The driver did not know that Sharpe was already an ace twice over, who had flown with the French before America entered the War. He also did not know that the man he was driving was a top G2 agent, sent to the boondocks squadron under the orders of Colonel Ira Jordan. Sharpe spent the uneventful ride reading and re-reading his orders. They were short and cryptic, as always: "Four pilots lost under strange circumstances from the 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit. You are to replace their flight leader, recently killed in action. Report your findings to the Colonel." Sharpe had seen murder under many "strange circumstances" ever since he joined G2.

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THE car came to a stop in front of the 10<sup>th</sup>'s aerodrome, a shabby place converted from the outbuildings of an abandoned farm in the open countryside. They had one runway, adorned with a neat row of shot-up SPAD XIII's. The crates were covered in so many patches and bullet-holes that they may as well have been covered with torn, polka-dot dresses instead of linen. When he got out, Sharpe was greeted by a large Irish man with short-cropped, fiery red hair and a matching mustache. "So you're the replacement for Charlie? Let me show you to the mess hall. We've got a patrol tomorrow, and there's some things you need to know -- at least if you have any aversion to rigor mortis."

The mess was shabby like the rest of the aerodrome. It had been converted from a horse stable by adding a few tables, which looked like they were about to fall apart. The air was full of cigar smoke, and Sharpe scanned the faces at the table. There was a very thin man with a full head of black hair, to his right was a short, stocky fellow, and to his right... Sharpe's eyes flew wide open.

"Tom! What are you doing here!" he exclaimed. If the shock was great for Sharpe, it was greater for Tom Whitehouse.

"I should ask the same of you!" he replied.

“You know Tom?” asked one of the pilots.

Sharpe tried to hide as much emotion as he could when he answered, “We met at Avord.”

It was a lie to protect his cover, of course. Tom Whitehouse was a man without a hair on his head, save for his mustache. He and Jack Sharpe had flown for France together, secretly working for G2 – until one particular operation where Tom blew his own cover. Sharpe thought there was no way Tom could have gotten out alive, and they lost their objective. The fiasco got Tom expelled from G2.

“Since you know him, why don’t you explain it to him?” The pilot who led Sharpe into mess prodded Tom.

“Alright,” began Tom, “Jack, the fellow who led you in here is Frank, to my left is Joe, and the thin guy is Henry. Now we have a patrol tomorrow, and you’re slated to be on it, so you need to know the rules around here. Whatever you do, don’t go start trying to bag Boches. That’s what got Charlie killed, and three flight leaders before him.” Sharpe was dumbstruck. First Tom came back from the dead, then... *Had Tom, fearless Tom, gone coward?*

Frank interjected, “It all started when that headless Hun showed up.”

“No it didn’t! It started when Henry got here.” Retorted Joe.

“It doesn’t matter exactly when it started. That Hun is what started it.”

“What headless Hun?” asked Sharpe.

Tom continued, “So we’re a pilot short, waiting for Henry to arrive to replace Al. Just before a patrol, Joe goes over to his crate and starts yelling about a dead body in there – a Boche, looked like an ace too from all the medals on his uniform.”

“And no head!” Frank shouted.

“That’s right. Headless, and a real messy job of it too. But here’s the kicker: he was clutching a message canister, and inside it said ‘NO MORE ACES’. Ever since then, any man in this squadron who has got four Huns has been killed during the very patrol he gets his fifth. We’ve lost four good pilots so far, counting Charlie.”

“That’s right,” Frank interjected again. “We’ve been cursed!”

“So,” Tom finished, “don’t go and try shooting down any Huns. Frank and Joe have each got three. Try to be like Henry here. He’s managed to get by without having to shoot down a single one.”

“How many have you got?” Sharpe asked Tom.

“Me... I’ve got four...”



## Chapter III

### The Pacifist's Dogfight

TOM had the lead ship of the patrol, a shot up SPAD with a numeral "3" painted in front of its stabilizer. Joe had number "2," Frank had number "0," and Sharpe had number "4." Henry drew the lucky straw and was sitting this one out, but he had a special propaganda note in German for Frank to drop over the lines. They were to fly over the lines and sweep back and forth until their hour and a half was up, and then go back – unless they had a run-in with any Huns. Their engines were idling with a steady putt-putt-putt, and they were all ready for takeoff. First Tom went up, then Frank, then Joe.

The putt-putt of Sharpe's Hispano-Suiza transitioned into a hum, then bellowed into a roar. The SPAD gathered headway, speeding down the runway. The end of the runway was hurtling toward Sharpe faster and faster. He pushed the throttle to the stop. Then he could feel resistance in the rudder pedals and his tail was up. The SPAD lifted off the ground. They formed up into a V, and went East as they climbed to 10,000 feet.

Sharpe had been scanning the sky from the instant they took off. Once they reached no man's land, he held his thumb up to the sun. There! Shadowed in the blinding brilliance, was a speck. He kept checking, and the speck stayed there. It didn't run away, or move in to attack. When he looked forward again, he saw Tom waggle his wings and point. To the left, in the distance, was a formation of four specks. Tom changed course to the right to avoid a scrap.

The specks soon resolved themselves into silhouettes. They were V-strutters. Tom continued to change course, but the V-strutters had decided to fight. There was no way of getting out short of racing them back to the 10<sup>th</sup>'s aerodrome. Soon the silhouettes were close enough for positive identification: Albatros DVs. The Albatros pulled up into the sun and disappeared.

Sharpe kept looking behind him, seeing nothing. Then there came a pop-pop from above. Tracer threads appeared to the left of his SPAD. The dogfight had begun. There was a navy blue Albatros diving on Sharpe. He nosed his SPAD down into a power dive and began to turn, forcing the German to try a long-odds deflection shot. The Spandaus missed their mark, and Sharpe pulled his SPAD up into an Immelman turn. Before diving onto the Albatros, Sharpe checked the sun. The speck was still there.

Sharpe dove down onto the Albatros, but didn't fire. After another burst from the Spandaus missed, he pulled the SPAD up into a climbing attitude, and kicked the rudder hard over. The SPAD flick-rolled, and then fell into a right-hand spin. As the horizon gyrated around him, Sharpe chopped the throttle and kept his eyes fixed on the altimeter. 8,500 – 7,500 – 6,500 – 5,500. He kicked the rudder hard over to oppose the spin, paused and then jammed the stick forward. The SPAD came out of the spin in a near vertical dive. Easing the stick back, he brought the SPAD back into level flight, and climbed straight into the sun.

Once Sharpe reached 15,000 feet, he found his quarry. The speck became the silhouette of a two-seater, and now he was in its blind spot: directly behind and below. He tried to make out its features as he approached. From its silhouette, he could tell it was a true biplane, without the top-plane extensions of a Fokker or Nieuport, and that it

had two bays like a SPAD. The closer he got, the more unique it looked. Then he saw the observer's head poke out of the rear pit, and an arm pointed at his SPAD. Spotted!

The observer had been startled, and, in his surprise, dropped a medium-sized, black object. Before Sharpe could open fire, the mysterious two-seater pushed its nose down into a power dive and was gone.



## Chapter IV

### Caught Bald

SHARPE was the last to land back at the 10<sup>th</sup>'s aerodrome. He noted that SPADs "3," "2," and "0" were already parked neatly in a row at the side of the runway. Tom, Frank, and Joe had all made it back. As soon as Sharpe got out of the pit, Joe ran up to him and shouted "Tom has beat the curse! After the dogfight, he caught a lone Pfalz and sent it down. We have an ace in our squadron!"

Sharpe got out of his SPAD and asked "Where is Tom now?"

Joe replied, "He's in his quarters: the hut behind the barn. Oh, and by the way, I found this in a crater." He handed Sharpe a pair of high-magnification binoculars, with their lenses shattered.

"Where's Frank?" asked Sharpe.

"Oh, and that too. He's been waiting in the mess ever since he landed. He said he wanted to show you something. Something about a letter in German."

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SHARPE understood German perfectly, and he knew what was in that note. There was no time to lose. He burst into Tom's hut, where Tom was sitting silently with his head in his hands. "I'm doomed," Tom whispered.

"Not so fast." Sharpe spoke sternly. "You've cheated death before, and you're about to do it again. There's more than just a curse going on here. There's a spy in our squadron, and I ran into an interesting two-seater after that dog fight. It was watching us the whole time until I scared it off. If you give me your shaving razor and lend me your strength, then you'll be just fine by the end of tomorrow's patrol, and this whole curse thing will be over with." Tom looked up and gave Sharpe a puzzled look.

"What do you want with my razor? Is this more of that G2 nonsense? And where are Frank and Joe anyway?"

Sharpe grinned. "They're outside. You'll see what I want with the razor..."

Tom gave Sharpe his razor, and they met Frank and Joe as they made their way to Henry's hut. Just before they got to the door, Sharpe pulled out his automatic .45 and handed the razor to Frank. Sharpe opened the door and trained the pistol on Henry. "The Jig's up Henry, or should I call you Hanz?" Sharpe sneered in perfect German. Hanz had been writing and stood to face the barrel of the automatic. He slowly raised his hands. "Pin him down!" Sharpe yelled, and Tom and Joe rushed in and seized Hanz. He stared down the .45 and pleaded

"So I killed a man! We're airmen – soldiers – we kill people all the time. I'm just an observer anyway!"

"You're a spy! You can drop the ruse, Hanz. Frank gave me your little 'note.' Now tell us the full story, or I'll do to you what you did to the real Henry." Sharpe snapped.

Seeing his situation, Hanz began: "I said I am just an observer. I'm just here to report how the project is going. I needed cover, so I intercepted Henry on his way to the squadron."

"And you blew his head off with that double-barreled shotgun!" interjected Sharpe.

"I couldn't leave an identifiable body, and I needed to dispose of my German uniform. Besides, the whole thing fitted well into the plan," Hanz answered.

"So Henry was the 'headless Hun,' and you're behind the curse!" Tom exclaimed.

"Call it whatever you want," Hanz continued, "They needed to test a new two-seater, and I was to report on the project. Now what are you going to do? Send me off to a prison camp?"

"I've got something much worse in mind for you." Sharpe said, grinning. "Tom, shave his head!"

Hanz began to beg in German: "Okay, Okay, I'll tell you whatever you want! We've been identifying you with a new lens from the two-seater to keep track of your scores. Just keep the razor away!" Frank and Joe continued to keep Hanz still as Tom shaved him bald. Sharpe then grabbed Hanz' suitcase from the corner of the hut and pulled out a disguise kit.

He handed the kit to Tom, and said, "Find a wig in there. The Huns will think you're Hanz, and that Hanz is you."

Sharpe explained his plan to Tom, Frank, and Joe. "I assume Hanz won't be willing to fly tomorrow's patrol, so we will have to lead him to his plane at gunpoint. Just make sure he doesn't have a flare gun in his crate, and he'll have no way to let the other Boches know about the swap. I am going to take off first and climb to altitude. After exactly twenty minutes, you are to take off in formation and fly with Hanz on patrol. With any luck, the 'Phantom' will jump Hanz."

## Chapter V

### Death Dive

THE observer in the mysterious two-seater, peering down onto the 10<sup>th</sup>'s aerodrome through his binoculars from 15,000 feet, could see a bald man being led at gunpoint into SPAD number "3." He probably thought that Tom had panicked and that

the fear of the “curse” was damaging the squadron’s morale, as planned. Neither the observer nor the pilot saw Sharpe’s SPAD, already hidden in the sun and nearly at 15,000 feet. The two-seater was apparently a high-altitude job, and it was heavily braced and reinforced. The fuselage was contoured like an Albatros’s, and painted a pale blue.

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“ALRIGHT, Hanz. No funny business,” growled Tom as he jammed the muzzle of his automatic into Hanz’ back. “Just outmaneuver any Huns you see and land back at the ‘drome at the end of the patrol and you’ll be fine. Remember, we’ve emptied out your SPAD’s ammunition, and Frank and I will be behind you in formation. Try anything funny and you’ll be in front of four streams of .30 caliber Vickers fire.” Hanz gritted his teeth and climbed into the pit of number “1.”

Twenty minutes after Sharpe’s climb began, the patrol’s SPADs sped down the runway and into the air one by one. They formed up into a V, and climbed Eastward toward the lines. As soon as the SPADs were within sight of no-man’s land, Hanz jammed the stick into the control panel and screamed downward toward the distant German trenches. The two-seater nosed-down to follow, as did Sharpe. The two-seater was diving faster than anything Sharpe had ever seen, and even with his SPAD nearly vertical and the throttle to the stop, the two-seater was pulling away. The air was blasting into Sharpe’s face, and his ears began to bleed from the pressure change. His wires were screaming, and he thought the fabric on his wings was about to tear off, but the SPAD held together.

The two-seater was only a hundred feet above Hanz when, suddenly, a black object dropped from it and fell straight into Hanz’ cockpit. There was a rumbling crash. The light from the explosion temporarily blinded Sharpe. When he was able to see again, he was stunned. Hanz’ SPAD had disintegrated! Tatters of flaming fabric and burning splinters were falling to the ground, leaving trails of black smoke over the French countryside. There was nothing left of Hanz.

Sharpe’s attention went back to the two-seater. It was 500 feet below him and still diving, but beginning to pull out. Now was his chance. He was on the two-seater’s tail and had a zero-deflection shot. Sharpe’s Vickers opened fire. The two-seater could out-dive his SPAD, but it couldn’t out-dive Vickers slugs. The lead plunged into the Hun’s engine block – a direct hit. The two-seater pulled up and zoomed, then leveled off into a glide. It’s prop had stopped.

They weren’t at the lines yet, and it was a race to the trenches. Sharpe’s altimeter read only 1,000 feet, but the two-seater might make it. Sharpe dove past the Hun and gave it another dose of lead, this time tearing up the fabric of its wings to worsen its glide slope. The two-seater tried to make a landing, but came in too fast and clipped off its landing gear. Sharpe touched down just after the two-seater skidded to a halt, 100 yards from the edge of a small wood.

Sharpe got out and drew his pistol. The German pilot had been knocked out in the landing, and his observer was dragging him away from the plane and toward the forest. Unburdened, and fast on his feet, Sharpe caught up to the Boche. Sharpe’s fist sent the observer to the ground with a right hook to the jaw. He left the pilot at the tree-line and dragged the observer to the downed two-seater, where he held his pistol up to the observer’s temple.

The observer had come to, and looked at Sharpe through gritted teeth. “How long do you reckon we have?” asked Sharpe in German. “30 seconds? 20 seconds? 10? I’ve got all day.”

The observer glared at Sharpe, then replied, “Perhaps we should have this discussion over there,” jerking his head toward the tree-line.

Sharpe smirked. “I think we should have this conversation right here.” He gave the German a shove with his pistol. “Where did you hide it? In the rear cockpit? The aft fuselage?” Sharpe asked. The observer looked from his plane to the pistol and back to the plane. He walked over to the front cockpit and retrieved a small box from underneath the pilot’s seat, then pitched it away from the treeline. Sharpe counted off the seconds. Then there was an explosion. There was now a ten foot diameter crater where the box had landed. Sharpe smirked at the crater. “So it was 20 seconds. Now,” he turned back to the observer, “Give me the whole story before my squadron-mates arrive. They will be less agreeable than I am, and maybe you can be sent to an officers’ prison camp if you cooperate...”

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“SO it was an air-to-air bomber,” concluded Jordan after Sharpe had filled him in on the events at the aerodrome of the 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit. Colonel Ira Jordan (the chief of G2), Jack Sharpe, and Tom Whitehouse were sitting around a small table at GHQ for the report.

“An air-to-air bomber re-enforced to dive at over 300 miles an hour,” Sharpe added. “They had special lenses aboard, too. Germany’s newest high-magnification gear. They used them to identify the pilots from the air, and observe who got how many kills in a scrap. The ship then dove onto the chosen target and bombed them.”

“They could have bombed anyone they chose, but they decided it would scare the wits out of us if they connected it to that curse they concocted,” Tom interjected.

“Great work, Jack.” Jordan continued, “Tom, I’m reinstating you at G2 for assignments on our side of the lines. You demonstrated enough loyalty, that’s for sure, but the fact that Hanz didn’t recognize you means your cover wasn’t blown as badly as we thought.” The Colonel stood up and finished with a salute: “Dismissed.”

When they stepped outside, Tom asked, “How did you know, Jack? About Hanz, and the curse?”

Sharpe answered, “It was easy. I knew the 10<sup>th</sup> was being spied on from from the air and on the ground – that’s how they knew who was flying what plane and with how many kills. I found the spy in the air when I caught that two-seater. Once I read the little ‘note’ Hanz gave for Frank to drop, I knew Hanz’ true identity. The ‘note’ was Hanz’ weekly report to the Germans on the 10<sup>th</sup> Pursuit. Now, let’s celebrate your promotion.”

