

The Scourge of the Witch Doctors

Another “Jack Sharpe” Mystery

by William Skelly

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“G-2 was facing a menace that threatened its very existence: Mysterious ships, piloted by witch-doctors that could shoot down a man without a single bullet. Jack Sharpe knew something was amiss – and it had something to do with those long-range Gothas!”



Chapter I

Escape by Air

The German ‘drome was buzzing with activity. Field-gray mechanics were darting here and there. Some were working on dilapidated Albatros D.Vs. Others were busy assembling and finishing the Jasta’s newly arrived Fokkers. Pilots were grouped in their circles discussing the previous mission’s dogfight.

There was no reason to give notice to one field-gray who was moving steadily toward the flight line. He was going to be late for his appointment, and he hated being late. Feigning interest in the engine of an Albatros parked nearby, he paused, felt through his coat. A rectangular lump re-assured him that his papers were still there. Those papers had perplexed him, but if the Germans found them he was sure to be found out.

Resuming his slow pace for just a few more yards, the mechanic sauntered over to a blue and red Fokker DVII doing an engine run-up. Pretending to assist in holding the plane for the run-up, the unassuming mechanic looked carefully over the cockpit. It was fully fueled, and the pilot had yet to fasten his safety belt.

Once the run-up was complete, the rest of the mechanics walked off and the pilot got ready to taxi to the runway.

NOW!

The field-gray yanked the German pilot from the cockpit, tossed him aside. The mysterious mechanic jumped in the Fokker, gunned the throttle. The propwash knocked back the bewildered German pilot. Shouts were drowned out by the roaring engine.

A kick of the rudder, and the DVII was on the runway. The Fokker accelerated, the tail was up. There were more shouts from the ‘drome now. German pilots were scrambling to their planes. The roar of the BMW overpowered a scream of “Halt!” Just before the end of the runway, the field-gray eased the stick back and lifted off. He took a compass bearing and began a shallow climb Westward. The Fokker would be 20 miles away by the time the next German ship was in the air to pursue. More than enough time to rule out any pursuit.

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Once his stolen Fokker was over the lines, Jack Sharpe pulled off his field-gray German mechanic’s uniform and dropped it overboard. Underneath it was his American uniform. Sharpe was an agent of G-2, and an ace twice over. He had been behind the lines for weeks collecting intelligence, but had just been recalled. He felt for his papers again. Among them were his orders, which had been secretly relayed to him. They read:

“Urgent. Needed at GHQ ASAP. Check for Fokker Dr.I with snakes painted on wings on way out. Rendezvous with Tom Whitehouse at Belrain.”

They must have a real case on their hands if they needed me back so urgently, especially if they’re getting Tom involved... Sharpe thought. Tom Whitehouse was another G-2 agent. They had flown with the French together, secretly working for G-2, until a particular mission where Tom blew his own cover. Tom had since been re-instated at G-2 for his work with Sharpe on a mysterious German phantom ship that was actually an air-to-air bomber.

Sharpe knew a German marked Fokker was unlikely to be received well at Belrain. He was headed toward a small G-2 strip to change ships before heading to his rendezvous.

When the field was within sight, he took out the Fokker’s 1” Very pistol, fired two green flares into the air, then a pause, then another green flare. Sharpe kept his eyes glued to the field. Three white meteors streaked upward in response. The signal meant that Sharpe could land. The airfield’s defender now knew not to shoot down the Fokker.

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Sharpe quickly wheeled his stolen DVII into a hangar and started prepping a SPAD. James, another G-2 ace, was the only man other than Sharpe at the small field. They had worked on a few assignments together. Both had saved each other’s lives more than once. James was getting ready to takeoff, also.

“So they want you at GHQ too, huh?” James began.

“How did you know?” Sharpe responded warily. He had not told anyone about his secret orders.

“Haven’t you heard?” James sounded surprised, “About the disappearances? The voodoo ships? About—” James stopped. He saw a speck coming from the East. It fired no flares.

“One of the Huns must have followed me here.” Sharpe explained.

Chapter II

Dogfight with the Witch Doctor

James and Sharpe were in the air before the speck was close enough to resolve itself into a silhouette. It was a Fokker triplane. Once they got closer, Sharpe saw that it was all-over green. The top wings were emblazoned with images of snakes.

Meeting the snake ship at 5,000 feet, Sharpe firewalled the throttle and made a head-on pass. For a moment, it seemed that the Dr.I was within his sights. Sharpe clamped down on the trips. His Vickers erupted twin streams of lead. The Fokker did a renversment at the perfect moment, and the tracer threads stabbed into empty air.

The snake ship was below Sharpe now. James pulled up into an Immelman, but overshot the triplane. Sharpe turned and saw the German climb up onto James' tail. It was a perfect shot, but the triplane's Spandaus were silent. *Why doesn't he shoot? Sharpe wondered, perplexed. Poor James is a sitting duck. Are the Boche's guns jammed?*

Oddly, the Triplane dived from its perfect position. James and Sharpe followed. James was ahead of Sharpe now. The Fokker weaved and sideslipped, always just out of James' sights. Finally, the Fokker erred, and started to drift into the line of James' Vickers.

Just before James could open up his guns, the triplane disappeared into a cloud. James followed. Sharpe banked and kept out of the cloud. When the duelists were visible again, James was firing wildly. Bursts of .303 slugs stabbed at empty air, nowhere near the mysterious snake ship. The triplane dropped behind James, once again in the perfect position. There was no relying on gun jams this time. Sharpe dived onto the triplane's tail to rescue James.

Suddenly, the snake-ship cut its motor, silently pulled up into a level glide. Just before it turned east, Sharpe caught a glimpse of the man in the pit. A skull's empty eye sockets stared back. The skull-faced pilot wore a necklace of snake bones, and a wreath of grass waved in the propwash instead of hair. The skull was painted with elaborate patterns of snakes.

Sharpe and James continued to scream down. Sharpe's face changed to a look of horror. James stopped his erratic firing, honed in on the sound of Sharpe's roaring hisso, and slipped onto Sharpe's tail. James' .303s spat flame. Tracers weaved in between Sharpe's wings. Sharpe pulled up out of the dive in an Immelman. James followed. Vickers slugs pounded into Sharpe's SPAD. A strut broke loose. Wires snapped.

Sharpe banked into a steep right turn and watched his tail. James tried to follow. His SPAD banked sharply, and began to turn, but then started to slide down the right wing. James flipped over and began to spin. Sharpe saw the ailerons centered and full opposite rudder, but there was not enough altitude for James to recover. Sharpe looked away, heard James' SPAD smash into the earth, and turned onto a course toward Belrain.

Chapter III

The Gothas' Snare

Tom Whitehouse greeted Sharpe as he wheeled his SPAD it into a hangar at Belrain.

"You're late, and say, where's James?" Tom began before he noticed the bullet holes riddling Sharpe's lower wings. A burst from James' guns had nearly torn the fabric from the SPAD's inner panels. Shot flying wires were dangling limp. "I see..." Tom said slowly, "Had a run-in with an angry Hun's Spandau's, eh?" Before Sharpe could answer, Tom continued, "I assume you'll want to be brought up to speed. You've been gone a while, and some strange events have taken place recently. Follow me."

Tom took the lead as they walked through the aerodrome. A squadron of SPADs had just returned from a mission. Mechanics were rushing to repair the damaged ships and refuel the rest. Pilots were doffing their altitude suits and making their way toward the mess tent. Tom led Sharpe into the frame of a building under construction and down a set of steps into a bunker underneath.

"We shouldn't be overheard here." Tom gestured to the bunker's walls, "Did James tell you about the witch doctors?"

"He mentioned 'voodoo ships' and disappearances in passing." Sharpe answered.

"Well it started with some isolated disappearances, but now the problem is much more serious. GQH is spooked, and rightly so. Nobody can make heads or tails of it." Tom continued. He paused, listened for any sounds from above. His voice dropped to just above a whisper. "It started with a G-2 agent going missing, nothing too unusual. But then we started getting more reports. They all have the same pattern. A G-2 pilot gets into a scrap and disappears in a cloud. When he comes out, he's in a spin or a dive and plows in." Tom stopped again to listen for eavesdroppers. He looked over his shoulder at the staircase. Then, he leaned forward and his voice dropped even quieter. "Here's the thing, Jack. They inspected the wrecks of a few that went down. Nobody could find any evidence of a single bullet hitting the crate. And here's the other thing, it's always been a tripe-hound painted with snakes all over it that shot our guy down. And the pilots who saw it say..."

"The pilots who saw it say what?" Asked Sharpe, intrigued.

"They're saying that the pilot is dressed up like an Amazonian witch doctor. They're claiming that he is casting a spell over anybody who gets on his tail. GHQ doesn't buy that part, but the Huns are going after G-2, and at the rate we're losing pilots..." Tom trailed off. He began again. "There's one more thing--" Tom stopped. He was interrupted by an air raid klaxon.

The two G-2 men rain upstairs out of the bunker, looked up. Against the noon sun they saw the silhouettes of Gothas.

Men were sprinting to their SPADs. Some were already running up their engines. More were being pulled out of hangars. Some mechanics were dashing to find cover. Others stared up in amazement. Above it all was the scream of the klaxon, and the giant, circling, twin-engined ships, surely getting ready to lay their eggs of death. Sharpe was already running to a SPAD being brought out of a hangar. He turned to Tom, and shouted, "Get in the air!"

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Sharpe was in the air off the runway first, with Tom close behind him. *Gothas? In the middle of the daytime? The Huns would never try such a stunt.* Sharpe thought as he climbed to meet the bombers. They were low. 5,000 feet. *This 'drome has got four squadrons of daytime fighters to defend it. Only a madman would send Gothas to attack it at noon.* Sharpe was puzzled.

Tom headed for the lead Gotha and wagged his wings. He swooped down just behind and below the Hun's tail. Sharpe zoomed to be just above and behind the Gotha. The German pilot began to swerve side to side, trying to rob Tom and Sharpe of a decent line-up. Meanwhile, the Gotha's gunner kept his Parabellums trained on Sharpe, firing bursts that came dangerously close to the SPAD. Tom pulled up, got the empennage of the lumbering bomber in his sights. A hail of lead slammed into the bottom of the Gotha. Shreds of fabric tore off, and splinters rained down from below the gunner.

The 3-seater kept flying, but the spooked gunner switched from harassing Sharpe to taking out Tom. While the Hun was clambering into the gun-tunnel, Sharpe took advantage of the momentary lack of defense. He gunned his hisso and strafed the huge machine. One of his slugs hit the fuel tank. Soon the Gotha was in flames and going down.

More SPADs were in the air now. They seemed to be taking care of the Gothas. Sharpe looked up at the noon sun, covered the glare with a finger. He saw a cloud of black specks. They were Fokker triplanes, and diving onto the unsuspecting SPADS. The squadron of Dr.Is would make taking out the Gothas harder, but the sight of the diving triplanes made Sharpe's hair stand on end for a different reason. He saw that each of the diving ships was covered in paintings of snakes. The same paintings that he saw on the ship that make James open fire on him.

Every other SPAD peeled off to attack the triplanes. Tom and Sharpe continued attacking the Gothas. One SPAD made a head-on pass at a Fokker, Vickers guns roaring. The tracers flew over the Dr.I. A miss. Another SPAD dropped onto a Fokker's tail. It got off one burst before following the voodoo-ship into a cloud. The SPAD emerged hanging on its nose, then fell into a spin.

Sharpe looked around and saw chaos. SPADS were falling left and right. One nearly hit Sharpe as it barreled toward the ground. The triplanes were each piloted by a man in the same witch doctor outfit as the one who attacked James earlier. Flying in and out of white clouds. Every time a SPAD followed, its exhaust flames turned green for a moment, then disappeared. The SPAD would then come out in a deadly spin. The previously clear sky was growing cloudier, too. Soon there would be no escape.

Sharpe let out the Hisso all the way and pulled alongside Tom, who was still trying to save the airfield from the Gothas. Sharpe pointed toward GHQ, motioned Tom to follow. It was now or never if they wanted to get to GHQ alive. Tom nodded in response to Sharpe's gesture, and they flew off, leaving the airfield and its SPADs to their fate.

Chapter IV

“Bombed by our Own Planes!”

Colonel Ira Jordan, chief of G-2, sat at the opposite end of a large, round table from Sharpe. The other men at the table were experienced members of G-2, including Tom Whitehouse. The meeting was taking place in a bunker under the main field of GHQ. The bunker was protected by thick concrete, and armed guards ensured no one was eavesdropping on the other side of the re-enforced doors.

“Let’s start by bringing Sharpe up to speed.” The colonel began in his booming voice, “We’re facing a double threat. The Huns seem to have a new long-range bomber up their sleeves, and those voodoo-ships are escorting them. We know where the Gothas are taking off from, but something’s up with those tripe-hounds. There are only a handful of Hun airfields large enough to allow a Dr.I to take off with enough fuel to follow the Gothas. You here have each searched those airfields and found no sign of these mysterious snake-ships. “

“We must be missing something.” a French agent at the table interrupted, “Those Dr.Is are taking off from one of the fields we searched. We need to look harder!”

“We have looked!” Tom exclaimed. “At least two G-2 agents have checked out each field independently, and we haven’t found a single sign of any of those Witch Doctors or their ships!”

“There are not witch doctors, it’s a trick!” retorted the Frenchman.

“I have received a message from Belrain.” Tom replied. He paused and read a note to himself. “They say that every plane shot down over their airfield did not have a single bullet hole in it!”

“Arguing over how hard we looked isn’t going to make those triplanes or the Gothas they’re escorting go away!” the colonel shouted, “It can’t be true, of course, can it? That these are real witch doctors putting a curse on every plane that tries to shoot them down? But,” the colonel turned to Sharpe, “we can’t make heads or tails of this, and the Huns are getting bolder with this stunt every day.”

Before Sharpe could reply, a crash sounded from outside that shook the bunker. The guards could be heard shouting at the armored doors. A doughboy burst in, panting. A guard was trying to restrain him. The sound of the air raid siren drifted through the now-open door. The doughboy was out of breath from running to the door and struggling with the guards. All he could let out was one word.

“Gothas!” He half-whispered, before collapsing.

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The G-2 men sprinted up the steps from the bunker and onto the field. Colonel Jordan was in the lead. Carnage was everywhere. Tents were burning. The field was

marked with craters and wrecked airplanes. Men shouted and ran to avoid death from the giant bombers above. SPADS were taking off. Interceptors were already in the air fighting the Gothas. Looking up, Sharpe saw they were also dogfighting with Dr.Is.

Small, low clouds littered the sky, and the SPADs and Fokkers were weaving in between them. Occasionally a SPAD would let off a burst from its Vickers, but none of them hit home. The nimble triplanes evaded the SPADs at every turn, but weren't firing a shot.

An explosion sounded from behind. Turning around, Sharpe and the others saw fire and flying earth where the mess building used to be. Splinters from the mess building were raining down a few hundred yards behind them. A pop-pop-pop from exploding .303 cartridges informed the men that an unlucky SPAD had been hit on the ground.

"Gothas? Over GHQ? This is impossible! We're miles out of range!" The Colonel shouted to the air. He re-collected himself. "Get in the air! Get in the air!" He shouted. "We need to shoot down those bombers!" The group of G-2 men began rushing to their planes. Before they had made three yards Sharpe shouted,

"Stop!" He looked at Colonel Jordan. "Countermand that order and get those planes down if you value GHQ or your life!"

"What's wrong with you?" The colonel shouted in response, grabbing Sharpe.

A flaming SPAD screamed down from above. It streaked above the group of dumbstruck G-2 men and hit 100 yards in front of them. Flame and splinters flew from the crash site. A piece of the propeller zipped through the air, barely missing Sharpe and the colonel.

"Can't you see?" Sharpe pleaded. "Those Gothas are unarmed. We're being bombed by our own planes!"

The Colonel was still dumbstruck. He looked around at the flaming earth before him. Almost every building of GHQ was aflame or destroyed.

"I didn't get to tell you," Sharpe continued, "that James almost shot me down earlier today."

"What?" Boomed the Colonel. "You don't mean to tell me you believe that..."

"No," Sharpe answered the unasked question, "James attacked me by mistake. He thought he was dogfighting with one of those voodoo-ships."

"Only a blind man would mistake your SPAD for a tripe-hound!" Exclaimed Tom.

"Exactly!" Sharpe retorted. "Don't you see?" He looked up at the sky. Every minute now, a SPAD was disappearing into a cloud and coming out in a spin. "James was blind. He happens to be a good enough pilot to dogfight by feel and sound alone. The men in the crashing SPADs here are blind. Those aren't clouds." Sharpe pointed at the low, thick cloud-layer in which the dogfight was taking place. "That's gas! Those Gothas aren't bombing us. They're luring our ships into the gas clouds created by those voodoo-ships. When our fully-fueled crates fall down onto the field, they do as much damage as a shell filled with TNT! We need to get our ships down now!"

"Alright." The colonel sighed. He moved call the nearest orderly. Sharpe stopped him.

"And one more thing, Colonel," Sharpe continued, "get me a gas mask and a fully fueled SPAD equipped with a wireless."

Chapter V

The Witch Doctor's Lair

Sharpe's gas mask constricted his field of view, but it was still enough to fly. The melee at 5,000 feet was like a sick dream. The clouds were now so thick they obscured the sun. Sharpe's world was turned a sinister green. Shadows darted in and out of view like specters. Some were SPADs, others were DR.Is. Guns chattered, but the gas mask obscured which direction they came from -- whether they were friend or foe. The snake-ships had turned the sky into an obstacle course. Sharpe dodged flaming SPADs as they fell to their dooms. He weaved between the low clouds, careful to not to enter any.

If Sharpe was right, the Germans would be running low on fuel, and would need to turn back soon. Eventually, he found what he sought. A snake-ship was speeding east. Sharpe climbed above the snake-ship and made sure of the heading it was following. He circled for a few minutes, waiting for the triplane to get far enough ahead that it wouldn't recognize Sharpe. Then, he fell in behind and below and followed the Dr.I into Germany.

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It was twilight by the time Sharpe and the triplane he was following came upon a small strip surrounded by woods. The strip was just large enough for the Dr.I to make a landing with its fuel tanks empty. Sharpe brought his SPAD in for a perfect, 3-point landing, but the strip was too small for the heavier ship to complete a proper rollout. Sharpe ducked under the cockpit coaming, braced himself against the instrument panel before the SPAD rammed into the trees at the end of the strip. Vegetation flew by as the ship plunged further into the twilight forest. A boulder took out the landing gear. The left wings came off with a resounding crack as the crate hit a tree. What was left of the SPAD came to a careening stop in a tangle of weeds.

Sharpe jumped off the wreck, drew his .45. He could already hear voices shouting in German. It wouldn't be long before they found the SPAD. Sharpe began moving toward the Hun airfield with the stealth of a jungle cat. He got to the shrubs at the edge of the field. The Fokker he had seen landing earlier was gone. Two German mechanics in field-gray were on the field. Sharpe heard an Oberursel motor overheard, looked up. Another one of the snake-ships was coming in for a landing.

When the Dr.I finished its rollout, the two mechanics began wheeling it toward a bush at the edge of the field. One of the field-grays pulled on a twig, and the bush swung open. The bush was, in reality, an expertly camouflaged hanger door. While the field-grays were occupied wheeling the Fokker into the secret hangar, Sharpe took his chance and slipped inside after them. He hid behind a barrel just inside the door.

Peeking out from his hiding place, Sharpe saw that he was in an underground complex. Electric lights overhead illuminated a huge cave with enough room to store an entire Jasta of fighters. Even though Sharpe's view was partially obscured, he saw at least ten triplanes in hangar-sized recesses drilled into the stone walls of the cave. Each was emblazoned with patterns of snakes. Barrels were stacked in natural recesses in the giant cavern. Some of the barrels contained fuel; others were marked with a green band and a skull and crossbones. Mechanics in field-gray were re-fueling airplanes that had just come in. Others were wheeling Dr.Is into their cavern-hangers. Oddly, the Dr.Is looked unarmed.

The pilot climbed out of one of the voodoo-ships. He wore a skull mask painted with patterns of snakes, and snake bones hung from a necklace. The witch doctor pilot stared around the hangar through empty eye-sockets, shouted something at a mechanic. He walked away from the ship and took off his mask. Sharpe saw that the inside of the mask contained a complex breathing apparatus.

A pair of the mechanics wheeled one of the green barrels over to the ship.

“Now remember, Rolf,” One mechanic began explaining to the other, “Just one whiff of this stuff is enough to blind you permanently. Don’t let it get near anything hot either, it’s highly flammable, too.” They hooked up a hose to the triplane and began pumping in the blinding gas. The tank was in front of the pilot, just under where the Spandaus would go. Apparently the tank had left no room for the guns.

Staying in the shadows cast by the stacks of barrels, Sharpe worked his way across the cave. Just the other side of the secret hangar, there was another giant set of doors. Near the other side he saw a natural window-size hole in the cave, looked through it. Outside there was a small, narrow clearing. Running down the clearing was a set of five rails. The end of each rail had a sort of open-topped railcar. The back of each of the strange cars held an array of rocket tubes. The front end was a mounting bracket about the size of a single-seater’s undercarriage. *This was how they launched the voodoo-ships with enough fuel to follow the Gothas!* Sharpe realized.

Sharpe’s amazed staring was interrupted by the shouting of mechanics and pilots.

“Ja!” He heard one voice say, “We found a wrecked SPAD in the woods. It had a wireless set in it”

“One of them must have followed us back here and transmitted our location! The schweinehund!” Another voice shouted.

“Search the base!” A third voice shouted.

Something cold stuck into Sharpe’s back. It was a Luger.

“That won’t be necessary,” Sharpe heard the man immediately behind him speak sardonically. “Turn around with your hands in the air – Mr. Sharpe!”

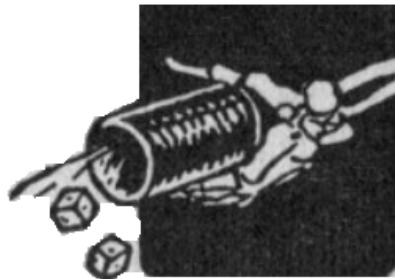
A man in field-gray ran up and took Sharpe’s .45. Sharpe turned, and a look of astonishment came across his face when he saw the form holding the Luger.

“Von Wolfe!” Sharpe exclaimed.

“So,” Von Wolfe began, a sneering grin on his face “I see you remember me.”

Von Wolfe was the leader of the Jasta Sharpe and Tom had infiltrated on that fateful day that got Tom temporarily expelled from G-2. It was Von Wolfe’s papers they had stolen when Tom blew his own cover. Sharpe would never forget the sight of that towering, Bavarian ace shouting “Spy!” as Tom ran for his life.

“The German High Command,” Von Wolf continued, “certainly remembers you!”



Chapter VI

Von Wolfe's Last Message

Sharpe was imprisoned in a small utility room with a re-enforced door. The room had no adornment, and smelled as though it usually held barrels of stored fuel. The walls were the bare rock of the cave. Sharpe was bound at his wrists and ankles, and had been left on the ground of the cave. A German guard stood outside with an automatic.

Looking around, Sharpe saw a stalagmite in the back of the room. He shimmied on the ground until he was at the stalagmite, began using it to cut through the ropes on his wrists. When his wrists and feet were free, he kicked the tip of the stalagmite off. Bits of rock flew across the floor, and Sharpe picked up the pointed rock tip. Then, imitating Von Wolf's voice, he called in perfect German,

"You Dummkoff! Sharpe is trying to escape! Can't you hear him! Quick, stop him!"

The latch of the door clicked, and the fooled guard burst in. Sharpe was ready, and hurled the stalagmite tip at the German's jaw. The guard came down silently. Sharpe quickly threw on the guard's uniform and took his Luger. Sharpe slinked out like a cat, silently closing the door.

Moving from shadow to shadow, Sharpe silently undid the lids of the gasoline and poison barrels. He needed to find a wireless set to contact GHQ and tell them the location of the site. There were doors to utility closets all over the complex. One read "pilot's uniforms" in German. Sharpe tested the latch. It was unlocked. Inside the room were rows of gas masks. The front of each had been painted in the manner of a skull. Sharpe took one and continued.

Eventually, Sharpe came upon Von Wolfe's office. He was surprised to find it empty and unlocked. There was a wireless inside, and Sharpe sent off a message to GHQ telling them the location of the secret complex, and above all not to engage the Gothas or their voodoo-ship escorts. Just as he finished tapping out the message, he heard footsteps outside the door.

"Dummkoff! You mean to tell me the American escaped?" Von Wolfe boomed.

"Nein, he is still on the base. We have searched the surrounding forest, and all the exits are closed." The man who had been guarding Sharpe replied.

Sharpe concealed himself behind a piece of furniture just before Von Wolfe burst in. Sharpe watched from his hiding place as Von Wolfe went straight to his wireless set and tapped out a message to the Gotha base. Von Wolfe then smashed the set and plugged three rounds of Luger lead into it for good measure.

"This is the only wireless on the base." Von Wolfe said to the pale-faced guard, "So at least you won't have to deal with explaining how that American devil revealed the location of the complex during your court marshal."

The guard's face grew paler.

"I don't expect that to help much, though," Von Wolfe sneered. Tell all of your men to search the complex for that schweinehund American. If we find him, then perhaps you will be spared and your mistake won't be fatal."

The guard leaped to his feet and sprinted off. Moments later, klaxons screamed and Von Wolfe also exited.

Sharpe was terrified for a different reason. He ran over to the remains of the wireless set and read Von Wolfe's message again. It said:

“NO SPECIAL ESCORT WILL BE PROVIDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. CONDUCT NORMAL BOMB RAID TONIGHT. ENEMY INTERCEPTORS WILL NOT ENGAGE.”

Von Wolfe is right. Sharpe realized. With no way to warn GHQ, there was only one option left.

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Sharpe glided out of Von Wolfe's office. He pulled on the witch-doctor gas mask, drew the Luger he had stolen from the guard. On his way to the office, Sharpe had uncapped a dozen barrels of gas and gasoline. If the blinding gas really was flammable, it should only take one shot from the Luger to light up the whole base.

Men in field-gray were running frantically around the complex searching for him. Sharpe took advantage of the chaos, walking unnoticed in the guard's uniform toward the large door that led to the launching rails. A group of DR.Is were being fitted for launch.

Von Wolfe spotted the odd combination of the guard's uniform and the pilot's gas mask when Sharpe stepped into the doorway.

“Da ist er! The man in the doorway!” Von Wolfe shouted, pointed at Sharpe.

Now was his chance. Sharpe kicked over a barrel of gasoline. It rolled toward the dozen he had uncapped earlier. He aimed the Luger at the rolling barrel, pulled the trigger. Flame jetted from the Luger, and the rolling barrel burst, spewing flaming fuel. The other barrels soon caught too. Flame leaped across the cave and the blinding gas poured into the air.

The cave complex was enveloped in chaos. Field-grays were running for the exits. Hangared planes were devoured by tongues of flame. The pilots rushed to put on their gas masks before the blinding gas reached the equipment locker. The whole cave was rocked by an explosion from the magazine. Rocks began to fall from the ceiling. Von Wolfe put on his witch-doctor gas mask and shouted,

“Get those DR.Is ready to fly now!” before running for the exit toward the launching rails.

Chapter VII

The Last Witch Doctor

It was almost midnight, and the full moon illuminated the ground through the clear sky. Sharpe was already outside of the cave, sprinting toward a triplane on a launching rail. He reached the voodoo-ship, pulled the shocked pilot from the cockpit. Sharpe jumped into the 'pit. The controls were mostly similar to the normal DR.Is he had stolen in his career for G-2. There was a lever on the right side that Sharpe assumed dispensed the blinding gas, and there was a switch labeled “Raketenstart.” Von Wolfe was not far behind, and was barking frantic orders to the mechanics to ready his plane for launch.

Sharpe flipped the switch. He was jolted back as fire erupted from the rockets in the back of the rail-sledge. The acceleration slammed Sharpe into his seat as the airspeed

climbed higher and higher. Just before the end of the rails the triplane eased up off the sledge. The ship slowly gained altitude as it now flew under the power of its own prop. It made a climbing turn North toward the Gotha field. Sharpe looked back. Von Wolfe's rockets had just started.

The second triplane screamed down the rail like a meteor with a tail of red flame. It lifted off the sledge and followed Sharpe's turn. If Sharpe could get to the Gothas first and give the right flare signal, he might just be able to stop them. Von Wolfe was determined not to let that happen.

The two screamed toward the Gotha field with their throttles firewalled. Von Wolfe dived beneath Sharpe and zoomed in front of him, pulled the lever for the blinding gas. Sharpe flinched and held his breath as he entered the cloud. He had to trust that his gas mask would work. The cloud blotted out the full moon and left only the faint glow of the exhausts, turned green by the gas.

He made it out and found that the Bavarian ace was ahead of him, still. If Von Wolfe was able to signal the Gothas, there would be no use trying to get them to turn around. It was no longer a race. Sharpe had to shoot the Bavarian Ace down.

The G-2 man looked in despair over the cowl of the triplane. There were no guns to shoot Von Wolfe down with. The blinding gas was his only weapon, but Von Wolfe was just as projected as Sharpe. Looking over the cockpit, Sharpe noticed the Very pistol. He was only a hundred yards away from Von Wolfe. Almost close enough.

Sharpe dived down onto Wolfe, leveled off when they were closest. Wolfe tried another dose of the blinding gas. Now! Sharpe aimed the Very pistol straight at Wolfe's cockpit. A white meteor blazed from the 1" gun, landed right on Wolfe's headrest. The flare started burning the fabric of Wolfe's empennage. The fire spread to the fuselage and cockpit.

The Bavarian ace sideslipped, but couldn't put out the flames. There was an open field close enough to make a forced landing. He nosed straight down and plunged toward the earth. Sharpe followed in pursuit, fired another flare. This time the meteor missed. If Sharpe wanted to signal the Gothas, he couldn't fire another flare.

Von Wolfe made it to the field and ran from the burning triplane just before the fire spread to the gas tank. The explosion lit up the midnight sky, temporarily blinding Sharpe. When he could see again, he saw a form running off into the woods. There was no time to try and finish off Wolfe now.

* * * *

Jack Sharpe once again found himself sitting on the opposite side of Colonel Ira Jordan's desk.

"So Von Wolfe was behind this." The colonel said, after reading Sharpe's report. It's a shame you weren't able to finish him off. We think he is behind a number of campaigns to take out G-2."

"I wish I finished him off, too." Sharpe replied.

"But," the colonel continued, "you did intercept the Gothas, and successfully signal them to turn around. You also managed to destroy Von Wolfe's secret complex, and all of the voodoo-ships except the one you brought here for inspection. Acceptable work once again, Sharpe."

"At least we can now be assured that the witch-doctors will never menace us again." Sharpe finished.