Waiting for news of the enemy. To wait and not to be demoralized by it is part of the night fighters' duty. They all know that the success of their night hunting depends upon the art of waiting.

**NIGHT FIGHTERS**

Night after night the pilots of a night-fighting unit must wait and wait for the telephone to tell them that the enemy is approaching, wait for the men at the detectors and search-lights of their own observation post to tell them that the enemy is in their own sector. The photograph on the left shows the final stage of the alarm: the crew of the night fighter is seated and the plane ready to take off and attack the invading bombers.
“T’S as black as ink!” growls the commander as we gingerly feel our way from his car to the observation post. Indeed, the night is uncannily dark. The keyhole of the door to the observation post is the only star in this darkness, and we need time to become accustomed to the light in the room which we enter. The commander glances round with a smile. His Knight’s Cross catches the light for an instant. He has brought down thirty enemy planes . . .

His staff captains make their reports, after which he allotsthe “waves,” five for today. The names of the pilots are entered on blackboards on the wall, the spaces for the taking-off and landing times remaining free. That is all for the moment. One of the chief requirements of night fighting is the virtue of being able to wait. To wait for hours, for nights . . . for many nights. Night fighting is one of the weapons whose time of employment is determined by the enemy. No huntsman lying in wait for game ever knew such a period of waiting, yet here, too, they are waiting for game.

The bombproof control room is filled with a tenseness which can be felt almost physically. Men are standing at endless rows of telephones, tuning in here and plugging in there, speaking an apparently senseless series of words into the receivers: “. . . Fish . . . Rose . . . Scorpion . . . Dervish . . . Octopus . . .” Wireless operators are sitting in front of their apparatuses in glass cases—ear to ear with unknown comrades suspended somewhere hundreds of miles away in the night air. From a hundred separate messages, sent by searchlight batteries, observation posts, meteorological posts, and night fighters in the air, the air situation in the group’s sector is calculated and investigated every minute from early evening until early morning. Air-force men are seated at huge tables, silently at work with millimeter scales and slide rules. They enter strange signs on large maps, for the most part tiny circles which are from time to time joined together by lines. In this way, the direction of flight and the position of approaching enemy bombers can be seen at a glance, while gigantic wall charts show the weather conditions and the entire situation of the chase for the night. Fresh messages are received from the fighters flying in the air, and new orders are transmitted to the airmen. Thus the heart and brain of a night-fighter group work together, while out on the field the flying personnel is waiting for the order to take off.
Suddenly three, four, eight lines begin to converge on one of the maps and move in a definite direction representing the course of attacking planes. The whole place now becomes alive.

"Attention! First wave, take off!"

"All clear ....." buzz the headphones in the night-fighter plane "Puma." The lights on the runway begin to hop and, as the machine hurtles forward, they grow into a ribbon of light. Then the plane plunges into the night, which envelops it like bottomless black eternity. The wireless set is in unbroken communication with the control room already far away, where the net is woven in which the enemy will be caught. The spectral fingers of the instruments grope through the vast expanse, stretching out towards the foe for whose heartbeat the wireless operator listens intently ..... 

The earphones buzz again. "Caesar," the night fighter in the neighboring sector, has been unable to catch the enemy. But he has forced the latter over into the "Puma’s" hunting grounds. Now the "Puma" has caught sight of his prey. The altitude? 20,000 feet. The deep shadow of an enemy plane is swimming down below as though in a dark crystal bowl, gliding ghostlike over banks of clouds, passing through a pale cumulus cloud and finally plunging into a black chasm. Stick to him! The fighter pursues the heavy bomber like a shark following a huge whale. Closer—one thousand feet, now six hundred feet. The bluish exhaust flames of the bomber look like a will-o’-the-wisp in the distance. The game can begin.

A sudden staggering jolt shakes our machine: we are firing. Whole bundles of gleaming harpoons rend the body of the gigantic fish. It bleeds tongues of flame; the air around it is full of fire. The bomber is lost—but its rear gunner is still shooting out of the cockpit behind the rudder. A burning parachute detaches itself obliquely from the conflagration, opens, sinks down into nothingness—and then the bomber plunges down like a barn on fire. The wings drop off and hurtle into the darkness ..... 

It’s all over.

So that is what the long wait means. But it is not always possible to bring the plane down so quickly. The enemy is cunning, has a cool head, and is daring. Even when severely wounded, he still fights to the last. And then there is the night, uncertain, with its tricks and pitfalls to which the fighting man can oppose, apart from his instruments, only the imperturbability of his nerves and his firm belief in his luck.
Captain Streib, an experienced night fighter, once had a British plane covered by the gleaming cross of his sights—scarcely sixty feet away. An ideal position. He opened fire from all his guns, and the volleys hacked into the body of the British plane. Suddenly a terrific explosion almost tore the joystick out of his hand; his machine began to dive, and it was only with great difficulty that he was able to flatten out again. He was lucky and managed to fly his badly damaged plane back to the base. The British plane had exploded in the air, and the pieces had torn through the battered cockpit, the engine cowling, the wings and rudder of the German fighter.

Sergeant Major Gildner, one of the most successful German night fighters, had "outcurved" a British "Hampden" according to all the rules of the art of flying a fighter. The enemy then tried to save himself by flying low. Gildner stuck to him. Even in daylight, "hedge hopping" is a great art. The Britisher skimmed over the countryside through the night, sped over hedges, houses, fences, high-tension pylons—and actually reached the open sea! He flew like the devil incarnate. And his rear gunner was firing for all he was worth. But Gildner did not let go of him. He forced the Britisher lower and lower down—until suddenly an explosion and a column of water and fire leapt at the German who, at the very last moment and with lightning speed, was able to jerk his plane upwards. He was lucky, for water can be harder than granite.

The same sergeant major was once so close on the heels of a "Wellington" that he could almost have touched it. He fired, and the full tanks of the British plane exploded, covering the machine of the German fighter pilot with burning petrol. Wrapped in flames the sergeant major climbed as fast as possible and was just going to bale out when he saw that the wind caused by his speed had put out the flames as though by a miracle. And it was Gildner again who one night brought down three British planes in one hour . . .

Night fighting is the youngest of all weapons in this war; but the night fighters have already had countless adventures and have an inexhaustible supply of stories. They tell them simply and objectively, like a workman explaining how to use a hammer or a chisel. They do not need to exaggerate: this fantastic chase in an expanse of innumerable thousands of cubic miles and, moreover, complete darkness, needs no embellishments.

Once again we are seated in the low, comfortable chairs in the control room, waiting. Waiting is part of our duty. And the old captain who looks after all the fast machines brings out his faded photograph album and chats about fighters and fighting during the Great War. He shows his pictures—Richthofen . . . Udet . . . Goering . . . it is as though they were here in the room with us. And we youngsters sit and listen. Then the old captain closes the album, bangs his fist on the book of his youth, and mumbles something about "being young again" and "those old wire crates we used to have." A nostalgic smile lights up the veteran’s face as he gets up to go out into the darkness and see to his night fighters.