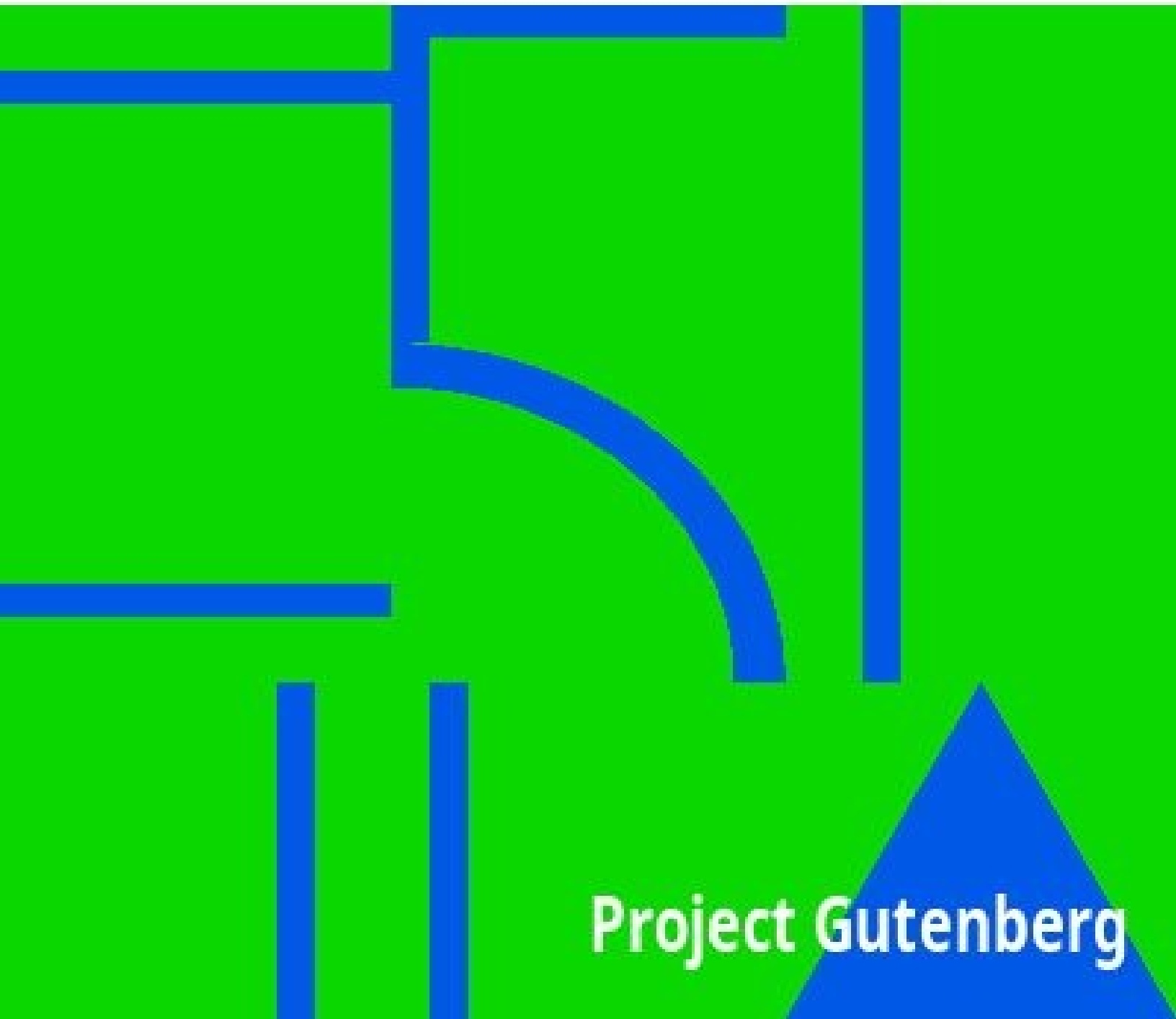


Dogfight—1973

Mack Reynolds



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DOGFIGHT—1973

By
Mack Reynolds

**Flying at 1600 m.p.h. you act with split-second timing after y
sight the enemy. And you're allowed only one mistake—your last!**

MY radar picked him up when he was about five hundred miles to my north-northeast and about forty-five miles above me. I switched the velocity calculator on him as fast as I could reach it.

The enemy ship was doing sixteen, possibly even sixteen and a half. I took the chance that it was most likely an Ivar Interceptor, at that speed, and punched out a temporary evasion pattern with my right hand while with my left I snapped an Ivar K-12 card into my calculator along with his estimated speed, altitude and distance. It wasn't much to go on as yet but he couldn't have much more on me, if as much; inwardly I congratulated myself on the quick identification I'd managed.

He was near enough now for my visor screen to pick him up. At least he was alone, that was something. My nearest squadron mate was a good minute and a half away. It might as well have been a century.

Now, this is what is always hard to get over to a civilian; the time element. Understand, it will take me a while to tell this but it all took

less than sixty seconds to happen.

He had guessed my evasion pattern already—either guessed it or had some new calculator that was far and beyond anything our techs were turning out. I could tell he'd anticipated me by the Bong-Sonic roll he slipped into.

I quickly punched up a new pattern based on the little material I had in the calculator. At least I'd caught the roll. I punched that up, hurriedly, slipped it into the IBM, guessed that his next probability was a pass, took a chance on that and punched it in.

I was wrong there. He didn't take his opportunity for a front-on pass. He was either newly out of their academy or insultingly confident. My lips felt tight as I canceled the frontal pass card, punched up two more to take its place.

The base supervisor cut in on the phone. "It looks like old Dmitri himself, Jerry, and he's flying one of the new K-12a models. Go get him, boy!"

I felt like snapping back. He knew better than to break in on me at a time like this. I opened my mouth, then shut it again. Did he say K-12a? *Did he say K-12a?*

I squinted at the visor screen. The high tail, the canopy, the oddly shaped wing tanks.

I'd gone off on the identification!

I slapped another evasion pattern into the controls, a standard set, I had no time to punch up an improvisation. But he was on me like a wasp. I rejected it, threw in another set. Reject. Another!

Even as I worked, I kicked the release on my own calculator, dumped it all, selected like a flash an Ivar K-12a card, and what other

estimations I could make while my mind was busy with the full-time job of evasion.

My hands were still making the motions, my fingers were flicking here, there, my feet touching here, there. But my heart wasn't in it.

He already had such an advantage that it was all I could do to keep him in my visor screen. He was to the left, to the right. I got him for a full quarter-second in the wires, but the auto gunner was too far behind, much too far.

His own guns flicked red.

I punched half a dozen buttons, slapped levers, tried to scoot for home.

To the left of my cubicle two lights went yellowish and at the same time my visor screen went dead. I was blind.

I sank back in my chair, helpless.

THE speed indicator wavered, went slowly, deliberately to zero; the altimeter died; the fuel gauge. Finally, even the dozen or so trouble-indicators here, there, everywhere about the craft. Fifteen million dollars worth of warcraft was being shot into wreckage.

I sat there for a long, long minute and took it.

Then I got to my feet and wearily opened the door of my cubicle. Sergeant Walters and the rest of the maintenance crew were standing there. They could read in my face what had happened.

The sergeant began, "Captain, I ..."

I grunted at him. "Never mind, Sergeant. It had nothing to do with the ship's condition." I turned to head for the operations office.

Bill Dickson strolled over from the direction of his own cubicle. "Somebody said you just had a scramble with old Dmitri himself."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if it was him or not. Maybe some of you guys can tell a man's flying but I can't."

He grinned at me. "Shot you down, eh?"

I didn't answer.

He said, "What happened?"

"I thought it was an Ivar K-12, and I put that card in my calculator. Turned out it was one of those new models, K-12a. That was enough, of course."

Bill grinned at me again. "That's two this week. That flak got you near that bridge and now you get ..."

"Shut up," I told him.

He counted up on his fingers elaborately. "The way I figure it, you lose one more ship and you're an enemy ace."

He was irrepressible. "Damn it," I said, "will you cut it out! I've got enough to worry about without you working me over. This means I'll have to spend another half an hour in operations going over the fight. And that means I'll be late for dinner again. And you know Molly."

Bill sobered. "Gee," he said, "I'm sorry. War is hell, isn't it?"

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