

CRAZY EIGHT

DEDICATED
TO ALL MY PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE FRIENDS.

Note from author.

All the characters in this book are somewhat fictional, in a weird sort of way. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, is premeditated and deliberately intended. I hope those people, living or dead, can take a joke. And if those people, living or dead, can't, well then they will just have to accept this tragic turn of events and curse against the first amendment.

Furthermore, in case this book should actually become popular, and its reading required in schools around the world, I wish to sympathize with the poor students who have been constrained to read it, and I would like to point out that even if your teachers swear that there is a profound philosophical message in all of my sentences, I assure you that these teachers are deceiving you, as there is actually a profound philosophical message in all of my *words*.

And finally, before you begin, I hope, reading this story, I would like to point out that it is not politically correct. Yes, I'm afraid that the characters in this book are mostly white males, to my regret. This is not in the least due to any racism and/or sexism on my part but rather to the fact that, when I began writing this story, a long time ago, I did not know much about girls and ethnic groups, and so I mechanically and unconsciously began to write about what I knew best, namely white males. I hope this does not prevent you from reading my story, and, to show that there are no hard feelings, I would like to suggest that you forget that we are white and just think of us as Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, Asians or whatever may be your fancy.

"I'm bored," complained John.

"I'm more bored," whined Thibault.

"I'm boreder," sighed Stefano.

"I'm boredest," moaned Charles.

"You're making me sick!" affirmed Patrick.

"Yeah! Instead of groaning, you could think about something to do!" I continued.

"Look at the sky today! Sometimes, I really wish I could be up there..." remarked Samuel, in an effort to change the subject.

"Why don't you just jump off a tree, then?" queried Mortimer, ironically.

Samuel ignored this remark.

We all solemnly scrutinized the sky for a while.

My nine year old brother was lazily resting his head upon his skateboard, surveying the heavens with his blue eyes. Slightly vain, he kept his auburn hair well-bred, to my disgust. Small for his age, he nevertheless demonstrated exceptional energy in showing off new tricks using his ever-present skateboard. He relished fun, animals -particularly his guinea-pig, Domino- and food. For this he was appreciated, but his tempestuous and a trifle pessimistic nature was, quite on the contrary, undesired.

His good friend, Stefano, nine as well was also leaning on a skateboard. A slender silhouette and an eternal grin were his particular traits. His brown hair flew wildly in the air. Good-humored, enthusiastic reader, optimistic, always smiling, he was well liked, except when he played one of his infamous pranks.

John was dozing off nearby. His short, yellow hair stubbornly fought against the wind. He was well known for his overwhelming scientific curiosity -even though he was my brother's age-, and for his stormy sulks.

Charles, in all probability was already sound asleep. This guest of ours normally resided in France, but had once lived in Washington D.C.. We had, following our custom, invited him over to stay part of summer vacation. His freckled face, chestnut hair, penetrating blue eyes, and his eternal grin strangely resembled those of "Mad Magazine"'s symbol -you know, that kid whose motto is: What? Me worry?). He was agreeable, funny, enthusiastic, good-humored and nine. Even though he was especially my brother's pal, all of us were greatly attached to him.

Mortimer was still smirking at his joke. Tall, robust, eleven, he had acquired a useful ability to persuade bullies that they would be better off leaving us, and particularly him, alone. Usually optimistic, -even so, he could sometimes be a very pessimistic bum, believe me-, he was fun to have around. His love for good food sometimes caused him to receive some adequate comments, which displeased him greatly. His brown eyes twinkled, and his dark-brown hair quavered in the air.

Samuel was pondering, his clear, blue, dreamy eyes all hazy. This slightly sadistic and sometimes belligerent eleven year old could be qualified as the brains of our small group. His auburn hair -a debate rages to this day on whether he actually has any- was cut extremely short. He was good-humored, proud and very enthusiastic.

Patrick was also looking particularly meditative. Short yet not stubby, for his age of ten, he was not well-liked for his humor, which was sometimes sarcastic, sometimes insulting, and usually irritating, especially to Mortimer. He had slightly curled golden hair and sparkling blue eyes, as well as a witty tongue.

I, leaning against an old oak tree, was just hopefully wishing that, having won the lottery, I would never have to go to school again. Since descriptions are not my strong point, I'll just tell you where you can find my picture: in any illustrated dictionary, you'll find me right besides the definition of exceptionally intelligent and thoroughly nice guy (not as an antonym, incidentally).

"You know," I announced, breaking the silence, "I've been seriously considering the purchase of a 'Kitfox'. I saw a commercial for it in 'Popular Science', and it really looks neat!

It can cruise at 90 mph, and uses regular gasoline!"

"Yeah, and you have to build it yourself, and it costs a fortune!" replied Samuel.

"Actually, it looks cheap, and my father can help me build it. And you don't even need a pilot's license to use it!" I countered.

"Wow! Sounds great! What's the catch?" countered Patrick.

"Can you let me fly in it when you get it?" entreated John.

"IF he gets it!" corrected Mortimer.

"You guys are just jealous!" I retorted.

"No, we're just smart!" responded Patrick.

"You know, I saw this book at the library all about building oneself an airplane. It looks very instructive, and I took it out," Samuel put in, in an effort to calm us down.

"Really? Could you get it?" asked Charles.

"Well, alright. Just wait for me here, I'll go get it in my pack."

Samuel began moving across the field to the barnyard. We watched as he was engulfed by the gaping blackness of the barn. In the middle of our field, there was a single, ageless oak tree, casting a shadow over a considerable piece of land. We had taken refuge beneath this protective cover from Virginia's scorching summer sun. Built near the forest, was the abandoned, wrecked barnyard that was miraculously still standing.

Most of us lived in or near Washington D.C., but we had been allowed by our parents, to bike ride (or skateboard) -approximately a 1 hour ride- to this desolate farmland where we were the only representatives of the human race. We would stay the whole day, taking advantage of the silence, the absence of nosy adults, the forest as well as the lake nearby, to have the time of our lives.

This was the way we spent summer, and we loved it! We could swim or canoe in the lake, build cabins or play with water-guns in the forest. Sometimes, our parents would accompany us, and we'd have a big, festive pick-nick. It was really great.

This particular day, we were by ourselves, and somehow, we had become tremendously bored of all our usual pass-times. Vacation was going by, for once, slowly. We still had 2 whole months and a half left, not that we minded or anything, actually.

"Got it! Here you go Charles," Samuel handed him the book titled "10 Simple Steps to Build Your Own Aircraft Inexpensively", and bearing the authors name in big, red letters: Stephen Wrihte.

Charles flipped through the numerous pages that displayed many colorful illustrations. We awaited his verdict.

"This looks awesome! And easy too! They give step-by-step instructions! I think we should try it!" enthusiastically concluded Charles, having reached the last page.

"Oh common! You expect us to actually make our own airplane! Let alone fly it!" interrogated Patrick.

"Look, it has a page showing all the costs of the enterprise, as well as the total price... Somebody pinch me!!" I demanded.

Patrick was going to take my statement too literally, but I evaded his grasp. Mortimer looked at what had so surprised me.

"OH MY GOD!! I don't believe this! And they say this is supposed to be inexpensive! This is practically FREE!" he hollered.

"Only 50\$ total? I'm impressed!" admitted Stefano.

"Only? Let me see!" demanded Patrick

"GOSH! What is there too lose? I think we should build a plane, even if it doesn't work, for this price! Anyway, it'll be fun!" proclaimed John.

"There's probably a catch, but at least will have something to do!" assented Patrick.

"Well... All right, but only because Patrick agreed," yielded Samuel.

"I'm for it!!" yelled Thibault.

"So am I!!" yelled Stefano.

"You all know how I feel!" said Charles.

"It will never work!! We're can we get the necessary pieces?" protested Mortimer.

"The author tells all that kind of information at the end! See... here!" I pointed out.

"How about the license, huh?" objected Mortimer once more.

"If you don't need a license for the 'Kitfox', why should we need one for our plane! Anyway, this could be our little secret... Nobody ever comes down here you know, and we could store it in the barnyard!" observed Stefano.

"Well, how about the... the... the engine?"

"The book!" remarked Thibault.

"The... the wings?"

"The book!" commented Charles.

"Well, how about our own personal safety?" Mortimer grinned devilishly at the thought of foiling our plans with such a critical problem.

We were speechless. Finally, John came up with an answer.

"We could just fly at low-altitude over the lake!"

"But that wouldn't be very fun, now would it! And we could always have an accident while landing!" retorted Mortimer.

"We can get parachutes!" commented Stefano.

"Fat chance! And they don't work at low altitudes!"

"Well, listen Mortimer, I personally believe in living life to its fullest, as well as in my exceptional abilities as a pilot, so whether you like or not, I am going to build this airplane and fly it!" I declared.

"Well spoken! And I'm with you!" congratulated a pleased Samuel.

Everybody else, except Mortimer, was with me as well.

"Well, let's get organized!" said Samuel.

Here began an intense discussion on who was to procure what pieces, and who was to do what. Mortimer, feeling left out, and seeing the heck of a time we were having, finally joined in.

"Glad to have you with us Mortimer!" I told him.

It was 5:30 when we had worked out all the bugs. Each and every one of us had certain pieces to get hold of. We all donated \$6.25 to the worthy cause, so we needed an accountant. Samuel was chosen for his honesty and his skill with numbers. I was chosen to write down our adventures and take snapshots of them for future generations. Mortimer was picked for chief-executor with Patrick. Their job was to make sure everybody did there job well and on time. Mortimer was adequate because he was the biggest of us all -therefore good at convincing-, and Patrick because he had the habit of nosing around - therefore capable of keeping track of what everyone was doing-. Charles was selected to direct the construction -with Samuel keeping a constant eye on him-. Thibault and Stefano were in charge of accommodations, thus taking care of food and making comfortable working quarters. John was to help anyone who needed it most. All of us were going to participate in the construction.

We rode back to our homes, light-heartedly, and with a bright prospective future, even though some of us were still not convinced of our success.

The next day, I was up at about 7, which is very remarkable for me, mainly during vacation. I was looking forward to today for obvious reasons.

Anyway, I briskly dressed, had a slap-dash breakfast, and then, accompanied by my brother, I went to "Hechinger's". There, we met Mortimer and Charles who were in search of stuff for our undertaking as well.

We shopped together, and by 3:00, we had assembled a considerable amount of wood, nails, and weird nick-knacks.

Knowing it would be nearly impossible to haul all this stuff to our building site by bike, we nevertheless had to, if we wanted our project to remain secret.

So, we created a very ingenious system: the extremities of a few wood planks would be bound to two bikes by ropes, thus creating a kind of platform between those aforementioned bikes. We would then stack all the rest of the stuff (in bags) on that platform, and secure all of that with more rope.

Unfortunately, the system was not perfect, as it was difficult to keep the two bikes perfectly steady and at the same speed. But we overcame the problems. We found out that we weren't the only ones who had gone shopping that day, and we had practically everything we needed to begin construction. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time left that day, so we had to postpone it all for the following one.

I dreamt I was soaring over my school and throwing water balloons on the people I really hated during the night. When I grudgingly woke up, it was already 8:00. I rushed to get to the field in time, for today the assembling was to commence. In record time, I joined my friends at the barnyard.

I was still breathing heavily from my mad bike ride when I entered the barn.

The place was buzzing with activity, and some boards of wood had already been nailed tightly together.

"Amaury! What's been keeping you! We need your help for the... Stefano! What are you doing!! Let me show you how to PROPERLY nail!! ACK!! Stop that! You blundering bastard!! LEAVE THAT HAMMER ALONE!!" Samuel greeted me.

"Gosh, Samuel just nailed Stefano!!" grinned Patrick.

"AARGH!! THAT'S NOT FUNNY!!!" pointed out Mortimer.

"Samuel's been bothering us for an hour already with his stupid advice!! I bet he couldn't even tell the difference between a hammer and a wrench!" explained John.

"Yeah!! He's getting on my nerves!!" acknowledged Charles.

"STOP TALKING YOU THREE!! As for you, Amaury, let me explain to you you're job!" Samuel hollered, having completed his "how to nail PROPERLY" demonstration.

I was in charge of helping Samuel construct the engine, which was entirely battery-powered. We had in fact "borrowed" some car batteries for this purpose. The engine would be able to sustain an airplane afloat for an indefinite amount of time, at a maximum speed of 150 km/h. Why indefinite? Because Samuel had participated in an eco-contest organized by Sierra, and had won the first prize: two solar panels and four tiny wind turbines, with the proper electrical components to transform wind and sun into usable electrical current. Thus, with these two support systems attached to our plane, we could gain a few hours without having to land and recharge the automobile batteries, an operation which would take about 2 hours. Unfortunately, our time afloat would be only a tiny 3 hours if it didn't happen to be a sunny day. But if it proved to be very sunny, we could stay up as much as 6 hours!!

Now don't start imagining that we are kid geniuses, because even if we are, we still wouldn't be able to make an operational engine, electric or not! But the book gave step-by-step instructions on building an electric or fuel powered engine. We chose the electric one because it was safer, easier to build and refuel, and especially because it would be harmless to the environment.

Patrick was working on the control system, John on the landing gear, Mortimer and Stefano on the fuselage, Thibault on the wings and Charles was reading the directions. Every so often, we'd switch jobs. This was fairer, and safer too, for we could verify the previous person's work. Nevertheless, Samuel remained working on the engine all the time, for he was used to those kinds of things.

The fuselage was beginning to take shape, as well as the wings. We worked well, and wondered about our future adventures to keep our spirits up. Soon, and it felt too soon to many of us, it was time to return for dinner.

"So, what did you do today?" inquired my mother, between bites.

"Oh, we just played at the field," I responded.

"You seem to be going there quite often these days," observed my father.

"Well, actually, my brother answered, we're building an..."

I kicked his dangling shins underneath the table.

"Ow!"

"You're building a?" enquired my father, suspiciously.

"Uh, my brother continued, we're building a tree-house!"

Boy, was I relieved. Our parents, satisfied with this answer, went on to other subjects.

"One wing or 2! What's the difference??" demanded an irate Stefano.

"Or three," I pointed out.

"Three?" gasped Charles.

"A triplane..."

"Oh..."

"Well, anyway, 1 wing will give us more speed because there will be less wind resistance, and it will demand less time and material to build the plane. Whereas 3 wings will give us greater maneuverability and portance. And 2 wings will obviously provide a compromise," clarified Samuel.

"I'm for 2 wings!" I announced.

"So am I!" decided my brother.

"Let's vote," suggested John.

We voted, and agreed on having a biplane. That matter settled, we immediately got back to business. The plane was making impressive and immense progress.

The next day, we decided to stop all work to discuss an important side of our plans: safety. Considering we were going to attempt flight, a pretty original and dangerous feat already, with no previous experience and on a home-made aircraft, there was plenty of reason to worry.

We concurred on the following measures to protect our health:

- We'd take intensive flight training.
- We'd somehow obtain parachutes.
- We'd fly in such a way as to prevent any injuries and accidents.

Now, for the first measure, we knew we couldn't obtain real lessons, so we were just going to cope with the means at our disposal. Signifying that Samuel and I, the two "experts" on aeronautics, were going to "teach" the rest of our party how to fly. We were assuming a great responsibility, but we thought we could handle it.

The second measure presented more difficulties. Where the heck were we going to procure parachutes?? After a long moment of extended meditation, we decided that we were going to solve this particular puzzle later.

As for the last one, Patrick ordained several rules and regulations that were intended to make our flights safer, to our displeasure. For example, he set an altitude and speed limit, defined which weather conditions would be considered unflyable, and he established severe punishments for immature behavior.

We found ourselves faced with the second problem again. After more musing, we came to the conclusion that like it was impossible for us to make them ourselves, we were going to try and see if they sold them at a surplus. This of course was completely absurd and ridiculous, but worth a shot. Anyway, a bunch of kids imagining they can actually build an airplane is also absurd and ridiculous, yet we tried! So that was that for that.

We, finding ourselves with some time on our hands, tried to calculate how long it would take for everything to be ready. Counting probable bad weather conditions -which would force us to stay at home instead of going to work- and possible impediments -for example friends leaving on trips-, we brought it down to approximately 2 weeks. This of

course was due to the extraordinary luck that none of us were going anywhere because of how our parents had already spent so much money during the year.

The next day, we worked twice as hard as we normally did. Mortimer, pretending to be an adult, called a Surplus about the parachutes. Unfortunately, his impression of a hoarse voice was very poor. After several unfruitful attempts at many different stores, he tried pretending to be a woman: it worked. We fell on a particularly gullible person who gave us the information we needed. We were overjoyed: they did sell cheap parachutes. Unfortunately, the store happened to be far from any of our houses and furthermore, the parachutes didn't come with a guarantee. Well, we couldn't risk asking our parents to bring us there by car, so we just had to send Mortimer. He left the next day on his bike. Luckily, he found the gullible person. Another might have been more shrewd. Mortimer told the credulous fool that he was sent by his dad who was a construction worker afraid of heights and who, therefore, wanted to purchase a parachute. The guy actually fell for it.

Meanwhile, our biplane was progressing at an astonishing rate, and, which is very rare for such undertakings, we were ahead of schedule. The fuselage was practically finished, and the wings were slowly taking shape. At 6, we found ourselves faced with something resembling an airplane, a parachute and a predicament. No matter what Samuel did, the engine would not start. It would putter pathetically and then die down. We were completely puzzled by such behavior.

"What's wrong with this blasted thing! Of course! That must be it: the doo-dad is not connected to the whatchamacallit! What a blasted blunderer I am! There, now it should work!! Cross your fingers!!"

"Putt... putt... putttt..."

"Damn! That wasn't it either!! I don't believe this! It's beyond all comprehension!!"

Finally, we discovered that the source of the problem was that the batteries we had "borrowed" were completely discharged. This was quickly mended, and soon Samuel was able to experiment with the engine. It confirmed all our expectations, to our gratitude. With this engine, we'd be able to reach approximately 150 km/h, hopefully enough to take the air with a pilot onboard.

This incident closed, we got back to work.

"the fuselage is finally finished!! We can put in the motor and the control system now! Come on! Let's get a move on it!!"

"Oh gosh! I'm so excited!! What do we put in first?"

"The engine."

Yes, we had finally, after two weeks of fervent and exhausting labor, assembled the fuselage, the landing-gear, and the wings. All that remained was the installation of the control systems and the engine. This was no laughing matter though, for these two components are crucially important. I mean imagine a plane with no ailerons or rudders or elevators!! A plane without an engine has already been verified -sailplanes- but those still have some kind of control system. Well, anyway, what we were about to undertake was a vital part of the airplane, so we decided to take our time and do it just right.

Samuel was put unanimously in charge. He was faced with the task to tell us what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Thus, his responsibility was great, yet he was able to cope with it. In fact, he coped with it a little too well.

"No you bastard!! You connect the red wire to the + of the battery and the black one to the -!! Good! Now try to unravel the mysteries of electronics without me! I have other things to do than to baby-sit incompetent fools!!"

We had been able to borrow -yes, really borrow- a soldering iron from my father, telling him we needed it for a special component of our imaginary tree-house. Therefore we were able to make good time while still being prudent not to botch the job. Soon, we had the engine properly and skillfully installed. It proved very powerful and reliable after the extensive tests we held with it. Then, we began work on the control systems. We all agreed that we'd prefer a joystick to a steering wheel. We also decided on a simple shift to control the multiple speeds of our aircraft. As for brakes, well that was an altogether more difficult matter. It's not that easy to make effective brakes to quickly stop any vehicle. I mean, during World War I, the biplanes didn't even have brakes! Of course, we decided that we'd rather have some way of stopping on the ground, so we made some rudimentary brakes like those found on some types of sleds -a slab of wood or metal that could be pivoted from a horizontal position to a vertical one, thus getting into contact with the ground, so as to slow down the vehicle-

As for the control systems, we decided to go without flaps. All we needed were ailerons, rudders and elevators to control roll, yaw and pitch. This was no easy matter as well. For all of this was powered by a complex tangle of wires and pulleys. Luckily the book carefully explained everything we might need to know. 3 days went by in careful, minute work. We all worked hard, and most of us well.

"This is it! Tomorrow, we'll be able to fly!! I don't believe it! This is too awesome!! Oh boy!! I can't wait till tomorrow!!" exclaimed Thibault.

"Not so fast! You're forgetting the lessons we still have to take!" I reminded him, to his disappointment.

"Well, let's get it over with fast!" declared John.

Finally, our plane was finished. It really was a sight for soar eyes. Its four wing each had a length of about 1.5 meters, and a width of 50 cm., giving us a combined wingspan of about 3 meters -or 6, depending on your point of view-. The top wings were about 45 cm. over the bottom ones -which were about 70 cm. off the ground-. Our fuselage reached a length of about 2,5 meters. We had purposely made it smaller than the one described in the book because, after all, we were only kids. Like the old World War I biplanes, we only had one pair of wheels, placed just beneath the wings. As for the back, we just had a tiny little wheel at the end of the fuselage. Therefore, the plane was inclined, having the forward half higher than the backward half. This would prove to be an added difficulty during take-offs and landings. The wheels, by the way, were not retractable.

We already knew that for the older of us, the top wing would create no problems, but for the younger ones, the top wing would be an obstacle to their view. So, we had to put a special pillow for whenever it was my brother's, or one of his friends', turn.

We quickly agreed that the plane was pretty bleak, so we decided to give it a paint job before christening it.

"I say we should paint it completely green," maintained Patrick.

"But blue is such a prettier color!" protested Samuel.

"I still think purple is just what this airplane needs!" I asserted.

"NO! We should paint it all yellow," affirmed John.

Finally, we came to a compromise, and ended up with the most colorful airplane in the world: the fuselage was in the top part green, in the middle part yellow, and in the bottom part blue, as for the wings, well they were purple. And someone even painted the nose red.

Then, we decided to begin the lessons. We listened to Samuel's lectures on the secrets of flight, about safety, and about control. Then, he proceeded to give us more practical and entertaining lessons. He brought us to his computer, where we learned the functional use of an aircraft on Microsoft's Airplane Simulator. I personally wasn't paying too

much attention, for I already knew most of this stuff. Finally, when he believed Patrick had finally understood that to go up, you pulled the stick, and to go down, you pushed it, which he seemed not able to grasp, and when he thought he had brain-washed the rest of us well enough, he stated that we were probably ready. This created a lot of excitement and discussion. We all wanted to be the first to fly. Samuel tried to re-establish some order.

"SILENT!! Nobody is going to fly yet!! First, we must christen our plane!! Any suggestions??"

A continuous stream of suggestions came from our resourceful minds. Samuel had to re-re-establish the peace.

"ONE AT A TIME!!"

"I suggest Multicolored Baron," I suggested, ironically.

"How about The Kingfisher," appealed John.

"Or The Peregrine Falcon," proposed Samuel.

"Maybe The Albatross," I submitted.

"Nah, all those are pitiful. I think we should call it The Bald Eagle," advised Thibault.

"Maybe we could call it Prototype X1," I joked.

"Or even X25647," chortled Patrick.

"Maybe we could name it The Terrible Tornado," my brother put in.

"The Lightning Bolt!"

"The Thunder Flash!"

"The Hurricane!"

"The Earthquake!"

"The Sand Pile!"

"What???"

"Uh, nothing!!"

"The Awesome Ace!"

"The Dream Machine!"

"Oh GOD!! Who said that??"

"Hey, don't look at me!"

"The Illusion!"

"Hey! That's not bad!!"

"NO! I don't like it!!"

"How about The Perpetrator!"

"Or The Aggressor!"

"Wait! I got it! We're 8, aren't we? How about The Lucky 8, or even The Great 8?"

"NAAAAHHHH..."

"The Avis?"

"WHAT?"

"Avis, that's Latin for bird," explained Samuel.

"Hey! That's not bad!! I'm for *Avis*!"

"Well... Okay!! I want to get this over with anyway!!"

"HOORAY FOR AVIS!!"

"HIP HOORAY! HIP HOORAY! HIP HOORAY!!!!"

"To the plane, gentlemen!!"

"Wait!! I'll get some Champagne!"

And so it was that our plane got the name of *Avis*. We excitedly hurried to our "hangar". Stefano got their first. He fastened his parachute on, jumped in the plane and prepared to take-off.

"Hey wait just a darn minute!! Who said you could go first??"

Stefano mused a while, then proudly declared, "I did!" and began rolling out of the barn. But we blocked his way.

"GET OUT OF THERE STEF!! OR YOU'LL NEVER FLY AVIS!!" warned Samuel,

ominously.

"Okay! OKAY! If you can't take a joke!! Sheesh..."

"Okay, now please move aside so that I may take-off," demanded Mortimer.

"No way!! Let's vote for it!" John pronounced.

"Vote? Everyone will vote for themselves!!" I pointed out.

"Well, what I meant was that we write our names on pieces of paper and then stuff them in a bag or something. A neutral person, with his eyes shut, takes a paper, and whoever's it is wins the right to use *Avis* first!" illuminated John.

"Okay! And I'll be the neutral person, 'cause I don't want to be the first!! I'm not too sure about my capabilities as a pilot!" grinned Patrick.

We proceeded with the "vote", while Patrick made sure that each of us only put 1 paper in the bag. He then shook the bag brusquely. Finally, he began humming the Jeopardy tune.

"HURRY UP!! YOU SLOB!!" Mortimer threatened.

"Okay! Okay! I was trying to make some suspense so that..."

"WILL YOU JUST HURRY!" Mortimer hollered.

He shook the bag one last time -while we looked at him with a menacing expression-, and then pulled a paper. He then pretended to be having a terribly difficult time unfolding it. Mortimer grabbed it from him and read out loud:

"Samuel."

Samuel smiled brightly, while we eyed him angrily. He marched to the plane, when Patrick called out.

"WAIT!! Let me continue the drawing first to establish the order so we don't have any arguments later!"

Samuel agreed, and to my joy, I found myself second. The final order was: Samuel, Amaury, Stefano, Charles, Thibault, John, Mortimer, and Patrick. Patrick didn't mind, for he chose to be last, but Mortimer was raving mad! Finally, after we were able to calm him down, Samuel stepped in the plane. He took advantage of this moment to remind us of some important flight techniques as well as the important parts of our instrument panel, which was constituted by exactly 6 instruments: the ON/OFF Switch -very important-, the Joystick, the throttle control -a shift-, the brakes -a lever-, a small watch -to remind the pilot of his limited electricity supply-, and finally a compass. As for the speedometer and the altimeter, we weren't able to obtain any, so we'd be forced to calculate our height and speed unaided by any instruments.

Then, he commenced a systems check, to check if all systems were in working order. They were. He then waved good-bye, and put *Avis*'s nose into the wind, which was, fortunately, not very violent. He warned us that before trying to actually take-off, he'd do some tests to make sure he'd be able to fly. So we saw him zoom from corner to corner, to turn, to brake, etc... After these frolics which lasted about 15 minutes, he finally prepared for a real take-off. We watched in awe and apprehension.

The motor buzzed to life. Behind the plane, the grass was softly swaying in the powerful current caused by the propeller. The plane took speed progressively, and in no time, Samuel made it to the middle of the plain with no difficulties. He then began to raise himself slowly and cautiously above the ground. We held our breaths. He was now 1 meter over the ground. Then, the engine pattered, wheezed, and came to a complete stop. We watched, crestfallen. Fortunately, the plane didn't go into a stall, which could of been disastrous at such a low altitude, and Samuel was able to bring her in safely. He stepped slowly out of the *Avis*, while we rushed towards him.

"I don't think *Avis* will ever make it any higher," he said, morosely.

We all understood. Everything had failed.

"WAIT A DAMN MOMENT!! How do we know it isn't just a little mechanical problem??" I insisted.

"Well, we might as well check," said Samuel pessimistically.

We did, and found a tiny disconnection in a secondary part of the engine.

"I doubt that caused the problem," stated Samuel.

"Oh well, I've got nothing to lose, I might as well try. I mean it is my turn, isn't it?" I decided.

Samuel graciously ceded.

We moved the airplane back into a take-off position, and I stepped in. To create a dramatic effect, I cracked my fingers and took a deep, resonant breath. I then imitated Samuel's Cockpit Check, and decided I was ready as I'd ever be. I revved up the engine. It sounded normal. I released the brakes and waved to my pals. The plane moved rapidly towards the other side of the clearing. When I thought the moment was adequate, I pushed down on the stick, to raise the tail. This had the immediate effect of greatly increasing my speed. When I reached what I thought was 150 km/h, I pulled on the stick slowly. *Avis* responded accordingly and took some altitude. When I was a meter off the ground, and about 10 meters from the other end of the field, I took another, deeper breath, and pulled on the stick a little more. I ROSE!!

This had the immediate effect of boosting my confidence and moral. I rose a little more, and a little more. When I had reached an altitude from which my friends looked like little PlayMobil figurines, I turned back for the field. I saw them looking avidly at me, about twenty meters below me, eyes wide and mouth gaping. It was hilarious. When they had regained some sensation of the world around them, they waved at me. I felt an overpowering need to show-off, and to execute a barrel-roll, when I remembered the consequences: no more flying for me, at least for a while. Besides, the rudimentary seat-belt we had installed did not win my confidence.

Instead, I went off to explore the landscapes that were so familiar to me from another point of view. Everything looked much smaller than I had imagined it would at such a low altitude. The trees seemed as if they were 5 cm. high, the commonplace scenes had taken a whole new appearance. For example, the nearby lake seemed a shimmering blue mirror, the barnyard a little -slightly worn-out- toy, and my friends little "lego" people. A surge of adrenaline went through my veins, and in this overpowering folly, I felt a huge desire to climb ever higher, to reach the inviting clouds above. Unfortunately, I had, in all the excitement, lost track of time, and I realized that I had already spent 10 minutes in the sky. I judged it about time to land, for Stefano and the rest of my pals seemed just a teeny bit impatient.

"HURRY UP THERE!! YOUR NOT AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD YOU KNOW!! THINK ABOUT US!!"

Resigned, I made my landing approach. Samuel showed me the wind direction. My landing was pretty good, if you consider falling straight down on your nose good (just kidding). I wasn't even fully immobile that my buddies surrounded me.

"How was it?"

"Where did you go?"

"Hurry!! It's my turn now!!"

"Does it work normally?"

"Does it perform well?"

"I just asked that, stupid."

"Yes, but I asked it with superior language."

"Shuddup, will ya?"

"HURRY! I WANT TO TRY!!"

"It's not your turn yet!! I'm before you anyway!!"

"YOU ARE NOT!"

"AM TOO!"

"QUIET YOU TWO!!"

"HURRY AMAURY!! IT'S MY TURN NOW!!"

"WE KNOW THAT!!!"

"I HOPE YOU DO!"

Etc...

Stefano eagerly jumped in the plane. He moved the craft to a suitable take-off area. Everyone helped to speed up the process in a frenzy of impatience. This actually slowed things down, but everyone was too excited to notice at the time. I hastened to give Stefano some information about the different conditions, and after performing the now familiar systems check, he turned on the ignition.

For a beginner, his take-off was spectacular. He quickly took up speed and altitude, while staying almost perfectly steady. He then began a succession of turns, and veers, and spins, and swerves, and curves. This, he later explained, was to test the maneuverability of the aircraft. But at the time, we thought all he would test would be how long it would take before he vomited. Well, anyway, after having completed his fifty third turn, he finally landed, thanks to the encouragements of Mortimer.

"IF YOU'RE NOT DOWN HERE IN THE NEXT 5 MINUTES, YOU'LL BE VERY, VERY SORRY!!!"

Charles was next. He yanked Stefano out, fastened himself in the cockpit, and before anyone knew what was happening, he took off. His ascent was spectacularly fast. In no time, he had reached a very respectable altitude of 30 meters, approximately. He then disappeared over the crests of the trees.

10 minutes pasted.

"Still no sign of him," observed John.

Suddenly, we heard a sinister laugh from behind our backs, and as we swerved around, we just had the chance to duck before *Avis* whizzed overhead.

"WHY THAT BLANK BLANKING FOOL! HE WON'T SET FOOT INTO *Avis* FOR THE NEXT BLANKING CENTURY!!!" announced Samuel, loudly.

"OH NO! My hair!!" whimpered my brother.

As he painstakingly combed it back into place, Charles landed. He was crying with laughter. Samuel sprinted for him and snatched him out of the cockpit.

"You will never step into this plane for the next millennium, do you hear me?"

Between two guffaws, Charles managed to answer.

"Where in the rules does it say that I couldn't do that?"

Patrick, who was holding the rules, glimpsed at them.

"I'm afraid he's right. 'No barrel-rolls, no loopings, no steep diving (more than 40 degrees) etc...'", but nothing about savagely skimming the ground in an effort to scare someone. We'll have to add that."

"Neener, neener, neener," went Charles, while sticking his tongue out towards Samuel.

"Okay, so he was allowed to do that. But is there anything in the rules that prevents me from, how should I put it, giving someone a black eye?" requested Samuel.

"No," Patrick grinned, "You can do that all right..."

"Now wait a minute," pleaded Charles, not laughing any longer, "Let's not get hasty here or anything. It was after all just an innocent joke, wasn't it? No hard feelings, right?"

Samuel made a threatening movement that sent Charles bolting into the forest.

"That'll teach him."

Charles didn't reappear until he was quite sure Samuel was just pretending, which wasn't for a fair bit of time.

My brother, eager to finally have his go, hopped into the cockpit. Feeling partially responsible for his safety, I warned him that if anything were to happen, I'd reserve myself the right to appropriate his savings. This encouraged him to fly safely.

His was a very peaceful, lengthy ride. He mainly explored the surroundings. He returned with the innovative idea of making a map to ease recognition of landscapes from

above. He immediately got to work. John was next.

He carefully stepped into the cockpit, did a "systems check", and turned on the throttle. His take-off wasn't exemplary, but at least it wasn't disastrous. At first, he seemed to be trying to get used to the new feeling of flight. But when I saw some kind of bright red "ball" protruding from the cockpit, I began to feel wary, and, suspicious, I took cover under the oak tree.

Deciding against warning everyone else, I awaited patiently for the raid. And, to my amusement, it soon took place. John pretended to make his approach. He arranged himself to come as close to us as possible without breaking the new rule we had just added (thanks to Charles). When he was barely a few meters from us, he hurled the balloon.

"I'd be careful if I were you," I grinned.

"YIPES!! AIR RAID!! AIR RAID!!"

"DUCK!!"

"THAT DIRTY, CONNIVING SLOB!!"

"WAIT TILL..."

"SPLOTCH!!"

The initial panic having ceased, I assessed the results. Samuel was fuming, plotting some kind of horrible revenge. Mortimer was roaring and, while threatening John with his fist, described all the horrible things that were awaiting the former as soon as he touched down. Patrick was wiping his glasses, somberly. Thibault was preparing a welcoming committee for John, with the help of Stefano: they were heading towards the barn to gather some straw... Charles was grumbling and leafing through the rules to see if there was anything about "attacking unarmed bystanders with devastating equipment from an airplane".

I grinned again.

John was still overhead. He yelled.

"HEY GUYS!!! I WON'T LAND UNTIL YOU PROMISE ME THAT YOU WON'T DO ANYTHING BAD!!! DID YOU HEAR ME?? I SAID I WON'T LAND UNTIL YOU SWEAR YOU WON'T HURT ME!!!"

"WE'RE NOT PROMISING ANYTHING!! YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO STAY THERE UNTIL THE BATTERIES RUN OUT!!" Samuel warned ominously.

"OH YEAH!! WELL THEN I'LL JUST LAND ELSEWHERE AND YOU'LL NEVER FIND THE AIRPLANE AGAIN!!"

"FIRST OF ALL THAT'S AGAINST THE RULES!! SECOND OF ALL, WE ALL KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE, AND WE CAN EASILY... PERSUADE YOU TO TELL US WHERE THE AIRPLANE IS HIDDEN, IF YOU HAPPEN TO DO WHAT YOU MENACED!!"

"WELL THEN, I'LL, I'LL... I'LL LAND FAR AWAY AND BREAK THE AIRPLANE INTO PIECES!! SO THERE!! NYAH NYAH NYAH!!"

"THEN WE'LL JUST DO THE SAME TO YOU..."

"NO YOU WOULDN'T!"

"OH YES WE WOULD..."

John didn't respond for a while. He was probably pondering about the consequences of his actions. Finally, he hollered.

"OKAY... OKAY I GIVE UP!! AS LONG AS YOU DON'T HURT ME!! IF YOU HURT ME, I'LL TELL MY PARENTS!!"

"THAT'S AGAINST THE RULES TOO!! ANYWAY, YOU'D NEVER DO THAT, YOU'D NEVER FLY AGAIN!! YOU WOULD BE GROUNDED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE AS WELL... BUT WE PROMISE WE WON'T (overly) HURT YOU!! RIGHT GUYS?"

Looming silence

"I SAID RIGHT GUYS?"

"....Okay..."

John commenced his real landing approach, we hoped. And, to our relief, it was. No sooner had he stepped out of the cockpit that Samuel made a long, boring speech, that I'll refrain from reporting, all about how in the future, such behavior would be severely punished and etc..., etc..., etc....

Then, my brother and Stefano began their ceremony, which was soon joined by all the other victims. At the end of the festivities, John was completely covered with hay, itching all over, and wishing we had doused him instead.

Finally, it was Mortimer's turn. He completely forgot all about John, and enthusiastically leaped into *Avis*. *Avis* broke under the strain (just kidding). He hurriedly took-off, and joyously went off to explore. Ten minutes later, he returned, with a profound thought in mind (he has so few of those...).

"You know," he declared, "We'll never get on with just one plane for all of us! We can afford making one or two more..."

"These cost 50 bucks you know!! And where do you expect to keep all these planes!! Anyway, did you see how long it took us to build just one of these?? There's no way we can build more!!" interrupted Patrick.

"I'm sure we could, considering the practice we already have, and 50 bucks isn't a lot of money, we could easily afford it!" protested Mortimer.

"Come on you two! We'll think about this another time! Let's let the matter rest for a while," put in Samuel.

"Oh, Samuel..." began Patrick.

"Yes?"

"Well, considering you didn't have such a good turn, I was wondering if you'd like to go before me... I mean, I'm not in much of a hurry you know... and well..." politely proposed Patrick.

"Patrick, don't be preposterous! It's your turn now, fair and square! I'll go after you," refused Samuel.

"But... I insist!"

"So do I"

"I insist more than you!!"

"No you don't!!"

"OH COME ON!!" broke in John, between scratches, "Can't you see Patrick wants to go last!! Just take the plane!! And stop wasting time!!"

Samuel yielded and stepped into *Avis*. But before taking off, he thanked Patrick and asked for a rock and a timer. He gave Patrick some instructions. When he was set, he took off. Suspicious, I headed towards the oak tree, followed by Mortimer: we didn't want any mysterious rocks to smack us.

But, actually, Samuel's intentions were very pacific and scientific. He wanted to calculate the maximum altitude and speed of *Avis* when airborne. To calculate the maximum speed, he went full throttle from the oak tree to the barn. Knowing the approximate distance between these two objects, and having timed the period it took him to get from one to the other, he came up with: roughly 90 km/hour. Pretty good, wouldn't you say so?

As for the altitude, he went as high as possible. As he climbed, the frosty wind whistled past his ears more loudly. He considered himself lucky to have slipped on a pair of gloves and a warm coat, even though it wasn't that chilly. He gazed downwards and was overcome by a feeling of superiority, of domination as he viewed the world from such a different perspective. It looked dream-like, or actually no... It looked phony would be more like it. He imagined the trees, the paths, the barn to be a child's toys. As the sky was completely clear, he had an awesome view of the surroundings. He could barely see us as little dots against the green field, near a reddish block that was the barn. Finally, at a predetermined time, he dropped the rock. Patrick, with a timer in his hand, verified the exact time at which it hit the ground. Knowing what distance an object achieved when falling to the

ground for a second, it was easy for Samuel to deduce how elevated he was. About 2500 meters. Not bad at all!!

Patrick was next. He seemed to be sensing a impending disaster. Pale, he slowly entered the cockpit. He sluggishly did the systems check. He then took off. Keeping a low altitude and a restrained velocity, he turned around the field a few times. After a while, encouraged, he took some speed, and a more respectable altitude. He then began exploring a bit more. 10 minutes having elapsed, he returned to land. He was now jubilant, and fully confident. His landing approach was practically perfect. As he neared the "runway", Samuel helped him.

"SLOWER!! AND LOWER!! NOT SO HIGH!!"

Patrick, having always been confused about the intricacies of joysticks, pulled the stick towards him, (instead of away) thinking that was the way to go down. Disaster struck.

Avis's nose pivoted towards the sky. The plane, now vertical, lost speed. It stalled. Unpowered, the plane plunged. Patrick desperately tried to regain control. It was too late. The plane collapsed unto the ground.

We ran towards the smoldering wreckage.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT!! WHAT HAPPENED??"

"PATRICK!! CAN YOU WALK?? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT??"

We saw a sooty creature raise itself from what used to be the cockpit.

"Gosh, I'm sorry... It just slipped my mind," it went, while wiping it's glasses.

The tension and anxiety shattered, we all smiled at the peculiar spectacle, even though Avis lay, ruined, on the field.

"We really should build a new one!! I mean it's just another \$ 6.25 each! We can afford it! And now that we know it actually works, it's worth the trouble!" I recommended.

"Yes, but it's risky!! There will eventually be another accident, and it might be a lot more grave than Patrick's!" advised Samuel.

"Well, it only happened because Patrick got confused with the controls. We can just inverse them so he feels more comfortable with them," suggested my brother.

"Real smart!! And then the rest of us will be confused. Just keep your moronic ideas to yourself, will you?" demanded Mortimer.

"Well sorry for helping!"

"Anyway, if we do build another one, it will still be just 1 plane for eight people. We're sure to start arguing! It won't be fun anymore," pointed out Patrick.

This comment lead us to remain pensive for a while.

"I got it! We can just make some kind of calendar. One day would be reserved for me, another for you, and so on..." proposed John.

"Well... I don't really like that. It might still bring about confusion and arguments, and some of us would get better days than others. It's pretty complicated, too..." indicated Samuel.

"Hey... Maybe we could just each build our own personal plane! There wouldn't be anymore arguments!! And we could take a ride whenever we chose, it wouldn't be forced upon us on certain days!" went Thibault..

"Don't be absurd!! We'd be talking about \$400!! And just think about how long it would take us!! We would toil all vacation and still not completely finish!!" explained Samuel.

"Yeah!! It's completely foolish!!" added John.

"Well I think it's a good idea! It's still only 50 bucks each! We can afford that!! And think about all the fun we'd have! We could have pretend dogfights..." continued Stefano.

"That would be a lot too dangerous!! We..."

"LET ME FINISH, WILL YOU!! As I was saying, we could have lots of fun, and it wouldn't take that long..."

"WHAT!! NOT LONG!! Let's see now 2 weeks for each plane, that comes to... um... wait a sec'... 14 wee... No 16 weeks!! And we only have half that much time left of vacation!!" calculated, with some difficulty, Charles.

"Ah! But you're thinking in terms of how long it took us to build our first plane. We had to get organized, we had to learn how to use the tools, we had to cooperate (that was the hard part!!!), we argued, we..." I undertook.

"He's got a point you know!! Anyway, we'd each be working on our own plane. That would encourage us to work better and faster! We could probably be done in... 4 weeks!" reckoned Stefano.

"ARE YOU CRAZY!! 4 weeks to make 8 planes!! Do you expect us to work 24 hours per day on this senseless project!!" bellowed Samuel.

"Well, who says we need to have them all made by the end of the vacation. We can do as much as we can now, and when school starts, we can continue on the week-ends. I mean, nobody's forcing us to make them this vacation!! And I agree with Stefano. We can probably have this all over by four weeks," stated John.

"I think you've all flipped your wigs -except maybe Samuel-!! Thank you," I put in, humorously.

"I don't care what you guys are going to do, but I'm embarking on my airplane first thing tomorrow! Whether you like or not!" declared Charles.

"Me too!" went John.

"Count me in!!" announced Thibault.

"I'm with you!!" proclaimed Stefano.

"I certainly am not! Break your necks if you want to, but without me! And I'm not responsible for anything that happens to you!! I warned you, and you neglected my counsel, so too bad for you!!" warned Samuel.

"Actually, what is there to lose, except for the 50 bucks of course. At least I'll have something to do. Anyway, a new airplane simulator for my computer would cost me exactly the same, so I might as well get the "real thing"..." I meditated.

"I agree. And even if *you* don't, all I have to say is 'IN YOUR FACE, SUCKER!!'" stated Mortimer.

"Hey!!"

"You might as well give up, Samuel and Patrick. We're going to build them anyway!" I notified them.

"Oh... okay..., I'll join you. But you'll see!! It'll take us a lot more than 4 weeks!" predicted Patrick.

"Like Patrick is joining you, I may as well do the same, but I agree with Patrick: this will take a lot longer than 4 weeks."

"Just wait and see," grinned Stefano.

"So it's agreed!! Tomorrow, we begin a new era in our aviation history!" I proclaimed.

The next day, we all went off on our own to gather the necessary components for our airplanes, including more of those solar panels and wind turbines (Samuel knew where to purchase some). Most of us were in high spirits and positive that we were going to soon have our own planes. With this thought in mind, I was able to collect everything I needed in that same day. I planned to bring it all to the barn the next morning, and begin working as soon as I got there. And that's what I did.

I wasn't the only one there. All my friends soon joined me, and we all began working on our own airplanes in very cramped quarters. By the end of the day, we had all made some progress, except some of us were having less difficulty than others and so every plane was at a different stage of construction. This wasn't right. Furthermore, some of us, particularly Patrick, weren't very skilled at manual labor.

"It isn't fair!! My plane is going to be all messed-up!! We should distribute the work

equitably!! Every one does what he's best at, and we don't just each concentrate on our own airplanes!" demanded Patrick.

"I agree!" agreed Samuel.

Most of us did so too, and we soon organized ourselves so that each of us would have specific tasks. Considering the turn of events, we also made it clear to everyone what distinctive characteristics we wanted our planes to have. For example, some of us preferred biplanes, while others wanted monoplanes (which were faster but less agile than biplanes), or even triplanes (which were more agile but slower than biplanes). Stefano wanted his plane to be extremely maneuverable while Mortimer wanted his speedy. Patrick absolutely emphasized that he wanted his plane to have its controls inverted, which we all favored...

So anyway, as this was becoming a little confusing, we made a chart describing what each plane was to look like.

The next day, we worked a lot more efficiently. Each plane was beginning to take shape, slowly but surely. This went on for 1, 2... 3 weeks.

At the end of the third week, we were desperate.

"We'll never make it!! We're not even half finished!!" moaned Mortimer.

"YES WE ARE!! We just need to make the engines!" objected Stefano.

"That's the hard part..." sighed Samuel.

"Oh well, we can do it!!" encouraged Charles.

"Oh shut up, will ya!" grumbled Mortimer.

"I told you so!! I said we'd never make it in 4 weeks!! We still need at least 3 more weeks!" scoffed Patrick.

"I told you so... I told you so..." went John, imitating Patrick's voice, or at least trying to.

"I'll work all night if that's what I need to do to finish my plane!!!" announced Stefano.

"Me too!!" declared Charles.

"Me three!!" notified John.

"Me four!!" reported Thibault.

"And if you don't join us, too bad for you! Don't count on us to work on your planes!!" added Thibault.

"Yeah!! So don't come begging to us when we'll be ready to fly and you won't!" alerted Charles.

"You fools!! What will your parents say?? Anyway, you can't build proper engines! You are too ignorant!" pointed out Samuel.

"Am not!!"

"Are too!!"

"Am not!!"

"Are too!!"

"Am..."

"I don't believe you guys!! I always did think you had a mental age of 2!"

"YOU!! THINK!! OH MY GOD!! CALL THE PRESS!"

"Ah... shuddup!"

"I'm afraid Samuel's right: there's no way you can conceal your disappearance from our parents at night. And just imagine how exhausted you would be after just a few nights' work! Anyway, I have a better idea: if we finish this week, I'll give you each fifty bucks!!" I suggested.

"Yeah sure..." doubted John.

"Okay... okay... But seriously, my idea is that instead of talking like idiots, we work like crazy!"

"I agree!" exclaimed Samuel.

And that's what we did. Not a single one of us uttered a word while we strived to

complete the airplanes. We toiled away for 5 days, never permitting ourselves to take a break, except of course for lunch and brunch.

On day 6, we were elated.

"We're almost finished!!!"

"Only a few more connections to make!!"

"Oh... I just can't wait!"

"Shut up!! And hurry!"

"..."

"WE'RE FINISHED!! COMMON, LET'S GO TRY THEM!!"

"Not so fast there... First we have to christen them, paint them, review the basics of flight, make the new rules..."

"AW... COME ON!!"

"Yeah Amaury!! We'll do that later!!"

"I must insist, at least about the reviewing and the rules! Do you value your life or petty enjoyment more?"

"Now let's see... that's a hard one..." quipped Patrick.

"OKAY!! But let's hurry!!" Mortimer urged.

By the time we had finished, it was too late to try our new "babies" out today so we were constrained to paint and personalize them instead. This we did fervently, each of us trying to come up with a composition that would best portray our convictions.

My brother wanted to depict the emotions he felt about flight. He called his biplane the *Soaring Freedom*. The *Soaring Freedom* was painted orange, with horizontal light blue and green lines (I'm afraid he's color-blind). Its propeller was fluorescent yellow (to scare off the birds), and on its rudder was written COME JOIN THE AMERICAN SKIES (don't ask me...).

On the other hand, Samuel wanted to expose his true aggressiveness and boldness. His biplane was named the *Mockingbird*, because, he said, and I quote, "mockingbirds are maneuverable, daring, and full of guts". It had blood red wings, a white propeller, a blue undercarriage, and a bright blue fuselage (you must say, we're pretty original). The wings were adorned with black Maltese crosses, and a snake coiled itself around the fuselage, which also displayed the words VICTORY OR DEATH (let's see now... which one should I chose...). He had also specifically desired a rotary engine. Now how he made a rotary electric engine, I'll never know, but he did. Anyway, this engine had two little peculiarities: it could only be on or off, and nothing in between; and it caused the plane to, as the engine had such a brutal torque and the plane was so light, climb when you went left, and to dive when you turned right. This could be very dangerous, but if one was experienced, the *Mockingbird* could swerve very tightly to the right, a great attribute (from Samuel's point of view). The Sopwith Camel had, you may recall, the same characteristics.

Charles's biplane was christened *Sky High* (as if we didn't know that...). It was pretty plain, having black wings and a blue fuselage. On its sides were painted ferocious-looking green dragons.

Stefano's triplane was called the *Lightning 5* (?) and was also pretty plain. It was painted all black, with a yellow lightning flash piercing through the words LIGHTNING 5 on each side.

John's triplane was named the *Swift*. This because swifts are so nimble and agile. It was a light, heavenly blue, and a lightning flash (what's with all this thunder?!?) pierced through a ninja star in a red background on each side of the fuselage.

Patrick's biplane was christened the *St. Louis Flyer*, in honor, I'm sure you can guess, of the one and only *Spirit of St. Louis*, the first airplane ever to cross the Atlantic Ocean. It was painted a plain red (at last a modest person!), except its wings, which had gold trimmings (forget I said that...), and it displayed, on each side of the fuselage, a coat of arms

representing two swords penetrating a shield.

Mortimer's monoplane (the only one, and thus the fastest of all our planes), was named the *Swift Angel* (he sure has a high opinion of his plane!). It was painted a dark green, with an angel (Cupid?) embellishing either side of its fuselage.

And finally, my biplane was christened the *Ace of Spades*, because I love the letter A, aces happen to be exceptional pilots, and *Ace of Spades* has a pretty nice ring to it. It was bright white and was adorned with a jet black ace of spades on each side of its fuselage, and on each of the top wings, as well as on the undercarriage (So I'm weird two!! Sue me!!).

By the way, all our planes had approximately the same dimensions that *Avis* had had.

The next day, I rushed to the field, extremely eager to try out the *Ace of Spades*. My friends were already waiting for me.

"It's about time!!"

The field was only big enough to accommodate one airplane at a time (actually, at most two, but we didn't want to take any chances). We decided to proceed, in order to be as fair as possible, in the opposite order taken for our first flight on *Avis*. Meaning Patrick was first, then Samuel, then Mortimer, then John, then my brother, then Charles, then Stefano, and then finally me.

Fully aware that my turn wouldn't be for a long time, I made myself comfortable to watch the unfolding events.

"HEY!! Amaury!! Come n' help us, instead of snoozing!!"

Resigned, I found myself assisting everyone in getting the planes outside. Then, we all strapped our parachutes on.

Patrick then proceeded in putting his airplane face to the wind, at one end of the field. He climbed in, did the systems check, and took-off. The *St. Louis Flyer* seemed to be reacting very well. It was a very stable plane, and probably very comfortable to fly in. When he was at a respectable distance, Samuel prepared his airplane.

Now, at first, we had thought that it might be too dangerous to fly in the same airspace at the same time, but we finally decided that if we couldn't do it, what the heck did we make several planes for!! So we just came up with the following procedures: two planes had to be separated from each other by at least 15 meters (approximately, of course.); the landing order would always be: youngest first then oldest (to prevent the simultaneous landings of two planes), unless an emergency arose; a simple code of sign language would be used to communicate between the planes; and it was required that if one was going to turn, rise or dive, one would first have to notify any nearby planes (this was pretty irritating, but necessary to prevent collisions). We also decided that for Christmas, we'd all ask for walkie-talkies to facilitate communication between the planes.

Anyway, the *Mockingbird* took-off very rapidly and jerked upward as Samuel swerved to the left. It seemed to be a very unstable and tempestuous biplane, so I knew Samuel would appreciate it.

To his immense satisfaction, Mortimer was next. He hastily prepared his monoplane, and in a blur of speed, the *Swift Angel* took-off. In no time, he was out of sight (Thank God!).

John immediately got his triplane set, after having finally found his goggles. The *Swift* nimbly veered off into the sky.

By the time John had disappeared behind the trees, my brother was already turning on his engine. The *Soaring Freedom* rapidly departed, freed from the cold, harsh earth.

Charles, enthusiastically hopped into *Sky High's* cockpit. The engine faltered a bit, but in a jiffy, it was running correctly, and he took-off. *Sky High* appeared to be a pretty vigorous plane, impetuously flying off into the sky.

Stefano, overjoyed to see Charles disappear, joyously prepared to take-off. The *Lightning 5* left the earth deftly, and beat its wings, a sign of victory (against what? Lowliness? Well, he hasn't won yet..).

Finally, it was my turn. Of course, as I was the last one left, I had to bring my plane into position alone, but I made it nonetheless (thanks to my stupendous muscular ability...). Having finished my systems check, I was soon joining my buddies in the sky. The *Ace of Spades* performed wonderfully, it was maneuverable yet speedy, and stable yet nimble (I'm a very neutral kind of guy).

The scene was surrealistic. Little multicolored airplanes were streaking across the bright blue heavens, above the green Virginian forests and fields. Each of us was roaming his way, each of us was trying to avoid another. My brother waved at me. I waved back, and then, seeking an empty piece of air, I veered off towards the lake.

I loved this feeling of freedom, which I hadn't really felt on *Avis*, for, in the back of my mind, I had known that someone was waiting to fly after me. I had had to rush with *Avis*, whereas now I could savor the moment more peacefully, more calmly. As I bolted across the lake, I glimpsed motion a little farther off. Intrigued, I headed toward them. As I approached, I heard laughter.

"People!" I thought, panicking.

If we were discovered, the gig would be up! I immediately back-tracked to warn my confederates. Soon, we were all on the ground.

"Thank god they didn't see us!!" sighed Samuel.

"Well... I'm pretty sure they didn't see us. I can't guarantee it, though!" I cautioned.

"Um... Maybe we should send a spy party to see what those guys are doing!" suggested Charles.

"Yes, and the rest of us will hold a council to solve this pressing matter," approved Patrick.

"What pressing matter?" inquired Stefano.

"The concealing of our operations!"

My brother, hearing this reply, had a quizzical look about him.

"He wants to make sure no one finds about our planes," I explained, smiling.

"Oh..." he responded.

The youngest all wanted to go on the scouting envoy, hoping to avoid another boring conference. But we couldn't let them go without some surveillance, for we were responsible for them, after all. So Mortimer agreed to accompany them. Meanwhile, Samuel, Patrick and I discussed security procedures. After ten minutes of discussion, we came up with the following:

- the barn would be more effectively protected. We'd install locks, bolt the windows, and ensure that no one could peek inside.

- before flying, we'd explore the vicinity, by bicycle, to identify the presence of any undesired person, and then the first one to take off would, while remaining over our field and from a high altitude, survey the country-scape. If someone were detected, we'd cancel all flight plans for that day until we were sure he had left.

- If one of us were ever detected (in flight), he would immediately take measures to hide his face, and disappear from the person's sight, going the direction opposing our airfield. Making an extensive circle (to make sure he remained out of view) towards our base, he would then warn any other planes to land, and land himself. When everyone would be on the ground, emergency measures would be taken to conceal the airplanes.

- We would all take a strict pledge to keep our mouths shut (resist giving any more information about our doings) if ever captured with an airplane.

- If we were about to have our base discovered, we'd take evasive action, meaning we'd all take-off and regroup in a distant field previously chosen for such an occasion. There, we'd decide what else to do.

- If we were ever hopelessly located and captured, we'd sue our discoverers for "invasion of privacy" and "attempt to prevent minors from exercising their right to freedom and liberty" (just kidding).

This decided, we awaited the others. They arrived 20 minutes later.

"So?" I questioned.

"It's the Brainless Bullies," reported Mortimer.

"Oh... That's bad."

Now, the Brainless Bullies, as we call them, are a group of 16 idiots whose main concern is to act "cool" or "hot" (depending on room temperature, I guess) and especially to torment (or at least try to...) everyone else at school. Considering they're going to play an important role from now on in this story, I guess I should describe the key B.B. figures to you.

Their leader, Samantha, was a 10 year-old girl who couldn't keep her mouth shut, loved to lead, and adored giving advice to everyone, whether they needed it or not. She simply had to be the center of attention at all times and was constantly harassing others with gossip and guidance.

Li Chang Yen, 12, was the brains of the group. Probably the least "in" of them all, he had been allowed into the group only because of his brains, which the B.B. had a shortage of, and because he was pretty big and mean, and thus pretty persuasive.

Moe, 12, was universally considered as a brute. One had to explain him something at least three times for him to understand what was wanted out of him, but once he knew what to do, it would be nearly impossible to stop him from accomplishing it. He was also extremely loyal to Samantha, and was used by her as a personal bodyguard.

Marvin, 9, was stupidity and incompetence personified. He would walk up to you, make some lame remark that would supposedly insult you, snicker, and then walk away, in his huge coat, looking superior. It was hilarious. (I think he was allowed into the B.B. as comic relief).

The sadist of the group was Benito (11). Now, Benito was cruelty personified. He would imagine new, original ways to torture people and try them out on poor, innocent insects. Another of his pass-times was to tie people up, make them swallow disgusting medicines, and then tickle their feet (I had almost been the recipient of this treatment once...).

Benito's best friend was Adolf (11). Now Adolf, I believe, was slightly off his rocker. Ever since we had thrown a water balloon on him, he had held a terrible grudge against my friends and I, and delighted whenever he could do something bad to us. And, furthermore, for some strange reason he had tattooed a ridiculous-looking moustache on his face...

Geraldon (11) was the obnoxious loud-mouth of the group. Every 5 seconds, he would holler out some stupid remark with the intention of making Samantha (whom he was madly in love with) laugh. She rarely did. Not only were his so-called "jokes" unbearable, but so was his guffaw that followed every single one of them.

And finally, there was Sir Snotface jr.. Now, I put him as last, but not least -believe me...- because I'm not sure whether to qualify him as a B.B. or not, for he hasn't actually been ordained an official B.B. yet, at least to my knowledge. This requires some explanations: Sir Snotface jr. is stupid. No, but I mean really, really stupid. In fact, brainless would be nearer to the truth. He is so stupid that even the B.B. don't want him!! They have tried again and again to make Sir Snotface jr. realize that they won't have him, but this guy has a knack for not understanding. They rejected him, made fun of him, beat him, even tried sending him off to Zanzibar, but to no avail. He just keeps on trying and trying and trying... So much so that Samantha ceded... kind of. She uses him as a tool, promising him that if he does so and so, he'll be appointed a B.B.. And of course, she always finds something slightly wrong with his work, and thus refuses once more to accept him in the limited circle that comprises the B.B.. As far as I know, Sir Snotface jr. still hasn't grasped that Samantha is just manipulating him, and probably never will.

The eight others, Gabrielle, Matthew, Tiffany, Daniel, Anthony, Joe, Michael, and Philipp just play secondary roles, so I'll refrain from having to describe them.

Now, we had been one of their favorite targets, until the trash compactor incident... but

that's another story. Anyway, after that incident, they pretty much avoided us. Even so, they still meant trouble, and we had to brace ourselves for it...

"What were they doing?"

"Oh, just talking."

"About what?"

"About how they were going to build some kind of meeting place around here and..."

"WHAT!"

"I know..."

"Drat!! Just when we were starting to have fun!! But they didn't see us, at least?"

"No. But they might in the future..."

"What do we do?"

"We might as well already undertake part I of our protection plan."

Samuel explained what we had come up with, and when everyone agreed, we began barricading the windows of the barn and obstructing any holes. When we were confident that no one could see what was going on inside the barn from outside, we made make-shift locks to employ until we got real ones. We also made sure, by removing the propellers and batteries and by attaching the planes securely with the help of our bicycle locks, that if anyone discovered the planes, they wouldn't be able to "fly" away with them. So we're paranoids, but better safe than sorry!!

This accomplished, we returned home, deciding to figure something out tomorrow.

The next day, as we proceeded towards our field, we were ambushed by 5 B.B.s.

"Hey, look!! It's the nerd herd!!!"

"Har... har... har. Dat's a got' one!!!"

"Where are you going wimps?? To play chess?? Hah, hah, hah!!!"

"Careful not to get dirty now!! Your mamas wouldn't want that to happen now, cry-babies!"

"Like, you are really so like, uncool... You know what I, like, mean?"

"Come and fight, ya sissies! Or are you to chicken! Pawk, pawk, pa-kawk!!!"

I clenched my fists, and glanced at the cretins with my coldest stare, hoping to strike terror into their hearts. Unfortunately, this seemed to be failing.

My friends and I then looked at each other. We nodded knowingly, and lunged. I know, I know: violence is bad, it was just words, they intended to provoke us, we're hot-headed, and so on... But I think that's pitiful! If some buffoon thinks he can just insult me and get away with it, he's dead wrong, unless of course there happens to be some pesky adults around (you just can't wallop people nowadays...).

So, as I was saying, we charged, fists flying and tempers rising. That's when it happened. The remaining B.B., waiting for just such an occurrence, cowardly assaulted us from behind, caught us off guard and gave us a good (not from our point of view, of course) beating. We all fought valiantly and skillfully, but in vain. Outnumbered, dazed, and battered, we beat a hasty retreat. Having escaped, we reached our destination in a gloomy mood.

"Those morons! Wait till I get my hands on them..." Mortimer forewarned.

"I'd love to use my airplane to teach them a lesson, heh, heh, heh..." snickered Charles.

"So would I," I envisioned.

"Why don't we?" asked John.

"Do you want the B.B. to spill the beans about our planes?" interrogated Samuel.

"Well, even if they did, nobody would believe them," I pointed out.

"True," admitted Patrick.

"But they would try to discover our planes and wreck them!" Mortimer pictured.

"Who says they'd find them?" Stefano inquired.

"Well..." went Samuel.

"Common, they'll never know what hit them, it would be so funny..." encouraged my brother.

"Why don't we put it to a vote?" I proposed.

We did so, and an overwhelming majority chose to use the planes as tools for revenge. Now this may have been imprudent, but we were so infuriated at the time that we took this reckless risk without paying any attention to its consequences.

Now, we had stored our "Super Soakers", as well as a few empty balloons, in the barn in case we ever needed them during our vacation. We filled them all up with the coldest water we could possibly find, and established our battle plans. As we didn't know the location of their base, an armed scout would be sent to discover it.

Then, at his return, we would separate into two groups: the commandos and the air force. 4 of us would be picked to join the commandos. They would reach the area by bike and await the arrival of the planes. The air force would catch the enemy off guard, and after unloading a few water balloons and putting the enemy into disarray, they would land as close as possible to the sight. We would then round up as much of the enemy as possible, and have our revenge... This plan approved, we proceeded by choosing the scout and commandos.

Patrick's luck didn't fail him, as he was chosen, randomly, as one of the commandos. John, Samuel and Thibault also became commandos, to their exasperation. Seeing how irritated they were, we decided, to prevent a mutiny, to let the commandos be the avengers and "executioners" of any prisoners that we would capture, and to receive special privileges in the future. This greatly satisfied the commandos, especially Samuel. I, of course..., was chosen as scout.

"Okay, Amaury, once you've found their base, return immediately. We can't allow them to see you, or else they might suspect something," explained Samuel.

"I know, I know... But what if they do see me?"

"They won't see you!" ordained Samuel.

Resigned, I grabbed my soaker and my bike.

"One more thing, I added, this might take long... so don't get impatient."

Having pointed that out, I pedaled off. Now, I assumed the B.B. had made their clubhouse in the area I had first spotted them, so I headed that way first.

My progress was slow for the underbrush and trees provided annoying obstacles. I had to avoid low limbs and bushes, and the grass was a very poor surface to bicycle on. Even though, I tried to keep my eyes and ears open for any signs of people.

One hour of precarious riding later, I reached the other side of the lake, where I had spotted the B.B. from the air. I now proceeded carefully, so as to not make myself to conspicuous. I heard talking coming from nearby. I got off my bike and walked towards the noise. It got louder and louder, but I still couldn't see them.

At one point, the clamor was so loud that I could swear the B.B. were right next to me, but I still couldn't discern them. Then, I realized that the brouhaha was coming from a giant oak tree. I glanced upwards, and to my surprise, I saw a tree house built upon its limbs. How could the B.B. build a tree house here? And in such little time? Maybe they had built it some time ago, and Mortimer had just misheard. Anyway, I surmised that our plans were now completely foiled. We couldn't possibly attack them in their tree house: it seemed impenetrable, and, furthermore, it would be too dangerous for the planes to fight over the trees. I also surmised that we'd have to come up with another plan, some kind of ambush, or trap. Anyway, I knew what I had came for, so I decided to return.

"Darn, that ruins everything. What should we do?" asked John. "I thought we could set a trap, or an ambush," I answered.

"Well..." went Samuel.

"Let's just forget about it!" suggested Charles.

"NO! I want revenge!!" asserted Mortimer.

"I say we ambush them: it's the only way," decided Patrick.

"Yes... we can ambush them when there on the road to Washington," defined John.

"YEAH!! And smash them in their tracks!!" added Stefano.

"It would be so neat: we could throw water balloons on them, and strafe them..." pointed out Thibault.

"I believe that it is indeed the only possible method available to us," concluded Samuel.

"I guess so..." agreed Charles.

"So let's get working on it!!" I decided.

After careful deliberation, we came up with the following plan, which was fairly simple: tomorrow, one of us would observe the road and notify the rest of us when the B.B. arrived, by walkie-talkie. Then, the rest of us would proceed to the point by air, and raid the B.B.. Meanwhile, our scout would show himself to the B.B., act surprised and panicked, as if he didn't know what in the world was going on. This in an effort to provide us with some kind of alibi. The scout would also assess the damage caused by our onslaught, and report back to base, where, considering he had had the least exciting duty, he would receive special privileges concerning any future battles.

All we had to do now was choose a scout. No one volunteered, so we had to do a drawing. Patrick "won".

"I can't go!! I'm a terrible actor!! They'd never believe me if I pretended to be surprised. And if they started chasing me, I'd be done for: you all know I can't run fast," Patrick protested.

"He's right: this mission requires particular skills. We must send someone that acts convincingly and that can run fast," pointed out Samuel.

"Don't look at me, I can't act" I sighed.

"Hey, me neither!" Mortimer went.

"I can't run!" guaranteed John.

"My running capabilities are under that of the average human being," explained Samuel.

"I'd be great for the job, but I won't do it!" declared Stefano.

"Me too!" proclaimed Charles.

"Well, without wanting to brag, I think I could do it... and I don't mind to..." admitted Thibault.

"Okay then, Thibault is our man!" announced Samuel.

Having taken this decision, and realizing the time, we returned home. But before doing so, we told each other to bring some kind of facial disguise to wear tomorrow, in order to further insure that the B.B. wouldn't discover our identities.

"Are you sure they're coming today?"

"Yeah, we've been waiting for Thibault's phone call for the past half-hour!!"

"Don't worry, they ought to be here soon..."

"Will you guys shut up!! I'm trying to sleep! After all, why did we have to wake up at 7:00!!"

"Never seen such a sleepy head!"

"I said: shut up!!"

"Sorry!"

""Fizzle"... "craac"... Hello, this is "craac"...bault. Do you "fizzle" me?"

"We read you A okay! Are they there?"

"Yes!! "Craaaaaaac" up!! They're moving "zup"...ast!!"

"On our way, over and out!"

"Over and "frazzle dwip bloop!"

"THEY'RE HERE!!"

"ATTACK!!"

We rushed to our planes, that had already been prepared for take-off. I winked the sleep out of me, slipped the were-wolf mask on, and jumped in the *Ace of Spades*.

Blackbeard, a.k.a. Samuel, led the way. A few minutes later, we spotted the target. Considering our planes ran on electricity, and thus were very silent, the enemy hadn't spotted us. As I saw the B.B., I remembered some old World War II footage displaying German Stuka dive bombers attacking Polish armed forces. Touched by the dismal analogy, I nevertheless remembered that we were using harmless water. Speaking of which, I checked my water balloons, grabbed a big, red, one, and waited for the signal to attack.

We approached a little more, in line astern formation, sun to our backs. Blackbeard waved his hand downwards: attack! Blackbeard then dived down, followed by me (were-wolf), George Bush (or Mortimer), a mummy (Patrick), Dracula (John), Billy the Kid (Charles) and a zombie (Stefano).

Blackbeard threw three huge blue balloons at the first ones in the line. They slowly fell down, and hit their targets with stunning accuracy. Only now did the B.B. realize our presence, but, unfortunately for them, it was too late. I hurled my balloon, closely followed by two others.

As I watched them descend in a semi-circle, I noticed Thibault jumping out of the forest, running across the large terrain separating it from the path, and making a scene. He was doing his job quite well, I must admit.

One of my balloons slammed a boy, probably Moe, another one soaked a girl, I think it was Tiffany, and the last was a near-miss of Marvin. Grinning, I pulled the joystick towards me, took some altitude, and prepared to make another pass.

Having turned, an image of utter chaos came to view: the B.B. were dashing for the forest, in an effort to escape extermination. And to make things worse, my brother was running around like a decapitated chicken, and getting into the B.B.'s way.

I quickly chose my next victims: those who seemed dry, namely Joe, Gabrielle and Thibault... Skimming over the ground, I zoomed towards them. Gabrielle screamed as the balloon smashed into her glasses. Joe didn't know what hit him. My brother held his hands before him yelling: "No!! NOT ME!!" as the balloon approached...

By the time I had made another U-turn, the B.B. had almost reached the outskirts of the forest. I headed for the two closest to me, which were, if I remember correctly, Sir Snotface jr. and Matthew. A big, blue, bulging balloon blew Sir Snotface jr.'s brains out. Unfortunately, I missed Matthew.

Realizing they had escaped, I went back to base, followed by the rest of our group.

"OOH! That was great!! We got'em good!!" chuckled Stefano.

"I got a direct hit on Sir Snotface jr.!!" announced Mortimer.

"So did I," I added.

"You should of seen Adolf's face!!" Patrick smiled.

"Right in the kisser!" went Charles.

"Matthew fell flat on his face!!" explained John.

"Wham!! Wham!! I got both of those bloody bastards, Laurie and Benito!" described Samuel, while making evocative gestures.

Thibault appeared, breathing loudly.

"We did great!!" he managed to proclaim, between two breaths.

"Did you make sure they saw you?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, yeah... They saw me all right, after all I did!!" Thibault asserted.

"Good," I said, wondering if we had successfully made ourselves an alibi.

"What do we do now?" asked Patrick.

"Good question," admitted John.

"Well, I think that the B.B. will probably try to figure out who attacked them. And I think that even though we sent Thibault, they'll certainly suspect us. After all, we're the only ones who'd dare do that to them. So, what I suggest we do is keep a low-profile for a few days, or even weeks. Meaning we avoid the B.B., and we don't fly anymore."

"Yes, I believe that would be the wisest decision," conceded Samuel.

"But we don't have *that* many weeks left of school left and..." protested Thibault.

"Oh come on!!! We still have about 6 weeks left!" Patrick pointed out.

"Okay, okay..."

"So it's decided, we keep a 'low-profile' for a few days. Any objections?" asked Samuel.

There were none.

"I can't stand it!!!! We've been staying inside for 3 days now!! The B.B. must have forgotten about it by now!!" raved Charles.

"Yeah sure... Would you forget being soaked by tiny airplanes piloted by mysterious people?" I demanded.

"Well... no. But still!!" complained Charles.

"Listen, I say we just wait one more day, and then we go see what's going on." suggested Patrick.

"Okay," we all went in unison.

The next day, John and Charles went on a scouting mission. They returned by lunch time.

"So?" questioned Mortimer, impatiently.

"We didn't see them!! We looked everywhere and we still couldn't find them!" announced John.

"Hum... That's awfully suspicious," decided Patrick.

"Yes, it would seem so," agreed Samuel.

"Let's go check the forest," suggested Stefano.

"Yeah," went Charles.

We were there in no time. The first thing we did was to check our hangar. It hadn't been tampered with. Then we sent Mortimer to spy on the B.B.'s tree house.

"They were there!! And they sounded really excited: I heard arguing and hurrahs. But I didn't understand what they were talking about. Something about 'where to do it' and 'how many pieces'," reported Mortimer. "Oh yeah, there was some planks of wood stacked on a field near their tree house. I couldn't tell what it was for..." he added.

"Oh my god!!!! This sounds like some sort of commie plot!" pointed out Samuel.

"Gosh, what could they be planning..." Patrick wondered out loud.

"Whatever it is, it doesn't sound good!" I asserted.

"What do we do?" asked John.

"Maybe we should spy a little more to find out what it's all about," suggested Thibault.

"It would be useless: it's impossible to hear a single thing they say. Anyway, they have a patroller on guard who almost located me. It was a miracle that he didn't!!" vouched Mortimer.

"Well, we have to keep our eyes open, that's one thing for sure," stated Charles.

"Understatement of the year!!" I joked.

"What?" went Thibault.

"Understatement means something that is said which is obvious," attempted to explain Samuel.

"WHAT??" repeated Thibault.

"Forget it!!" renounced Samuel.

"So what do we do?" said Stefano proceed with the subject at hand.

"I have no idea..." conceded Samuel.

"Oh just great!! If Samuel doesn't have any ideas, we're in trouble!" jested Mortimer.

"Let's just wait and see..." concluded Patrick.

"Yes, it seems to be the only thing to do..." recognized Samuel.

1 week went by without any significant news. We had spent this week spying on the B.B., which proved itself nearly impossible for they had now 4 lookouts patrolling the area around their base, and, most importantly, around a tent they had set up. This huge tent had been installed in the field that was near their tree house. Coming from it, we could hear hammering, undecipherable shouts, and electrical instruments at work. Needless to say that our curiosity was aroused.

But we just couldn't figure out what was going on inside. We had even tried to go there while the B.B. were absent, early one morning. But we came against Adolf's dog, who was extremely vicious-looking. Finally, we called a meeting.

"Obviously, those conniving B.B. are building some sort of contraption. What it happens to be is shrouded with mystery..." explained Samuel.

"We know, we know, get to the point!!" I impatiently spurred him on.

Samuel shot a look of disapproval at me and then proceeded.

"Now, let's proceed in an orderly fashion. We know we won't be able to find out the nature of this contraption by spying: this has proved ineffective. So let's try to reason things out. The B.B. want revenge. That's unquestionable. Now let's assume they know that we were the perpetrators of the attack. Considering we've been inconspicuous for the past week, they haven't been able to directly strike us. So what would they do?"

"Build a torture machine!!" attested Thibault.

"What?" smiled Patrick.

"Of course!! See, they build a torture machine, and like they know that we'll eventually have to show ourselves, they'll just wait till we do, and then get us!!" Thibault described.

"Oh come on!!!! That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!!!!" thundered Mortimer.

"Why??" demanded Thibault.

"Yeah!! Why??" added Stefano.

"Because... because it's stupid!! That's it!!" demonstrated Mortimer.

"That's not a reason," said Thibault.

"I'll tell you why it's stupid. Why would the B.B. bother making a torture machine? First of all, they wouldn't be capable of doing it; secondly, they could just as easily use their fists. And anyway, even if they did, it wouldn't take them so long!!" brilliantly exposed Patrick.

"Yeah, well... I guess so..." yielded Thibault.

"Well then what can it be??" pondered John.

"Let's think," answered Samuel.

We all fell into deep thought, or at least appeared to, for a few minutes.

"Samuel, where did you put the book?" I suddenly requested.

"What book?" asked Samuel.

"'10 Easy Ways to Make a Flying Machine', or something like that..." I defined.

"Oh! You mean '10 Simple Steps to Build Your Own Aircraft Inexpensively'!"

"Whatever... so?"

"Well... that's a good question. Where *did* I put it?"

"Oh Oh..." I went mysteriously.

"Why? What's so important about it?" demanded Charles.

"You wouldn't be suggesting that..." tried to say Patrick.

"I have reason to believe that the B.B. are now building one, or several airplanes..." I announced ceremoniously.

"What!! You can't be serious??" objected Stefano.

"I am completely serious."

"So you *are* suggesting that they took it," nodded Patrick, more to himself than to the rest of us.

"Oh yes, I see..." went Samuel. "If this is the case, as I'm afraid it is, the situation might get out of hand. We must make sure..."

"We have to send someone," concluded Mortimer for Samuel.

"But how?? Whoever goes will certainly get caught, unless we go altogether," proposed John.

"What do you mean," inquired Stefano.

"I mean that while we keep the B.B. busy, one of us takes a look at what's underneath the tent," elucidated John.

"That's a great idea!" proclaimed Charles.

"Yes, I'm surprised I didn't think of it earlier," said Samuel.

"We can do it now," suggested Mortimer.

"Yes," agreed Patrick.

"Let's do it!!" yelled Charles excitedly.

"First we ought to plan things out a little don't you think," grinned John.

We decided that Charles would be responsible of finding out what the heck they were building. This having been solved, we then settled how things would be executed. After all, we had to give the B.B. the impression that we had accidentally discovered them, and that we weren't curious of knowing what they were doing.

We left on our bicycles, to retreat more hastily if need be.

"HEY!! YOU!! GET OUT OF HERE!!" warned Benito, ominously.

"Well, *sorry* for living!" I poked.

"I'll have you know that this is public property. We can remain here if we chose," demonstrated Samuel.

"HEY GUYS!! The Nerd Herd 's here!" hollered Benito, ignoring Samuel.

"WHAT!!! MAKE THEM GO!!" cried Samantha, running towards us, and leading the rest of the B.B..

"Ooo, keeping secrets are we?" grinned Patrick.

"Listen buddy. Samantha said you had to go, so make like a tree and run," notified Moe.

"That's 'make like a tree and leave'!" laughed Mortimer.

"What's the difference?" snorted Sir Snotface jr., uncomprehending.

Mortimer laughed even louder.

"I said get out of here, like SPLIT!" commanded Samantha.

"Make us!" challenged Stefano.

"OKAY! You asked for it! Like, get 'em guys!!" she ordered.

The B.B. dashed towards us. But, having remained on our bicycles, we easily evaded them. They then started chasing us, trying to grab our bikes. Satisfied by the turn of events, we tried to keep them busy as long as possible, slowly leading them away from their tent.

After a while, they became more skillful, and almost caught a few of us. We decided to withdraw, assuming that Charles had had plenty of time to accomplish his mission.

Charles was already waiting for us.

"Amaury's right! They're building airplanes!!" he announced, excitedly.

"How many?" asked Samuel, unmoved.

"Hummm... 16, I think."

"SIXTEEN!!" shrieked John.

"One for each of them," calculated Patrick.

"Ooh boy..." went Mortimer.

"Are they almost finished?" I enquired.

"No... I'd say they have *at least* three more weeks," he replied.

"This is going to be great!!" predicted Thibault.

"YEAH!! We can do dogfights and things!!" explained Stefano.

"ARE YOU CRAZY?? We'd break our necks!!" challenged Mortimer.

"No we wouldn't!! We have parachutes remember!!" remarked Charles.

"OH BOY!! Parachutes are really a lot of help!! How about if we have a collision!!" pointed out Mortimer.

"Furthermore, parachutes aren't fool-proof..." Patrick added.

"Are you afraid?" defied John.

"NO!! I'm just not crazy!!"

"Listen here!! Who said anything about dogfights!! That's absurd! Why would they want to fight us?? Well, okay... But what would you use to fight??" demanded Samuel.

"Water guns!"

"Pebbles!!"

"Slime!!"

"Pillows!!"

"Oh brother!! Listen, there's much more pressing news anyway: what do we do??" pointed out Patrick.

"What do you mean?" asked Stefano.

"I mean, how do we confront the B.B.? Do we ignore them? Do we make peace with them?? And remember, they could always find out where we hide our planes, and damage them!! After all, they must know that we were the ones who attacked them, and so they'll want to get revenge," elucidated Patrick.

"Yes, that's true. And even if they don't yet know who attacked them, they'll eventually find out..." assumed Mortimer.

"And the barn isn't a very secure hiding place..." pondered John.

"Well, we can always move somewhere else... farther away," suggested Charles.

"NO! That would be cowardice!! We must stand up against them!! Anyway, we know where their base is two!!" declared Samuel.

"That's true... We *could* make a deal with them: we don't blow their base, they don't blow ours!" proposed John.

"I doubt the B.B. would be mature enough to respect the treaty," Patrick called attention to.

"True, true..." admitted Mortimer, "But if they did attack us, we could easily attack them. After all, their tent is a lot weaker than our barn."

"Yes. So we might as well try to make a treaty with them, but only about the bases!" defined Charles.

"Okay... Actually, I don't want to make peace with those blundering idiotic morons either!" proclaimed Samuel.

So we began to compose a treaty which basically stated that both parties involved (the B.B. and us) would solemnly swear to refrain from entering each other's bases, hangars and airfields. Satisfied with this treaty, we all signed it and decided to submit it to the B.B. the following day.

"A *TREATY*!! Har, har, har... Treaties are for wimps!" decided Moe.

"Oh shut up and get your chief!!" ordered Mortimer.

"Hey Samantha!! These guys want to sign a treaty with us!! Har, har, har..."

"What's all this about?? I thought I told you to keep away from here!!" remonstrated Samantha.

"Exactly. That's why we're here," explained Samuel.

"What??"

"I presume you know that we were the ones who piloted the planes..." Samuel cleared out, ignoring the encroaching B.B..

"So you are... are you. I thought so..." said Li Chang Yen.

"So you admit!! Well, I guess we can have our revenge sooner than we had planned!! Charge!!" commanded Samantha.

"Wait!!" summoned Samuel.

"What is it now! Do you want a last meal?" snickered Geraldon.

"We also know that you're building airplanes, in that tent of yours. So let's make a deal..." continued Samuel, composed.

"So you know, huh!! Well forget it!! Your dead meat!! CHA..." cried out Adolf.

"SHUT UP!!! Now you had better listen to me, or we'll throw the paint-filled balloons at you..." warned Samuel.

"(Gulp) Yeah sure... you don't have any..." moaned Samantha, visibly panicking about her clothes.

"Wanna bet??" grinned Charles while displaying a big, blue balloon to her.

"Okay... okay. What do you want??" groaned Samantha.

We were finally able to reason with them, and, thanks to our balloons, were able to have them sign the treaty.

We returned, slightly reassured.

"Now that we made peace with them, we can fly again..." suggested Charles.

"Not until we make the barn B.B.-proof," countered Patrick.

"What do you mean?" asked Thibault.

"Let's work on the barn's safety measures," explained Patrick.

"Oh!"

"Yes, I believe Patrick is right. We can't really trust those conniving B.B.. Better safe than sorry..." agreed Samuel.

"Well let's hurry!" I decided.

We all put ourselves to work, but without zest.

Eventually, we considered our hangar to be completely safe and secure. It was now practically impenetrable unless one possessed 2 different pairs of keys (for each of the latches), and the secret numbers that were necessary for the two other locks. Furthermore, the windows had been very effectively and sturdily blocked out thanks to planks of wood. There were only 2 weak points in our defensive system:

- We obviously had to open the entrance to remove and return our airplanes. During those moments, we were extremely vulnerable to a surprise attack. Fortunately, we could attempt to retreat in the barn, as we could also lock the doors from inside.

- And evidently, if an enemy got hold of the keys and codes, the defensive system wasn't much of a defensive system... Or, if we happened to lose one key, or forget one of the numbers, well, we couldn't get our planes either. So this dependability on material and memory was risky.

Nevertheless, it was still preferable to have something, however bad it may be, rather than nothing at all.

The next day, we decided to take our planes out.

"AH!! Finally!! We haven't flown for something like a whole week!"

"I can't wait!!"

I enthusiastically climbed into the *Ace of Spades*. Being last in line, I watched silently as my friends zoomed into the sky. It all looked so surreal, dreamlike. As the size of the colorful planes diminished, they resembled little, fragile toys.

Finally, I took off. I amused myself by rapidly jerking the control stick from side to side. Then I began a looping, but ceased when I suddenly remembered the rules we had made.

Irritated by this recollection, I decided to head over the B.B.'s base to mock them. Stefano was already there. We began to skim over their tent and make faces at them. Furious, they started to hurl rocks at us. As their aim improved, I decided to leave. Stefano followed me. I then drifted aimlessly above the Virginian forests, savoring a great, care-free moment of relaxation.

When my timer revealed that my electric supply was ominously low, I returned. I found all my pals already there. I landed and dismally began to stow my plane inside the barn. That's when the B.B. charged.

"What the!!!!"

"QUICK!! SHUT THE DOORS!!" ordered Samuel.

We rushed to the doors, slammed them shut, and locked ourselves in.

"Open up, it's only the big bad wolf..." snickered Geraldon.

"Like, they are so scared. I mean *really*..." jeered Samantha.

"I'll have you know you're violating our treaty, you savage bunch of barbaric liars!!" announced Samuel.

"Oh. So what are you going to do about it?" roared Moe.

"Well, Mr. Stupid Samuel, I'll have *you* know that you violated it first," proclaimed Li Chang Yen.

"How so?" demanded Samuel.

"Two of your men..."

"We are not his men!! He's just our official speaker," I cleared out.

"As I was saying, two pilots flew over our airfield and hangar without permission," Li Chang Yen illuminated.

"So? There's nothing in the treaty that stated that airspace was off-limits. We can fly over your base, and you fly over ours, as long as we don't enter each other's property," I protested.

"Ah... But we assumed, and still do, that the airspace directly over our bases was also restricted. After all, you could bomb our base from up there without breaking the treaty if it weren't. Anyway, you did not explicitly say that airspace was not included as part of the base," decided Li Chang Yen.

"Yes, but we didn't say anything about airspace *being* included as part of the base," pointed out Stefano.

"Well it is," proclaimed Li Chang Yen.

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is..."

"Couldn't we come up with a friendly compromise?" enquired Samuel.

"Like, what?" required Samantha.

"Well, we'll admit that the base does include the airspace, and, in return, you leave," suggested Samuel.

"Like, no wa..."

"But Samuel..."

"That would be just fine. I'm grateful to see that you are so understanding. Sorry for having disturbed you... good bye," went Li Chang Yen.

"Like, but..."

"*Good bye*," repeated Li Chang Yen ominously to Samantha.

They left, murmuring and confused.

"I'm happy to see the leave," admitted Patrick.

"Yes, but it all seemed too easy..." wondered Samuel.

"Oh don't worry... what could they be planning," Stefano dismissed Samuel's doubts.

"Like, what was all that about? I wanted to, like, attack them. Like, who cares about a sissy treaty?"

"Yeah!! Are you yellow?" bellowed Geraldon. He began roaring at this particularly offensive racial joke. Li Chang Yen gestured something to Moe. Moe then crushed Geraldon's skull.

"We do. Once we start the war, we want to make sure they keep away from our hangar. After all, our tent is a lot more fragile than their barn. And, we know that as long as we have this treaty, they'll be too honest to attack our base. All we have to do is restrain from attacking theirs... it isn't that much of a sacrifice. Anyway, once we build a better hangar, we can break the treaty..." demonstrated Li Chang Yen.

"Well I, like, guess you're right," conceded Samantha.

"Yes, so do I. And, if you want my advice..." Sir Snotface jr. burst in.

"We don't!" quipped Geraldon.

"I think we should continue making our planes. And when can I become part of the B.B., Samantha. I really want to, you know... Please! Pretty please with sugar on top. I promise I'll be good! Just give me a chance! I love your hairdo by the way. And..." continued Sir Snotface jr., unperturbed.

"Will you shut up???" roared Moe.

"Shut up yourself. You slob. Slob! You're just a slob! Slob, slob, slob!! You're a slob!! Hey, you big fat slob!!" Sir Snotface jr. began chanting.

Li Chang Yen gestured something to Moe again. Soon, Sir Snotface jr.'s mouth was crushed.

3 weeks went by, calmly. While the B.B. worked continuously and eagerly on their planes, we flew. But the end of summer, and of our vacation, was ominous. We all felt morose and crestfallen, for there was but 2 weeks left. But our many flights kept our spirits up.

I believed that the B.B. were almost finished building their planes. With this in mind, I secretly fit my plane with a new instrument, which I concealed from my friends by disguising it as a decorative object.

"What's that *thing* on top of the *Ace of Spades's* wings?" questioned Mortimer.

"Oh... just a decoration I thought would nice," I lied.

"It looks like a machine gun!" observed Patrick.

"I know!! That's the whole point: I want to make my plane strike terror into the hearts of those B.B.!" I invented appropriately.

"Hey!! Speaking of the B.B., I came up with a new name for them," announced Stefano.

"Oh yes?" asked Patrick.

"I think we should call them NPB from now on," he decided.

"What?"

"NPB, that's short for New Pilots on the Block!" he exposed.

"Hey, yeah! That's a good one. It's better than B.B.," determined Charles.

"Why? What's wrong with B.B.?" demanded Patrick.

"Who *cares* what we call them!!" appealed Samuel.

"I do. And I think it should be NPB," said Thibault.

"Oh, okay," agreed Patrick.

"So, from now on, we call the B.B. the NPB," proclaimed John.

3 days went by.

As John was flying near the B... the *NPB*'s base on the third day, he glimpsed an unusual amount of activity going on.

"Guys!!! Guys!! I think they've finished!!" he notified us.

We all rushed to our planes. I was especially excited...

And, true enough, the *NPB* were about to test their planes. Their planes, amazingly enough, were even more colorful than ours!! Or maybe I was just impressed by their numbers...

The planes seemed to react well. They were air-worthy in any case. The *NPB* were having a hard time getting used to the new sensation of flight. But soon enough, as we watched despondently, they got the hang of it. They formed some kind of new-fangled formation, or maybe they were just badly doing a vee wing. Anyway, they headed towards us.

We watched, confident that if trouble aroused, our superior flying skills would keep us out of it. Meanwhile, I grinned to myself, ready to use my new instrument if need be.

"Hey, like the nerd herd's here! Like, cool..." Samantha went.

"Our planes are better than yours! Our planes our better than yours! Neener, neener, neener!! You can't even fly well!!" went Sir Snotface jr. as he desperately tried to avoid a collision.

"We can't hear you!!" my brother cried out, as he turned away from the *NPB*. Patrick also took some distance. I just waited, maintaining my previous direction. Soon enough, I was the only one left. The *NPB* thus decided to bug me.

"Hey!! Dweeb head!!"

"You think you're so cool, huh???"

"You're an idiot!! You're an idiot!! Idiot, idiot, idiot!"

Deciding the time was ripe, I unveiled the instrument. My water gun gleamed in the sun. I aimed for the closest *NPB*, which happened to be Marvin. Having been warned by his pals, he futilely tried to throw me off aim by performing sharp veers and barrel rolls. But I remained on his tail. Slowly, I approached my victim: he was slightly slower than me. Finally, when I was but 2 meters away from him, I grabbed the trigger -while keeping one hand on the control stick, of course-. I pulled it. A stream of ice cold water spurted out of the nozzle.

Unfortunately, my gun wasn't powerful enough to confront the pressure created by my speed. The water was actually pushed back towards me! I swerved to avoid it, but my left wing was struck. It became somewhat water-logged, thus reducing my ability to control my airplane. I decided to play it safe and I headed for my base, under the *NPB*'s laughs.

I was mad. Very mad. Revenge was all I bothered to think of.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out, Amaury. But I got a great idea: maybe electric water guns will work!!" Charles suggested as we met.

"That's a great idea. Those *NPB* deserve getting wet for all those names they called us!!" decided Mortimer.

"Yes, they weren't exactly very nice..." agreed Patrick.

"But where do we get some electric water guns? I don't have one," John pointed out.

"He's right. We don't all have the means to get an electric water gun. We're going to have to pool our resources..." concluded Samuel.

I tried protesting this communist measure, in vain. We each had to dish out some money to buy ourselves a stock of electric water guns. As we didn't have enough time remaining to go purchase them right away, we decided to prepare an adequate supply of ammo first. For the rest of the day, we gathered water from the lake in buckets to store in our hangar in case of an emergency. We discussed while we worked.

"Considering our planes have names, why don't we give names to the rest of the important stuff, like our base, the airfield, the lake and all that," suggested John.

"That's true. I'm surprised we haven't already done it," I conceded.

"Well, let's think of some good names..." proposed Thibault.

"We can call our airfield First Flight Field," suggested Patrick.

"Yes, that's a good one. And the barn can be Barn Base," proposed Mortimer.

"Naaah... I think that just the Base is fine," suggested Samuel.

"Yeah, let's keep these simple. And I think the lake should be called Mirror Lake," proposed Charles.

"Mirror Lake!! Give me a break!! If you want to keep things simple, why not just call it the Lake?" teased Stefano.

"Yes, that's fine. And what should we call the NPB's base?" asked John.

"Well, how about Brainless Bully Base? Or triple B, for short," suggested Patrick.

"That's pretty good. But is that their tree house, or their tent?" enquired Samuel.

"Both, I guess," defined Patrick.

"What else do we have to call?" questioned my brother.

"As far as I can see, everything's been taken care of. Wait a minute!! We've forgotten the most important thing!!" bellowed Stefano.

"What's that?"

"Our group!!"

"That's true!! Let's call ourselves Amaury's Awesome Aces!! Or triple A, for short!!" suggested guess who.

"OH BROTHER!!"

"How about Little Aces?" suggested Charles.

"Hey yeah!! That's a good one!!"

"It's pitiful!!"

"Is not!!"

"Is too!!"

"Is NOT!!"

"Is TOO!! We should call ourselves the Awesome Eight instead!!"

"Or the Great Pilots!!"

"No!! I got it!! Let's call ourselves the Crazy Eight!" proposed Stefano.

"Hey!! Yeah!! That's a good one!"

"It's a card game!!!"

"Exactly!! It'll be funny: the Crazy Eight, commanded by the *Ace of Spades*!!"

"OH BROTHER!! SHUT UP WILL YOU AMAURY!!"

"I'm for the Crazy Eight!!"

"NO!! Let's be the Little Aces!!"

Finally, we resolved the argument by calling ourselves both. In other words, we had two different names. Because it's easier to type, and because I prefer it, I'll personally call ourselves the Crazy Eight, but we also allow Little Aces.

Anyway...

"Now that we've solved that problem, we can tackle this one: if we're going to fight the NPB, we need some kind of military hierarchy..." Mortimer pointed out.

We discussed this matter and decided to keep things as fair and simple as possible. We needed some kind of leadership, or else we would be too disorganized, but we didn't want to only have one leader, and we also wanted everyone to have the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process.

So we came up with this plain system:

There would be two Squadron Leaders, who would be elected by everyone else. These S.L.s would be in charge of three pilots each. A S.L.'s duties were:
-to lead the formation in flight (in an offensive, or military patrol only).

-to give the following orders: take-off, land, change formation, return to base, attack, retreat, avoid, sneak, hurry, etc...(which would be assigned by making certain gestures)
-to maintain a certain discipline among their troops (the pilots).

The S.L.s would have no powers during peaceful flights.

As for the decisions of when to attack, where etc... in other words, everything that could be decided before the actual battle, this would be discussed and decided by the complete Crazy Eight.

We immediately proceeded to elect the two Squadron Leaders. After many unsuccessful attempts, Samuel and I were finally elected, because, among the Crazy Eight, we were probably the two who knew the most about flying. Each of us then picked his pilots.

Samuel's force included Patrick, Stefano and John. And, consequently, my force comprised Mortimer, Thibault and Charles.

We then decided to go home.

At home, I inspected my electric water-gun, placed a new battery in it and took some other ones that I would store in my plane in case I needed them. I also established some rules intended to keep a certain discipline among my troops.

The next morning, we purchased some electric water guns for those of us who previously didn't have one. We then installed them on the top wings of our airplanes. But his wasn't very practical.

"I practically have to stand up to shoot my gun!! Why can't we put them right in front of us??" demanded my brother.

"If we did that, the propeller blades would hamper the stream of water, and thus the gun wouldn't work properly," Samuel pointed out.

"Isn't there anything we can do to make it fire automatically or something?" John inquired.

"Well, considering these are electric water guns, I might be able to rig something up..." pondered Samuel.

"And why don't we put a lot of electric water guns on each plane?? It would be so much better!!" my brother argued.

"Well, I'll tell you why: electric water guns aren't cheap," explained Mortimer.

"Furthermore, it would be an added weight for the plane," added Samuel.

"And you can't shoot several guns at the same time! You need at least one hand to hold the flight-stick!!" John pointed out.

"Too bad..."

Furthermore, like Mortimer had a monoplane, we couldn't install the water gun on his top wing, so as to shoot over the propeller. He finally decided to elevate it above the propeller by installing it on a small platform which fortunately didn't impede his view or aerodynamics too much.

"One more thing: we're going to engage ourselves in a perilous act, so we must try to maintain some basic safety procedures. For example, absolutely no acrobatics, no imprudent flying, and we must respect a certain minimum altitude so as to allow our parachutes to function properly," Samuel lectured.

"Okay... okay..."

Finally, we were ready. We decided to separate into two groups, to cover more ground. We'd communicate between the two flights thanks to walkie-talkies.

Samuel's flight was first off. Then mine took-off.

I tested the communications.

"Hello? Do you read me Samuel?"

"[Crackle] I read you fine, over and [Fizzle]!"

"Keep in touch! Over and out!"

I then lead my troops towards the NPB's base. Keeping our distance, we distinguished no activity what-so-ever. The base appeared to be empty.

"Hello?? Samuel??"

"Yes?? [Crackle]."

"The NPB don't seem to be at their base. Over."

"Thanks for [Fizzle] information. Over and ou[Crackle]."

"Over and out."

I decided to patrol the area. 5 minutes later, I received a call.

"Amaury? [Fizzle-bloop]?"

"Yes??"

"Hurry!! We've spotted the [Crackle]s!! We're over the [Fizzle]!"

"The what?"

"The [Crackle-blorp]!"

"WHAT???"

"I said that we're over the [oop... veep]!!!"

"Yeah sure..."

"Over and [blop]!"

"Wait..."

"Crackle-bloop dweep"

I gave up and decided to survey the horizon for them.

"Amaury!! They're over the lake!!" bellowed Mortimer.

"I see them!! Charge!!" I ordered.

We streaked towards the little dots that were darting over the lake. Mortimer took the lead, due to his faster speed. By the time we were there, the battle was practically already over. We watched as the last few NPB retreated.

It had been a massacre, later related Samuel, as his squadron provided us with all the details. Stefano could boast as being the first Crazy Eight to shoot an NPB in aerial combat. Here's the story:

Samuel's squadron, which we later named Squadron 1, had been searching the skies when Stefano spotted the enemy. He immediately alerted Samuel, who ordered an attack. Stefano, being the closest to the NPB, reached them first. The NPB, of course, did not suspect a thing. They just made obnoxious comments about us. Sir Snotface jr. was particularly offensive. Stefano, justly insulted, approached Sir Snotface jr.'s tail, to the latter's surprise. But Sir Snotface jr. assumed it was just a joke. He laughed and ridiculed Stefano.

"Playing hide-and-seek? Hah hah hah... You're so stupid. Stupid Stefano!! Stupid Stefano!! What are you doing? Are you all right??" he snickered.

Stefano ignored these remarks, aimed, and pulled the trigger. This time, the stream of water hit its mark.

"HEY!!" yelled Sir Snotface jr..

Startled, he swerved to the left, his nape dripping wet. Stefano followed unmercifully, and continued to drench his victim. but, finally, Sir Snotface jr. did an Immelmann, and Stefano almost followed when he remembered the laws we had ordained. So Sir Snotface jr. was able to escape.

Realizing that it was serious, the NPB scattered, having decided the best tactic was evasion. Samuel's troops pursued the slower ones.

Considering Moe's red biplane was slow, Patrick's *St. Louis Flyer* easily overtook it.

"YOU DARE YOU DIE BUD!!" helplessly threatened Moe.

Patrick grinned, aimed and shot. Moe's left wing was soaked as he attempted to escape. His biplane drooped menacingly towards the ground, but Moe was able to prevent it from crashing and dived down in an effort to shake Patrick. Moe's plane being a lot heavier than Patrick's, it succeeded in out diving the *St. Louis Flyer* and then escaping.

Samuel went straight for their leader, Samantha. Thanks to expert maneuvering, and to his peculiar rotary engine, he was able to place himself behind Samantha's more agile triplane. He fired repeatedly.

"Like STOP THAT!! Like HELP!! UNFAIR!!" she protested.

Samuel was about to shoot her out of the skies when he was overtaken by his rigid scruples: he just couldn't shoot down a defenseless person cold-bloodedly, whether she be part of the NPB or not. So he relented and let her escape. Now, this behavior was undoubtedly very noble, but the rest of us had a lesser quantity of ethics. For example John.

He was ruthlessly dousing Michael.

"Hey!! You're messing my hairdo!! Stop!! STOP!! OH NO!! My jacket!! It's all wet!!" the latter realized in a state of hopelessness.

But John was not able to finish him off. Desperate, Michael maneuvered in a frenzy of swerves, dives and barrel rolls, and finally did an Immelmann. John was forced to abandon his prey.

By this time, all the NPB had managed to escape.

After this narration, we concluded that we couldn't fight effectively without being able to perform acrobatics like loopings.

"They can easily escape if we're not allowed to do loopings or Immelmans," protested John.

"Yes, that's true," agreed Patrick.

"But they're dangerous!!" objected Mortimer.

"Not really... like we have seat-belts," my brother pointed out.

"HAH!! Seat-belts!! That's no reason to feel safe!! Loopings and Immelmans require a lot of speed to prevent stalls, which can be deadly at low altitudes. And there are G-forces involved two," Samuel challenged.

"But the G-forces are tiny!! I mean, we don't fly as fast as jet planes!! And we can make minimum altitude and speed limits to prevent accidents!" I suggested.

"How can you tell if you're respecting them? We have no instruments!" Samuel remonstrated.

Finally, we decided to allow loopings, Immelmans, split-s, and barrel rolls. Break turns, scissors, skids, wing overs, and chandelles were already allowed.

We also established a more effective method of surveying. Each pilot would have his individual sector to scrutinize. This would hopefully let us spot enemies from greater distances, thus letting us perform helpful tactics like putting the sun behind ourselves and taking some altitude, as well as giving a more advanced warning to the other squadron so as to combine our efforts.

Finally, I did something that would stimulate my pilots to shoot down enemies. I established medals and a title that would be awarded to skillful pilots. For shooting down 5 NPBs, one would receive the title of Ace. For an act of valor, courage, devotion to duty or the shooting of 10 NPBs, the Bully Blaster Badge was bestowed. For 15 victories, or at least 2 acts of valor, courage or devotion to duty, one received the Eminent Eagle Order. For 20 victories, or 3 or more acts of valor, courage, or devotion to duty, the Perfect Pilot Prize was granted. And finally, if one shot down 25 NPBs, performed 4 or more acts of valor, courage, or devotion to duty, or accomplished a *really* outstanding military action, the coveted Awesome Avis Award was awarded. Oh, and whoever boasted the most aerial victories at any one time would be proclaimed Ace of Aces.

Samuel also decided to employ this system, that became very popular among us.

"YES!"

I watched, adrenaline rushing through me, as the red plane went down in flames. Fire

and smoke spurted out from all sides, giving it the aspect of a blazing mass. I followed its descent avidly with my eyes. There was a loud explosion.

A message flashed on the screen of my father's 386. It announced that my mission was over and that I could return automatically to my base or continue flying. I chose the former.

"It's my turn now!" reminded Charles.

"NO IT'S NOT! You already shot down the Red Baron! I didn't even get to fight against Boelke!" protested John.

"SAYS WHO?"

"SAYS ME!"

"Calm down guys! I think we've had enough of "Red Baron" for a while! I mean, why play simulators when you can go flying for real?" put in Samuel.

"Well, for one thing, we don't get to fight the Red Baron!" I pointed out.

"Maybe not, but we still have the NPB to reckon with!" reminded Mortimer.

"Speaking of which, I wonder what there up to..." wondered Patrick.

"Who cares? As long as they leave us alone!" affirmed Thibault.

"After what we did to them yesterday, I doubt they're going to leave us alone..." Charles pointed out.

"I say we go check up on them! I bet they armed their planes as well... It'll give us an occasion to do something other than playing on the computer! I mean, that isn't really what summer vacation is for!" Stefano called attention to.

"Well, alright. But only because I already beat all the aces in the game," I agreed, resigned.

I turned off the computer, after of course verifying my score, and we all marched out. Unfortunately, from my house to "First Flight Field", it was not really a short walk, so we took our bicycles.

Samuel took out his pair of keys and unlocked our hangar. Normally, the sight of the *Ace of Spades* would arouse me, inspire me. But today, somehow, I felt so weary, so downcast. It was because the end of vacation was approaching. In the back of my mind, I knew that in a little less than 2 weeks, I'd be stuck in a dreary, boring classroom. I just had to get my spirits up, or else I wouldn't be able to fully relish the rest of vacation.

A plan hatched into my mind: why not cause some action, like provoking the enemy... After all, as far as I knew, they were still unarmed...

I seized my parachute, fastened it on, and jumped into my cockpit light-heartedly. I pushed the starter button, gently pulled the throttle-lever towards me, and the slight electric buzz that characterized our battery-powered engines started. I slipped my goggles (actually intended for swimming) over my leather cap, checked that the poor assortment of instruments I had were functioning properly, verified that I had snacks onboard (you never know), and then rolled along to the rudimentary runway.

The latter, as you already know, consisted of a grassy length bordered by rocks. We had cut the grass not long ago, but the ride was still rough, on account of the many depressions that our landing gear encountered every so often. But, after a bumpy ride and a short wait for those of my friends who preceded me to take-off, I positioned my plane into the wind, yanked the speed-lever towards me, and jerkily took some speed. Vibrating atrociously, my plane zoomed across the grass. Finally, without -it seemed to me- an effort, I rose off the ground. The quaking stopped, and so did my envy to vomit. Swiftly I rose, watching the rest of my companions join me.

When we were all assembled, Samuel took the lead of Squadron 1, and I of n° 2. We headed for the NPB's airfield.

"Bogeys at 3 O'clock!" yelled out Samuel, the only one actually paying attention to our surroundings.

And indeed, on our right, were some low flying NPB. Recognizable by the hearts and human skulls blazoned provocatively on their fuselages, we discovered that only five of them were present. This was an easy victory for us, and taking advantage of the sun, we dived like hawks towards them.

Through the thin leather fabric covering my ears, I could hear the wind's whistle as the plane I had chosen grew into my sights.

But, as if it had been warned in advance, it broke off, imitated by its companions.

This is when we should of suspected the trap laid before our eyes. But, delirious from what seemed like a straight-forward triumph, we engaged into battle.

And in the excitement, we forgot the basic law of air combat: always keep an eye on your tail.

11 of them assailed us by surprise, seconds after our engagement. I was only conscious of their presence when I received a gush of water on my nape.

"DAMN IT!! They have some too!!" I heard Samuel roar.

Indeed, I had unfortunately realized that the NPB were now armed.

I broke off in an effort to escape, but Adolf didn't abandon his prey so easily. Furthermore, like we were outnumbered 2 to 1, the NPB had devised the obvious tactic to send two of theirs against each of ours. My aggressor was soon joined by Moe, and I knew I wouldn't make it.

I was just able to catch glimpses of what was going on around me. A few of us were already floating down in parachutes. I saw Thibault's plane plummeting to the ground, with Thibault inside! He just barely flung himself out before the collision. And, doing so, he was the first of us to try out the parachutes.

"Here goes nothing!! GERONIMO!!" he yelled.

He squirmed out of his cockpit and jumped. His eyes watered as he fell face first. The wind whisked past his ears with a buzzing sound. His hairdo was obviously completely messed-up.

Finally, he ripped the parachute's cord. As the parachute unfolded, he felt a massive shock, which added approximately 2 centimeters to his height. Eventually, he was slowed down. As he drifted, he patiently observed the ongoing battle and hoped that he wouldn't land on a tree. Fortunately, he didn't. Nevertheless, his landing was still pretty brutal, even though he had properly braced himself for it. He then gathered his chute, folded it, and headed for where he believed his plane had crashed.

My plane was drenched. Water-logged, I knew it wouldn't hold out much longer. Wind and other circumstances had made me stray far away from base. The two idiots were still on my tail, putting in a shot every so often.

Finally, my plane began to lose altitude alarmingly. I spotted a clearing which would provide me with a suitable landing space. Then, I remembered a pilot's ruse I had read about. If my wings would only dry, I'd be saved! For, I could then land, and remain in my plane. Simulating an injury, I'd wait for the NPB to join me so as to take me prisoner. When they would be very close, I'd let them eat my dust, and they would never catch up with me, not being able to take-off and pursue me in time.

Ideas flashed through my head, but I could find no practical way to dry my wings.

I submitted myself to the facts, and I made way for the clearing anyway. The two NPBs followed me. I landed and made a dash for the surrounding woods. I ran at a rapid pace, wanting to take a considerable lead. Fortunately, I was a pretty fast runner. Unfortunately, Moe was faster. He was swiftly catching up with me, to my utter ignorance.

I slowed down to take a quick peek over my shoulder. That's when I saw him, and he was only an arm's length away!

I leaped up, as if stung by a wasp, and with a velocity exceeding any I had believed myself possible of, I bolted away. For a few seconds that felt like eternities, I was able to

keep a distance between the two of us. But then, the surge of energy that had flowed through my limbs decreased, and out of breath, I came to a breathless halt.

Without any premeditation, by sole instinct, I swerved around and hollered.

"LOOK BEHIND YOU!"

The jerk arrested himself and almost turned his head to face away from me.

"HEY! I'm not falling for that one!" he roared, and then made a move to grab me.

"STOP! Okay! Don't look behind you, but you'll regret it!" I tried, desperately.

"HAH! WHAT A PIFITUL... Pati... peta... STUPID EXCUSE!"

"I can't bear to watch," I announced, pretending to close my eyes.

As I predicted, the dweeb spun around. I hit him on the back of the head.

"OW!"

Not bearing the pain, I tried to contain it by dancing around holding my limp fist and blowing on it mightily.

"HEY! THAT WASN'T VERY AMAIBLE... amibal... imabul... NICE!" said the beast trying to grasp me.

I inadvertently kicked him in the shins while performing a one-legged hop.

"YOW!"

Both of us were now bouncing around, him on one leg, and I blowing on my fist.

Finally, the pain desisted. I was moving in to give "le coup de grâce", when I heard a crack. I immediately, again by instinct, pretended to be in agonizing pain.

"WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON HERE?" demanded an unbelieving Adolf, holding a deadly looking water-gun.

Instead of answering his question, I imperceptibly bounded towards him. He didn't budge, just stood there, wide-eyed.

I kicked him in the shins.

"OW!"

I grabbed his gun, and waved it in front of them.

"NOBODY MOVE! I'M OUTTA HERE!"

I advanced menacingly backwards, towards my plane.

"OUCH!"

I had unintentionally stumbled upon a tree, and my cranium began throbbing with pain. Moe saw his chance, dashed for me, and in no time, I was marching back to my plane, with an unneeded escort consisting of Moe who was gripping my arms painfully on my back, and Adolf who was pointing the gun at me and mumbling something about "revenge" and "untimely doom".

My prospective future did not look bright. I tried to slow down the pace to buy time, but Moe would shove me violently whenever I hazarded to do so.

We reached the field.

My brain buzzed to find a loophole, but to no avail. Then, I had a brain-storm.

"COOCURACHAC!"

Moe, terrified that I might be losing my mind, eased his hold. I broke loose. I ran madly for my plane, followed by Adolf, who shot tentatively but in vain, for I darted from side to side. I leaped into the *Ace of Spades*, jerked the throttle lever to full speed and attempted to take-off. I heard the other two doing the same.

But, it seemed that all was against me, for I discovered that my wings were still too water-logged to be of much use, let alone flying.

I needed to waste time! I swerved to the right, and a crazy chase ensued.

I was speeding bumpily along the field, unable to take-off, and chased by the two stooges. We did a few laps around the field, them trying to catch up with me but at the same time remaining on the ground, I trying to evade them and to do so take-off.

It was just like one of those car chases in the movies, except that we were riding planes.

I realized that my wings would take too long to dry: by the time I'd be able to take-off, my enemies would probably have caught me, for they were gaining on rapidly.

I took the last resort. I went right for the woods. Maybe I would just barely make it over the tree-tops, and then I could try to get to safety! It was my last chance.

The woods grew larger and larger, as I was getting nearer and nearer. The quaking ceased, and I knew I was off the earth. Not for long. I fell with a thump, and knew that I wouldn't make it.

"YAHHHHHH!"

I flailed my arms in an effort to make myself stop.

"WHAM!"

My eyes closed themselves, as I was tossed about, helplessly.

I reopened them, awaiting to see angels and to hear harps.

But I was still alive, and at first glimpse, intact. Rapidly, I took my bearings.

Well, one thing for sure, my wings weren't water-logged anymore: they weren't there anymore.

My wingless plane was speeding through the trees, miraculously avoiding them. I quickly slowed down and grabbed the controls.

Unbelievably, and thanks to a path, I made it to our base. My buddies were already there.

"Amaury, what happened to you?" interrogated Samuel.

"HOW THE HECK DID YOU MANAGE TO LOSE BOTH OF YOUR WINGS??" John questioned.

"I'm impressed!" admitted Patrick.

I rapidly exposed my adventure.

"That's nothing compared to what happened to me!!" boated Thibault.

"Or me!" bragged Stefano.

Finally, Samuel gave me some details. Thibault's propeller and engine were damaged; Patrick's plane had stalled and crashed, wrecking its left wing; John had lost control of his plane, due to its extreme maneuverability, and had crash-landed -wrecking his landing gear-; and of course my wings had been obliterated. Samuel had been able to escape thanks to his unique engine, Mortimer thanks to his speed, Stefano escaped thanks to his plane's phenomenal climb rate, and Charles remained intact because of his luck. Meanwhile, the NPB, as far as we knew, had suffered no losses.

This was a disaster. Fortunately, as our planes were so simple, all the damage could be repaired in 2 days (including the paint-job), or 1 if we worked arduously. We decided to get them repaired in 1 day so that we could organize an all out reprisal against the NPB as soon as possible.

We were so motivated that we succeeded by dinner-time the next day.

"Now that we know that they're armed, what happened yesterday will not reproduce itself. But just in case, I've decided to teach you Balk's Dicta, to improve our combat," announced Samuel.

"What's that?" enquired Thibault.

"It's a set of 8 basic flight principles established by a great German ace, Balk, during World War 1," Samuel explained.

"Oh boy..." went Charles.

"If you stop moaning, it won't take long," Samuel pointed out.

"Okay... okay..."

So Samuel taught us Balk's Dicta, which, for those of you unfamiliar with airplane tactics is:

1/ Try to secure advantages before attacking. If possible, keep the sun behind you (also, try to attack from a higher altitude).

2/ Always carry through an attack when you have started it (aggressiveness will often frighten an opponent into making a mistake).

3/ Fire only at close range, and only when your opponent is properly in your sights (W.W.I machine guns and water guns are terribly inaccurate weapons, so it is doesn't hurt to get real close to the enemy, to help guarantee that your projectiles will hit their target. Furthermore, ammunition -in this case water- is limited-)

4/ Always keep an eye on your opponent, and never let yourself be deceived by ruses (pretty obvious piece of advice).

5/ In any form of attack it is essential to assail your opponent from behind (deflection shooting isn't easy).

6/ If your opponent dives on you, do not try to evade his onslaught, but fly to meet it (this would be easier to explain with an illustration, so I won't bother trying...).

7/ When over the enemy's lines never forget your own line of retreat (this one, though crucial in W.W.I, does not affect us, for we don't really have territories).

8/ Take care that several do not go for one opponent (For example, if there are 4 NPB and 4 Crazy Eight, it would be best that each Crazy Eight attacked a different NPB, or else, if they all went for one single NPB, that would leave 3 others free to attack the busy Crazy Eights).

Once Samuel explained these principles to us, we were all set.

"Yeah!! They're going to get it this time!!" encouraged Charles.

Confident and prepared, I took command of Squadron 2. We took off. I immediately headed for the NPB's base. Noticing our approach, a party of 8 NPB took to the skies to defend their base (in case we had decided to break our treaty).

We realized that the NPB were remaining over their territory, so we couldn't go after them unless we broke the treaty.

Irritated, I tried to provoke them into pursuing us. But they ignored my taunts. Finally, I got an idea. I approached the NPB's base as closely as possible, careful to respect our treaty. As I had planned, a few NPB approached protectively. I always carried a water-balloon in my plane (you never know...). So I grabbed it and hurled it towards the closest NPB.

Michael's face was drenched. Infuriated to see one of their men attacked, the NPB forgot their orders and charged.

"That's it!! Come and attack us!"

I ordered my squadron to attack. Mortimer, Charles and Thibault dived to meet the NPB's onslaught. Samuel also commanded his pilots to attack.

A terrible melee began, in which Patrick was the first of the Crazy Eight to make a looping and hit an armed NPB in aerial combat.

Slightly confused by the rapidly evolving events, Patrick was trying to avoid the fray to get a clearer view of the situation. An NPB spotted and pursued him. When Patrick felt a splatter on his neck, his first reflex was to *push* his joystick with all his might. Like his controls were inverted, he started to perform a looping. His body, though rigidly restrained by his seat-belt, threatened to break loose at any moment. His blood was forced towards his head. Dizzy, he nevertheless realized that his glasses were about to slip off. He held them firmly, and persevered.

The looping completed, he found himself behind Gabrielle. She was soon soaked to the bone... But Patrick was unable to score any complete victories for he later decided to escort Samuel home.

But, on the other hand, Charles was also accomplishing a great deed. He had immediately chosen a target, namely Benito, and stuck to him. Benito desperately tried to lose *Sky High*, but failed miserably. Charles, seeing his chance, stubbornly blasted him.

Benito then dived in a final attempt to escape.

When his plane didn't respond to his joystick as he tried to straighten himself out, he realized that his soaked ailerons were blocked. He jumped and his parachute unfolded properly. The black plane crashed as Charles and Benito watched, in satisfaction and in outrage.

So Charles had been the first of us to actually force an NPB's plane to the ground. Unfortunately, feeling too confident after this victory, he flew a little too recklessly, and played chicken with Matthew. Both biplanes headed towards each other, in the objective of forcing the other to swerve so as to avoid a collision, thus proving that he was a "chicken". Both Matthew and Charles were too proud to admit defeat, so the distance between the planes relentlessly shortened.

"You had better turn, kid," suggested Matthew.

"Hah! You're the one who's going to do the turning around here..." refuted Charles.

"You asked for it kid!"

"Make my day!"

Finally, when a bare 10 meters or so separated them, they began to panic.

"You gonna turn yes or no?" questioned Matthew.

"Not until you do!"

"Are you sure?"

"Just try and see..."

Eventually, they realized the absurdity of the situation, and they both simultaneously swerved to avoid a collision. Unfortunately, they both swerved in the same direction, so that their top wings scraped each other. The shock was such that part of those top wings snapped off.

"Nice going, kid!"

"You're the one who did it!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

They interrupted this insightful debate to attempt to regain control over their aircrafts.

The position of the green forests and blue sky inversed itself regularly as Charles's plane began to spin. Nauseated, he decided to jump.

His plane miraculously escaped mostly intact, and he was able to safely parachute down.

Meanwhile, Samuel was supervising his pilots. He would clear their tails and appreciate their fighting. In the process, he shot down 2 NPBs, Daniel and Adolf, and damaged 3 others. Unfortunately, as he was clearing Stefano's tail, he was attacked from behind by Anthony. Thanks to rapid reflexes, and to the Mockingbird's awesome ability to perform right turns, he escaped just fairly damaged. But he recognized that his biplane was no longer quite capable of fighting, at least for the moment, so he retired from the battle and returned to Base, escorted by Patrick.

Stefano was tenaciously trying to shoot down an NPB, but John kept on getting in his way. Finally, he decided to get rid of John. When John went by Stefano's gun once more, he was drenched.

John, infuriated, broke off and placed himself behind Stefano's tail. But Stefano spotted him, and did an Immelmann. So did John.

The two carried on this exercise for a while, both intent on shooting the other down. But, finally, Samuel intervened and put an end to their argument by forcing them to avoid each other for the rest of the battle. Afterwards, Stefano was finally able to shoot down Philipp, but was then attacked by Marvin, Geraldon and Matthew. Outnumbered, he was compelled to crash-land, breaking his wheels and part of his propeller.

John, after that little "incident" with Stefano, attempted to shoot an NPB as well.

Unfortunately, the *Swift* was so agile that he had a hard time just remaining steady to fire his gun. So he finished by scoring no victories, but being intact nonetheless.

Thibault was also having a hard time, but for a different reason. Considering he was the shortest of us, he practically had to stand up to shoot his gun. Furthermore, he had had to release his seat-belt by as much as possible. What followed was inevitable. He was trying to shoot Michael while remaining stable. His arms were stretched widely, one hand holding the joystick, the other trying to grasp the trigger. Precariously balanced, he was unable to retain control of the *Soaring Freedom*. It flipped over. He fell but was restrained by his loose seat-belt. Unfortunately, his feet weren't held and they tumbled out of the cockpit.

So there he was, dangling above the ground, his upper body barely retained by the seat-belt. He managed to, somehow or another, rotate the plane right-side-up once more, which caused him to tumble head first into the cockpit. After some squirming, he regained a normal posture. Dazed by this incredible event, he decided to follow Samuel and head for the base.

Mortimer was impaired by the *Swift Angel's* relatively fast speed, for the combat accentuated maneuverability. But he managed to shoot down Sir Snotface jr., and almost Anthony, by executing hit-and-run attacks. He would fly away from the fray, taking some altitude. Then, he would swerve around, choose a potential victim, dive on him at full speed, and the guy would never know what hit him. Unfortunately, this operation gave him very little time to shoot the enemy, so it was hard for him to score a kill. Furthermore, he wasn't too good at deflection shooting.

I shot down every one else. Okay, okay... I'm kidding!

Anyway, the *Ace of Spades* did react excellently. While being a slow diver and having, at best, a mediocre climb rate, it proved to be a very fast and maneuverable plane.

Thanks to it, to a special maneuver I used, and to my exceptional flying abilities, I managed to shoot down 2 enemies, Marvin and Geraldon. The afore-mentioned "special maneuver" that I employed was actually quite elementary. It was a simplified version of the hit-and-run tactic. I would begin just like Mortimer, but instead of flying off after shooting the first burst, which Mortimer did, I would stick to my opponent until he went down. Why Mortimer didn't and I did remain on the victim's tail is obvious: while the *Swift Angel* wasn't maneuverable enough to effectively pursue the NPB after the initial attack, the *Ace of Spades* was.

Unfortunately, once I shot down Geraldon, I was attacked by Tiffany and Li Chang Yen. I managed to escape unscathed -by doing a few Immelmans and split-s-, but by the time I did, the battle was over. I landed to help Charles and Stefano. We moved both planes, with Mortimer's help, to a path, in an effort to facilitate their transport to base.

"Let's stop here," suggested Mortimer.

"Yeah... I'm pooped..." gasped Charles.

"How long do you think it will take to fix my plane?" asked Stefano.

"Oh... I would say about half-a-day or so, depending... It isn't too wrecked..." I comforted.

"How do we get it home?" he added.

"Well, we'll do like last time: we'll tow it to base with our bikes. It won't be easy, but it's the only way..." I explained, and then continued, "Just stay here, I'll come back with some bikes."

"Okay," nodded Charles.

I returned to the base to get some bikes. When I returned, with John, Thibault, Patrick and Samuel, we stumbled onto a battlefield.

"Reinforcements!! Hooray!!" Charles shouted as he spotted us.

"Get them!!" ordered Samantha.

"What's going on here?" inquired Patrick.

"Isn't it obvious!! The NPB are attacking us!! I mean real..." Mortimer interrupted

himself to clobber Anthony, who was trying to wreck the *Swift Angel*.

"You're just in time to help us," Stefano pointed out.

"Let's get 'em!!" Thibault hollered, as Moe approached us.

"Wait!! Stop!!" I commanded.

"You're not our boss, you idiot!! You can't order us around!! Yeah!! I mean, you're so stupid!!" Sir Snotface jr. went, while cowering behind a tree.

"Wait!! What is it?" demanded Li Chang Yen, as he ordered the NPB to stop fighting.

"I suggest we make a treaty..." Samuel explained for me.

"Like, another one..." Samantha protested..

"Yes. We consider that respecting a downed pilot's plane is indispensable, ethical and basic behavior. We must remind ourselves that we are but children, and this is but a game..."

"Maybe you think so, but you're wrong. This is real..." Li Chang Yen ordered Moe to make Sir Snotface jr. shut up.

"Thank you Moe. As I was saying, this is but a game. We can't take it too seriously. We must vow never to attack a downed pilot, whether on the ground or in the air," Samuel concluded.

"Like, can you make us? Get'em boys!" ordered Samantha.

"Wait!!" I repeated.

"What is it now??" snickered Geraldon.

"If you don't do what Samuel just said, I'll tell the principal everything about last year's 'toilet incident'..." I threatened.

"But, you know that wasn't us..." Sir Snotface jr. unconvincingly objected.

"Yeah, sure. I have proof that you did it. If you don't vow to leave downed pilots alone, I'll show it to Mr. Nosserebrum..."

"If that's true, why didn't you blackmail us earlier?" demanded Li Chang Yen.

"Because I wanted to save it for something important," I explained.

"Yeah sure... this isn't important!" doubted Marvin.

"To me it is. But enough already! Hurry up and decide!! I don't want to be a squealer, but if I have to..." I warned.

"Like, okay! Okay! We, like, agree already!"

"Now give us the evidence," required Li Chang Yen.

"Now, now... That wasn't part of the deal, was it?" I grinned devilishly.

"Hey!"

"Listen, you'll just have to trust that I won't tell the principal. I don't want to give you the proof, because you would destroy it, and then nothing would stop you from breaking the treaty," I justified.

"But..."

"Do you want me to tell Mr. Nosserebrum or not?" I inquired.

"No!! Don't!! Anything but that!!" panicked Sir Snotface jr..

"Good... Now you can leave," Samuel settled.

Realizing that they couldn't do anything about it, the NPB left. As soon as they were out of earshot, John questioned.

"Did you really have any proof?"

"Of course not..." I grinned.

We all laughed and then towed the two planes back to base.

After that battle, we developed many new things. First of all, Samuel devised an automatic shooting system, which Thibault had insisted we needed. This system electrically connected the water-gun's trigger to a button placed on top of the plane's joystick. So all one had to do was press that button, and the gun would fire (or should I say water...). In other words, shooting was a lot less dangerous now. It only took 1 day to install this relatively simple mechanism into all of our planes.

Furthermore, Mortimer now gratefully got rid of his platform and instead installed his water gun on the *Swift Angel's* right wing, so as to have a better view and a more aerodynamic plane.

We also determined our plane's characteristics, which helped us choose tactics that would best fit our plane's properties. For example, Mortimer definitely decided to stick with his hit-and-run tactic, which suited his plane so well. Following is an estimated rating of our planes on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being poor, 2 fair, 3 average, 4 good, and 5 great.

	Speed	Maneuverability	Climb rate	Dive rate
Amaury	4	4	3	1
Charles	3.5	3.5	2.5	2.5
John	2	5	4	1
Mortimer	5	1	2	4
Patrick	3	3	3	3
Samuel	3.5	4.5	2	2
Stefano	2	4.5	4.5	1
Thibault	3	4	3	2

As you can see, everything considered, our planes were pretty much equal, in a limited sort of way.

Also, after a few disputes and some swearing, we agreed that forcing an enemy to land, crash-land, crash, or jump would be considered as a kill. Furthermore, one had to have at least 1 witness that could certify the victory for it to become official and valid. Therefore, Samuel was credited with 2 victories, Charles also with 2 (after all, when he collided into Matthew, he did force him to jump...), Mortimer with one, Stefano with one as well, and I with two. So we were doing pretty well. The NPB had shot down 2 of us, and we had downed 8 of them. A 4 to 1 ratio.

Anyway, the last significant thing to happen before our next battle was that I awarded Charles with the Bully Blaster Badge, for devotion to duty, for he was the first Crazy Eight to shoot down an NPB.

We were really eager to try out our new automated water guns, so the next day, we quickly took to the air to stalk the NPB.

"Bandits at 12 o'clock!! Angels 1,75!! Over," I warned, over the talkie.

"I see them. Heading 12 o'clock. Range... pretty close. The blanking fools!! We have an altitude advantage, and we're on their tails!! Over," Samuel pointed out.

"Let's get'em!" I suggested.

"Roger. This is going to be a great dogfight. Over and out."

"Over and out."

I ordered my Squadron to dive and attack. Mortimer took the lead.

He aimed for the closest enemy plane, which happened to be Philipp's yellow, blue with red polka-dots, triplane. He fired 2 short bursts of icy water on Philipp's nape. He yelped, panicked, dived down and crash-landed.

The NPB, which had previously been oblivious of our presence, suddenly realized it... but it was too late. One after another, we dived down and "killed" the unwary NPB's.

Mortimer, after scoring that first kill, went straight for Sir Snotface jr.'s pink biplane. Sir Snotface jr. desperately performed evasive actions, in vain. Mortimer aimed and pushed the trigger. A torrent of water doused Sir Snotface jr.. He attempted to loop his way out, but stalled and spun towards the ground. Mortimer followed, putting in a shot every so often. Eventually, at 100 meters, Sir Snotface jr. jumped and parachuted to safety, as his plane collapsed into the forest.

Ecstatic, Mortimer nonetheless realized that by the time he would return to the fray - which was taking place about 1000 meters above-, the battle would be over. Instead, he headed for home base.

Patrick was the second to reach the NPB. He went for Gabrielle's pink and white biplane. When she received a discharge of water on the back of her head, she screamed and broke to the right. Patrick followed, and hit her two more times. She did a split-s quickly followed by a half-loop, which brought her right behind Patrick, who was presently pondering where she had disappeared to. Just in case she was behind him, he decided to do a looping. That maneuver restored the former situation in which Patrick had been chasing Gabrielle. Realizing that the tables had turned, Gabrielle dived down, hoping to lose Patrick.

But Patrick remained on her six and regularly doused her with water until she finally landed. He then attempted to rejoin the melee, but failed, having, like Mortimer, lost too much altitude.

Samuel and Thibault were the next ones to reach the NPB. Samuel went right for Samantha's red and purple biplane. In less than 1 second, she was fluttering down, trying to control her airplane even though her wings were soaked. She managed to crash-land. Samuel then took care of Daniel, whose engine he drowned. Daniel was able to glide his black and blue biplane down and he landed safely. Afterwards, Samuel felt compelled to help his Squadron, and he did not score any more victories, except for Tiffany's green biplane, which he "downed" in some pretty amazing circumstances. She had been bugging John when Samuel intervened.

Samuel headed aggressively towards her, confident that she would soon swerve out of his way. But she wasn't about to admit defeat. The two planes were on a collision course (ever heard of déjà-vu...). As the distance separating them was still pretty considerable, neither fired a shot. Finally, Tiffany grabbed her gun's trigger. Precariously balanced, she aimed and got ready to shoot, refusing to avoid Samuel's onslaught. Impressed, and chivalrous, Samuel refrained from shooting for he believed that the battle was uneven, Tiffany's gun being more difficult to employ. But he didn't want to act cowardly and move out of her way, so both planes remained on a collision course.

Tiffany was having a difficult time aiming. Finally, she was going to fire when a blue jay whizzed past her face. Startled, she flailed her arms, and in the process made her plane veer abruptly. She lost her balance and fell out of her plane, for she had imprudently removed her seat-belt earlier on. Her parachute unfolded properly and she floated down, cursing her luck.

Meanwhile her plane, which was extraordinarily stable, slowly regained a steady and horizontal flight path. Samuel, astonished by what had taken place, nevertheless realized that his victory wouldn't be "honest" if he didn't actually force the plane down. So, he turned around, placed himself behind the pilotless plane and fired repeatedly. He soaked its wings and thus caused it to progressively lose altitude. Amused, and amazed, he followed it as it miraculously landed (yes, *landed*) onto a field. Flabbergasted, he remained in a state of stupor for a while, and by the time he regained his senses, the battle was over.

Thibault attacked Marvin's black and red biplane. Marvin performed every evasive

maneuver in the book, but my brother, somehow or another, remained on his tail. Thibault finally had a clear shot and was about to take advantage of it when Joe surprised him and hindered his situational awareness (i.e: his head having received a burst of cold water, my brother was no longer aware of his situation). Fortunately, I soon took care of Joe, and my brother, having reestablished his position, managed to force Marvin to jump. But by then the battle was over, so Thibault was unable to score anymore victories.

Charles impetuously went for Adolf's black monoplane which was adorned with white, grinning skulls. He overshot it on his first run, but quickly executed a looping which brought him back on Adolf's tail, who had not yet reacted. Adolf, realizing that he was under attack, increased his throttle and bolted away, still followed by Charles. He quickly outdistanced Charles, and he then abruptly swerved towards the latter. Adolf frantically exhausted his ammo attempting to hit Charles, at which he failed miserably. The two planes zoomed right past each other. Charles and Adolf glared at each other, menacingly waving their fists. Charles's biplane being more maneuverable, it turned more swiftly than the black monoplane, and soon Charles was back on Adolf's tail. But Adolf easily outran him once again, and, once more, veered to meet Charles's onslaught. Suddenly, Charles noticed some tracer whizzing past him: Matthew was on his tail.

Charles was confronted with a dilemma, and I emphasize the word dilemma. There was now one NPB shooting at him from ahead, and another doing the same from behind. He did what any sensible person would have done and broke right. Adolf and Matthew, who had not noticed each other formerly because Charles had been obstructing their views, suddenly realized that they were shooting at the wrong guy. But it was too late. Matthew's face was drenched and he lost control of his yellow biplane -which broke off into an unintentional barrel roll and then crash-landed-, whereas Adolf's engine was drowned, and he just managed to crash-land in a nearby field.

Jubilant, Charles subsequently attempted to score some more victories, but didn't succeed.

"Hum..." I reflected, "Michael looks like a nice target..."

I therefore headed for Michael because he was nearby, he seemed too engrossed about his hair's appearance to notice me, and, furthermore, his pink, yellow and red biplane was very conspicuous... I patiently lined up with his tail, keeping a wary eye on my own six, and fired.

"Bullseye!!" I thought, as a burst of water muddled Michael's hair.

He fainted.

Having collapsed on his joystick, his plane was now going straight down. Slightly anxious (I didn't want to cause someone's death, even Michael's), I fired another shot, which spontaneously awoke him. It took some time for him to realize what was going on, and when he finally did, he was barely 10 meters over the ground. He panicked and violently pulled the joystick. His plane's nose pointed straight up, which led to a stall. The biplane collapsed onto the ground. Reassured, I then spotted Joe chasing my brother.

"Amaury to the rescue," I thought.

I surprised Joe with a couple of bursts that soaked his engine, rendering it temporarily useless. He glided to the ground to attempt a landing. Meanwhile, Benito had sneaked up behind me and he was about to shoot me when John intervened and gave him what for. Grateful, I wanted to thank John when I noticed Geraldon zooming perpendicularly past me. Hopeful, I tentatively fired a few deflection shots at him. To my surprise, his engine sputtered and stopped. He was obliged to glide down and crash-land.

Suddenly, a blue triplane zoomed over me.

"Li Chang Yen," I determined.

I immediately engaged a pursuit. I was faster, but less maneuverable than him. He

twisted around and fired a few "rounds" at me, but missed. Assuming he was now behind me, I did an excruciating half-loop and found myself just over and behind him. I fired a few shots, but he rotated once more and bolted under me. I consequently executed a split-s, the blood rushing to my brain. Once more, I found myself behind him, and once more, he veered back towards me. Annoyed, I changed my tactic.

Instead of doing another half-loop, I waited a while and then presumed that he had now turned back towards me, and was therefore on my tail. I subsequently started to perform a looping. Unfortunately, Li Chang Yen's plane was faster than I had imagined, and he managed to catch up with me as I began my climb. He fired a few shots, which crippled my wings, causing me to stall. As I stalled, Li Chang Yen darted past me. Once I had managed to control the stall, I found myself behind the blue triplane once more. I immediately pressed the trigger. This time, he was unable to avoid my shots. His wings were soaked and he was forced to crash-land.

"Hah hah, sucker!!" I mused.

I then realized that the battle was over, and I returned to base, just barely able to keep the *Ace of Spades* airborne.

Stefano's *Lighting 5* dashed towards Anthony's black, red and blue biplane. Anthony defended himself very poorly, although his plane was faster, for he endeavored to fight Stefano by executing acrobatics, at which Stefano's triplane was a lot more adept. Eventually, Stefano got a clear shot and fired. But Anthony's plane was only partially harmed.

This dogfight lasted pretty long, because even though Stefano achieved several hits, he just didn't seem to damage any critical areas. Finally, just as he was running out of water, he hit the back of Sebastien's neck. The freezing water began to drip down his shirt, and along his back. Irritated, he tried to wipe the water off, but this only made things worse. Becoming angrier and angrier, he wiped harder and harder. Exasperated by the results, he started to use both of his hands. By the time he satisfied his urge, his plane was right over the lake's surface.

He ditched right next to the bank.

"ARGHHH!! NOT MORE WATER!!" he hollered as he found himself forced to enter -up to his neck, incidentally...- the lake so as to pull his plane back to the shore (our wooden planes being capable of floating for short periods of time -before becoming too water-logged-, he managed to salvage his).

By the time John reached the NPB, the battle had already well begun, but there were still some potential victims left. For example Benito, who was completely unconscious of John's presence, for he was totally absorbed by other matters, namely attempting to shoot me down. The *Swift* pounced on Benito's black biplane. Only a few bursts were necessary to force him down, wings and elevators soaked. John then swiftly turned and found himself behind Moe's slow biplane. Moe tried to lose him, but his plane was too sluggish and awkward. John, now proficient in the art of flying an extremely maneuverable triplane, effortlessly doused Moe, despite the latter's fervent protests and warnings. Moe's plane, which was already quite slow, became even slower once its wings were drenched. To avoid a possibly deadly stall, Moe was forced to land.

As soon as John had scored his second kill, the battle was officially over, due to the lack of enemies...

As soon as I got back to base, I rushed to the black paint and began to draw little lines on my fuselage.

"What the heck are you doing?" enquired Mortimer.

"I'm painting my kills," I explained, as I just completed the third line.

"Oh brother!!... Pass me the brush when you're finished," said Thibault.
Soon, we were all painting little lines on our fuselages.

"I'm afraid my plane won't be big enough to fit all the lines I'll have to put," observed Stefano.

"Oh shut up!"

Once we finished, I pointed out.

"Samuel and I are Aces now."

"Well yippee doo da!" went Patrick.

"Jealousy is such a terrible thing..." I sighed.

"Like we're really jealous!" protested John.

"Hey!! One more kill and I'm an Ace two!" Charles announced.

"Oh... I hate it!! I only have one kill!!" complained Thibault.

"Well so do I!" Patrick pointed out.

"I don't care about you!" stated Thibault.

"Now, now... At least you're still intact!" I comforted, glancing at my soaking wet *Ace of Spades*.

"Oh shut up!" morosely went Thibault.

"Well... Is anyone receiving a medal?" questioned Patrick.

"Well not you, that's one thing for sure," Mortimer quipped.

"Look who's talking..." I grinned.

"So Mr. Conceited things he's so funny, huh?" demanded Mortimer.

"Come on!! Stop arguing! We're supposed to be a team, remember?" appealed

Charles.

"Yes. We have better things to do than argue. For example confirming the victories," suggested Samuel.

As if on cue, a torrent of chatter erupted.

"Well I got Sir Snoface jr.! You should have seen his face! He..."

"And then he went straight down! All I had to do was..."

"Wham!! Wham!! Right on the head!!"

"I sneaked up behind him, aimed and..."

"He cowardly attacked me from behind, but..."

"So that was my first one. The second one was Benito. I..."

"Her expression was a riot!! All I did was..."

"So that makes 2. Ask anyone!! Look, I'll prove it..."

"QUIET!! ONE AT A TIME!!" thundered Samuel.

Finally, we were able to proceed in an orderly fashion, and all our victories were confirmed, even though Stefano tried to get away with one or two extra...

My brother, who was sulking because of his... meager kills, suddenly jumped into the *Soaring Freedom's* cockpit.

"Where do you think you're going?" I demanded.

He ignored me and took-off before I could do anything about it.

"Argh!! What an *idiot*!! Oh well..." I went.

"Is your brother always like this?" Mortimer asked.

"Don't even *talk* about it!"

Thibault was intent on finding a victim, and he was painstakingly scrutinizing the horizon. Meanwhile Gabrielle and Daniel were just flying back to their base, their wings having dried off. They were a little over Thibault when they spotted the *Soaring Freedom*.

"Heh, heh... This is gonna be an easy kill," thought Daniel, straining his mental capabilities to do so.

They dived. Gabrielle got to him first, shot a few bursts that missed, and then whizzed past him. Reacting quickly to the situation, Thibault pressed his trigger. Gabrielle's plane,

which was not yet completely dry, was easily and rapidly downed once more. But Daniel was more accurate. Thibault received a burst on his head, and his wings were soaked. Nevertheless, as Daniel's biplane overshot Thibault, he joined Gabrielle...

But Thibault's plane was falling fast. He wouldn't make it home. Instead, he succeeded to land in a field.

"Phew..."

But his troubles weren't over yet, for he had unfortunately landed right next to Moe, who was presently waiting for his wings to dry off.

"Hey!! You aren't one of us, are you?" he brilliantly deduced.

"Why... yes, I am. I'm a new recruit," my brother quickly invented.

"Oh... okay."

He fell into deep... Actually, make that *shallow* thought, for a few minutes.

"Hey!! You're not saying the truth!! I know you!"

"Oh really? Well it's nice to know you two."

"Oh, thanks."

Another moment of meditation, during which my brother desperately tried to dry his wings faster by blowing on them. Unfortunately, Tiffany arrived.

"Oh, hi Moe. Samantha sent me to see what was keeping you."

"Hi. I'm just here waiting for my wings to dry off. Oh, have you met our new recruit yet?" he asked while pointing at Thibault.

"Oh. Hello ther... Hey!! YOU'RE THIBAULT!!!"

"Bravo, Einstein," my brother quipped.

"Get him Moe!! YOU FOOL!!!"

"But, he told me that..."

"GET HIM!!!"

My brother, realizing that the gig was up, skedaddled... but Moe easily overtook him.

"TELL US!!" ordered Benito.

"What? What do you want me to tell you??" my brother inquired.

"Trying to joke around, are you? Think you're so funny, huh? YOU ASKED FOR IT!! Give him... the treatment," ominously went Benito.

"T... Th... the treatment??" Sir Snotface jr.'s eyes opened wide.

"Yeah, you heard me."

"But... but... We only use the... that in cases of high treason," Geraldon pointed out.

"Listen, I said give him the treatment. Don't you agree Samantha?"

"Like, yeah."

My brother was a little anxious as he saw Moe grab a gleaming glass of liquid from a cup-board. Thibault realized, to his despair, that it was cod-liver oil.

"Listen, now... I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement. I mean, what is it you want me to tell you?" he attempted to save his taste buds.

"Well, if we knew what we wanted you to tell us, we wouldn't be asking you!" kidded Geraldon.

"No, but I mean, about what are you questioning me? Our base? Our planes? What?" Thibault panicked.

"None of your business, shrimp," sneered Marvin.

"So are you going to answer?" demanded Benito.

"Answer what?? You never asked me a question!" my brother protested.

"Give it to him..."

"No!! WAIT!! AHHH!!!"

"Will you open your mouth?" said Moe, trying to dump the noxious liquid into Thibault's mouth.

My brother shook his head negatively.

"I said: open the mouth!"

My brother fervently shook his head from side to side.

"Open your [censored] mouth!"

"I said no ahead.... Oh oh..."

Moe quickly flung the deadly, so-called medicine into Thibault's open mouth. The latter choked, gagged, coughed, spit, did the locomotion, and then licked his lips.

"Hmm... That was good. Can I have some more?" he asked.

"WHAT?? Are you sure you took the cod-liver oil?" demanded Benito.

"Well... yeah. Uhh... I'm pretty sure I did..." stuttered Moe.

"Let me see that!!" growled Benito as he grabbed the bottle. He drank...

"Quick!! Call the paramedics!!" hollered Tiffany.

"You... you [censored]!! Think you're so smart, huh? We'll just see about that!" Marvin glared at Thibault. He then grabbed something, something huge, menacing, terrible....

"No!"

"Yes..."

"STOP!!" ordered Samuel.

But we were too late. Tears were streaming down my brothers cheeks. He was a nervous wreck, shuddering helplessly. His face was blood red. He was breathing with difficulty.

He just couldn't stop laughing.

"DROP THAT FEATHER!!" commanded Mortimer.

"Hey!! Like, what are you doing here!! This is, like, our base!! Like, get outta here!" went Samantha.

"Remember, we signed a treaty: you can't enter our base! You are therefore trespassing!! Does this mean you're breaking your own treaty??" demanded Li Chang Yen.

"No, we are not breaking our treaty. You're the ones who broke it!" protested Patrick.

"We did not!" Li Chang Yen protested.

"You did too! What do you call capturing Thibault? That's breaking our treaty about respecting downed pilots," John pointed out.

"Thibault's capture is not a violation of that treaty: you clearly stated that we couldn't attack downed pilots. You didn't say anything about not capturing them. So there!!" went Geraldon.

"Yeah!!" agreed Benito.

"You are wrong," asserted Samuel. "We assumed you'd understand that respecting a downed pilot included considering his freedom. Therefore, you clearly violated our treaty, which means that it is legal for us to invade your base. We are perfectly legitimate."

"Yeah! They're completely legato, latomas, letagi... What he said!!" my brother approved.

There followed an argument about who was breaking what, why and how. Finally, we decided to compromise: they would release Thibault and would agree to stop their torture practices. On the other hand, we had to admit that our treaty excluded not capturing downed pilots.

We were going to leave, when Sir Snotface jr. sneered.

"So Stupid Sammy: you admitted you were wrong, huh? You're just a chicken! Pakawk!! Pakawk!! You're so dumb. I think you're just a nerdy scaredy-cat!! You're just afraid!!" he went as he cowered behind Moe.

Samuel flushed. He was obviously about to commit murder.

"Neener... neener... neener... You sissy!!" continued Sir Snotface jr..

Samuel was now mortally insulted. He proclaimed.

"Sir Snotface jr., I demand that you take that back!"

"Sissy, sissy, sissy!! Sissy, sissy, sissy!!"

"I challenge you to a duel!"

"A duel?? Oh brother!" exclaimed Anthony. "Why can't you just fight like real men. Yeah!!"

"A duel is just a more sophisticated name for a fight, Seb," explained Gabrielle.

"Ohh..."

"I don't want to fight with him. He'll... he'll... he'll hurt me..." decided Sir Snotface jr..

"Now who's the coward?" smiled Mortimer.

"So? Do you refuse to grant me justice?" demanded Samuel.

"Sir Snotface jr., come here," asked Li Chang Yen.

Li Chang Yen then began whispering something in Sir Snotface jr.'s ear.

"But... but..." objected Sir Snotface jr..

"Look, do you want to be part of the NPB? Yes or no?" enquired Li Chang Yen.

"What's a all this, like, about?" demanded Samantha.

Li Chang Yen whispered something to her.

"Like, I think it's a great idea. Sir Snotface jr., like, it's an order," she concluded.

"But... but... Oh... Okay. But, if I do it, I become part of the NPB, right?"

"Like, sure..."

"Okay... I agree..." sighed Sir Snotface jr..

"You'll fight the duel?" verified Samuel.

Sir Snotface jr. nodded unconvincingly.

"Well then, you must choose the weapons. I challenged you, so you may therefore choose what we will fight with," Samuel explained.

"Li Chang Yen said... Oops!! What I meant to say was that I choose to fight in the air."

"You mean one-on-one air combat?" questioned John.

Sir Snotface jr. nodded affirmatively.

"So be it. And when do you want this combat to take place?" asked Samuel.

"Huh... Tomorrow, I guess," Sir Snotface jr. said tentatively while glancing towards Li Chang Yen, who nodded.

"At what time? And where?" added Charles.

"At noon. Over the lake," decided Li Chang Yen.

"Okay. Until tomorrow then," settled Samuel, as we marched outside. Thibault quickly retrieved his airplane, which had fortunately not been damaged.

"Good luck, Sam," wished Patrick.

"Are you sure you don't want some cover. I mean, it looked awfully suspicious the way Li Chang Yen whispered to Sir Snotface jr..." I pointed out.

"Listen, Ammo: it's really nice of you, but I told you already: no thanks. It's obvious that they're planning to surprise attack me, but that doesn't matter. I can take care of myself. They might be scum, but I'm not," Samuel explained.

"Well, it's your problem," concluded Stefano.

Samuel switched the power on. He waved at us, released the brakes, and flew off, heading towards the lake. We all watched him attentively.

As he arrived over the lake, he was quickly joined by Sir Snotface jr.'s pink biplane.

At first, they remained prudently away from each other. Samuel was maneuvering so as to be better positioned, and Sir Snotface jr., who seemed oblivious to the fact that Samuel was not pursuing him, was just swerving chaotically, in an effort to throw Samuel off his tail. I grinned, although the situation was quite serious.

Finally, Samuel having established himself strategically behind and above Sir Snotface jr., with his back facing the sun, began the attack. Although this position was especially effective when one surprised the opponent, it was still relatively helpful, even in this case.

So Samuel roared towards Sir Snotface jr., using his superior altitude to get some extra speed. Sir Snotface jr., hearing the *Mockingbird's* approach, panicked. He glanced behind himself. The glaring sun blinded him, forcing him to cover his eyes. Samuel was ready for the kill, but, even though he despised Sir Snotface jr., his sense of pity and ethics overcame him and he waited for Sir Snotface jr. to recover.

Suddenly, just when we thought the NPB were actually going to be honest, 15 planes darted out of a nearby cloud, on Samuel's right.

"The traitors!" Stefano hollered.

"Quick, we've got to warn Samuel," declared Patrick.

"I'm going," I decided, as I ran to the planes. I was followed by everyone else.

I quickly pushed my plane into a suitable take-off position. Mortimer was already about to go. But when he tried to turn on his engine, nothing happened.

"What the heck is wrong!" he raved, perfectly conscious that he was going to miss a great battle.

I feigned not seeing his predicament, and got ready to take-off. I switched the power on. Nothing happened. Once more, I clicked the switch to turn the electric engine on. And, once more, nothing happened.

It all seemed pretty suspicious, as if someone had sabotaged our planes. I flipped the engine's lid open and peered inside. Had I not actually participated in its construction, the engine's complex and tangled wiring would have certainly been too intricate for me to handle. Nevertheless, I realized that it would take me some time to figure out the problem.

Meanwhile, Samuel had apparently not discerned the looming danger that was about to befall him. He continued to wait for Sir Snotface jr. to recover from the sun's glare, before shooting him down. So the NPB approached menacingly, in a line astern formation (probably the overall favorite formation). They separated into two groups, one which headed straight for Samuel so as to attack him from the side and the other slowly circling around to attack Samuel from the back.

Obviously, the group that was attacking Samuel's right side reached the latter first. Led by Samantha, it was about to open fire, believing Samuel was still not conscious of their presence. But Samuel suddenly shot Sir Snotface jr., downing him, and then rapidly swerved to the right, thus heading straight for Samantha's red and purple biplane. She shrieked and broke to the left.

The whole formation scattered frantically, every pilot intent on avoiding a collision. Samuel took advantage of the situation and pounced on Marvin, who soon joined Sir Snotface jr.... But once the initial confusion ended, Samantha and her troops began an all-out attack against Samuel. To top it all off, the other group of NPB arrived. Samuel was fighting against all odds: 14 to 1.

Throughout all this, the rest of us were all trying to figure out what had been sabotaged. We had brilliantly deduced that it had to be sabotage once we had noticed that *all* of our engines were unable to work, and not only Mortimer's and mine. Eventually, with all of us pondering about the same problem, we determined what the problem was. One of the main electrical wires had been carefully displaced so that although it seemed fine, it was actually not connected. Once we solved that out, we quickly put our engines back into working condition and flew off to help Samuel. Actually, it was not so much to help Samuel than to participate in a great battle that we were in such a hurry, but as long as we're there, right?

Meanwhile, Samuel was acrobatically attempting to avoid being shot down. A swarm of NPB, each one keenly wanting to shoot Samuel down, were buzzing around him, putting in shots whenever possible. Yet, Samuel, using every maneuver in the book, managed to survive. Furthermore, he had an advantage: as all the NPB wanted to shoot him down, they fought each other to see who would get the best position, namely the one behind the *Mockingbird*.

Samuel managed to shoot down Tiffany and severely impair Anthony before being himself shot down by a hoard of NPB comprising Li Chang Yen, Adolf and Susie. It was at this precise moment that we arrived. I led Mortimer, Thibault and Charles into battle while Patrick, having taken Samuel's place, headed John and Stefano. We charged, each one of us having previously chosen a victim. I went for Li Chang Yen.

Just as I did so, he waved his hand in a frenzied fashion. This was probably some kind of order meaning "retreat", for all of the NPB, except for Adolf and Joe, headed for their base at full speed. Li Chang Yen's blue triplane was slightly slower than mine, and although he succeeded to keep my aim off for a while, I eventually shot him down. Mortimer, thanks to his fast *Swift Angel*, managed to bring Gabrielle and Benito down. Thibault was just able to get Michael, while Patrick finished off Philipp and Charles downed Daniel.

Unfortunately, we failed to catch up with the others. But there was still Adolf and Joe to deal with, because for some obscure reason, they had remained. We immediately jumped to the task of shooting them down. Easier said than done.

We encountered the exact same difficulties that the NPB had to deal with when they attacked Samuel. Moreover, Adolf and Joe were relatively good pilots (compared to overcooked noodles). They actually sent Mortimer down, as well as Charles. Eventually, as they were running out of electricity, they had to return to base. We, two, were getting low, and, anyway, we had to help Samuel, Charles and Mortimer, so we restrained from chasing them.

I landed next to Samuel's *Mockingbird*.

"Samuel!! Samuel? Samuel??" I shouted. "Where the heck is he..." I wondered out loud.

"Hmm... Humm..." a muffled sound came from the forest.

I headed towards where I thought it was coming from, and there enough was Samuel, tied and gagged. I mused about whether I ought to get the handkerchief out of his mouth and face his endless chatter, or just leave him as he was, and give my ears a well-deserved rest. Samuel, seeing that I was tempted, cast me the evil eye, which convinced me. I left (just kidding). I released him, and he immediately started explaining what had happened.

"As soon as I landed, Moe inconspicuously landed as well, managing to conceal this fact from the rest of you. He then proceeded to tie me up and gag me, although I put up a great fight -he presently has a black eye, a sore shin, and a bloody nose-..."

"But isn't that against our treaty?" I demanded.

"I'm afraid not, for I believe that it qualifies as 'capturing', which is, unfortunately, not covered in the treaty. Now where was I? Oh yes... So once he did that, he took-off and circled three times around the field, waving a red handkerchief, and then landed again. I take it that that was some kind of predetermined sign, for moments later -about half-an-hour-, a force of NPB, including Li Chang Yen, arrived by foot."

"Oh... So that explains why the NPB suddenly retreated."

"What?"

"Never mind..."

"Suit yourself. Anyway... where was I again? Oh yes. Well, to my surprise, they ignored me and went straight for the plane. I then realized what they were after: they wanted to find out how we could shoot without having to reach out for the trigger. Li Chang Yen began to carefully examine my machine gun, despite my protests..."

"So that's why you were gagged..."

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing, just go on. You were saying that they started to examine the guns..."

"Ah, yes. So, after about 10 minutes, he apparently realized what I had concocted, and he left without further ado."

"So they know how it works."

"I'm afraid so."

"Damn!! They really had it well planned to: they attacked you 16 to 1, to be sure to get you, and as soon as they did, they retreated. They even managed to sabotage our planes to make sure we wouldn't interfere with them!"

"They did not sabotage your engines."

"How do you know? You weren't ther... Hey!! I didn't tell you they had sabotaged our engines: I just said they had sabotaged our planes. How the heck did you know that?"

"Guess."

"Why?" I didn't even bother asking the whole question.

"Because I didn't want you interfering with me. It was a one-on-one duel, and I intended to respect that, even if the NPB didn't. As I said before, I'm not a scum, like them."

"But... but. Oh, I won't even bother arguing with you. It's too late now anyway. You and your damn ethics..." I grinned.

So we returned, but not before verifying that they hadn't in the least damaged the *Mockingbird*. Samuel explained what happened to the rest of us, and his announcements were received with mixed feelings. Some of us thought he ought to be discharged from his position of squadron leader while others firmly believed that he should have received the Bully Blaster Badge for an act of valor. We finally compromised and decided to forget the whole thing.

"Well kids, only 6 more days before school," announced my dad.

"We know, we know. Don't even talk about it," my brother pleaded.

"You'll have to go to bed and wake up earlier now, to get used to all that again."

"Aww dad... Common."

"Now don't feel bad son, 'cause I decided to bring you on a fishing trip for the last few days we have together! Isn't that great!"

"Well, not to be mean or anything, but we'd rather not. I mean, I like to rest during the last days of vacation. Anyway, we've just finished our tree house," I explained, eager to remain so as to keep on fighting the NPB.

"Is that so? Well, I understand. Anyway, I have so much work nowadays..." my father rolled his eyes pathetically and sighed.

"Oh poor dear. The Bank shouldn't give you so much work, especially on vacation! You've been going to work every single day for the past month, even on Sundays!! You're going to work yourself sick!" my mom protested.

"But I can't help it, dear. Ever since my promotion, I haven't had a day's rest!"

"I still say you're going to get sick, what with all that work. You ought to take tomorrow off. It's Sunday: you just can't go to work on a Sunday! We can all have a big pick-nick at the lake, with the parents of Amaury's and Thibault's friends!"

"Well... I guess so... And like that I'll be able to see your tree house that I've been hearing so much about lately," my dad genially smiled at us.

My brother almost choked on his orange juice. My brain whirled madly to come up with an excuse. I unintelligibly muttered something.

"What is that, son?" my dad asked.

"What Amaury was trying to say is that it's kind of like our secret headquarters, so that parents are not allowed."

"Oh," went my father, disappointed.

Feeling miserable for this second refusal that my dad had to endure, I blurted out, "Thibault's just kidding. Of course you can see it."

My brother shot me a look of sheer desperation and incomprehension.

"Oh good...", my father beamed, "Well then so be it. I won't go to work tomorrow."

"That's great, dear. I'll call the other parent's right now."

"ARE YOU CRAZY?? NOW WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO??" my brother hollered, as he slammed our room's door shut.

"Trust me."

"Trust you? Hah hah hah..."

"Thibault, the NPB will certainly be busy installing the electrical firing system on their planes tomorrow."

"SO?"

"So they will be at their hangar-tent."

"SO??"

"So they won't be at their tree-house..."

"Ohh... Great thinking!! I'll call the others to warn 'em."

"You do that, and I'll start thinking about how we'll organize ourselves. After all, we can't let them catch us in the act of showing their base to our parents..."

"Okay, let's go!" went my father as he heaved the picnic basket into the trunk of the car.

"I hope you called the others..." whispered my brother to me.

"Of course I did! Do you think I'm an obnoxious moron or what?" I stormed.

My brother rolled his eyes, coughed, and moved away whistling.

"Thibault, come back here a sec'..."

We rapidly arrived at the lake, and we were soon joined by all our friends and their parents. While we attempted to drown each other in the lake, our parents began a profound debate on the proper recipe for lamb brain with tartar sauce.

"I sure hope you know what you're doing, Ammo," sighed Samuel.

"You sent someone to check on the NPB, like I asked you?"

"Yes. In fact here's Charles now."

Samuel motioned Charles to give us his report.

"Everything seems normal. As far as I could see, they're all working on the airplanes. They don't even know we're here."

"Good..."

"I'd feel a lot better once this is all over. As soon as we've finished eating, we'll quickly show your dad the tree-house and get over with it," stated Samuel.

We ate hurriedly. But, as often happens in such cases, our parents took an eternity to complete their lunch. Finally, they were ready. We led our parents towards the tree-house.

They chattered loudly and laughed heartily all along the way, which did not ease our nerves. My brother, who I had sent out to scout the way, suddenly appeared, running towards me.

"Amaury, he whispered with all his might, Sir Snotface jr. is in the tree-house. What do we do??"

"Damn it!! Humm... Let's see. Any suggestions Samuel? Patrick? Mortimer? ANYBODY??"

Everyone shook their heads morosely.

"We could just bust his brains before our parents get there!" ventured Mortimer.

"Nahh... Too dangerous. Our parents might catch us in the act, and then we'd really be in for it!" sighed John.

Patrick looked absorbed, and then he exclaimed.

"I got it! You guys try to keep our parents busy for a while, and I'll take care of all of it!"

"What are you going to do?" Stefano asked.

"Trust me... Just keep them busy for... 10 minutes."

"Okay..."

As Patrick left, running, the rest of us undertook to slow our parents down.

"OH MY GOD MOM!! I SAW A RARE PURPLE JAY!!" yelled my brother.

My naive mom, a devoted, bird-watcher exclaimed.

"WHERE?? WHERE?? You aren't lying, are you? I've never seen a purple jay!! Are you joking?? No! Where is it? Quick!"

Everyone began scrutinizing the tree-tops in search of the imaginary blue-jay.

Meanwhile, Patrick ran up to the tree-house and began yelling.

"Sir Snotface jr.!! Sir Snotface jr.!!"

"What are YOU doing here? You... you fat slime ball! Yeah!! That's what you are!! Yeah!! Where are you friend? Did they leave you all alone in the forest? Oh... poor, poor Patty-wick!"

"Will you shut up Sir Snotface jr.? Your life is at stake here: the teacher sent me here to get you."

"The teacher?? What teacher?? It isn't school yet! What the heck do you mean!!"

"WHAT!! You don't know!!"

"What!! What is it!!"

"I don't believe it! You don't even know it!"

"Know what! WHAT IS IT!!"

"I don't believe you guys!! Your friends didn't even know! Either you're good liars, or you are all seriously mentally deficient..."

"What is it!! What didn't we know!!"

"You are in big trouble," went Patrick, shaking his head sadly.

"WHY!! What did we do! COMMON!! Tell me!"

"Don't tell me you didn't even know that school started today!"

"WHAT!! Sc... Sch... Schoo... School started today... You're kidding, right..." Sir Snotface jr. pleaded, straining to smile.

"Of course it did!! The teacher is real mad... You had better hurry! You're already in big, big, big trouble! I don't believe you were actually able to forget. Neither does the teacher, at that."

"You're... you're... you're not kidding..."

"Well, if you don't believe me, it's your problem. YOU can go talk to the teacher, pleading for forgiveness. It's not my fault. I tried."

"OH NO!! YOU'RE NOT LYING!! I DON'T BELIEVE THIS!! I MISSED THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL!! AHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Instead of crying like a baby, you had better hurry to school. Maybe if you get there fast enough, the teacher will excuse you..."

"OH MY GOD!! I have to hurry!!"

Sir Snotface jr. threw himself down, and began running like a decapitated chicken towards the road, crying "Oh no, oh no..." all the way.

"Mission accomplished," Patrick grinned.

We arrived a few minutes later, my mom scolding Thibault for his trick.

"See dad, this is Th..., our tree house. Isn't great? Okay, I guess we can go back now," I declared.

"Wait a minute! I just got here. I'd like to see how it is. Can I climb up, or are adults not allowed?" my father smiled.

"Sure, dad, sure. Go right up. Here I'll come with you."

I quickly showed him the tree-house, inventing explanations as I went. Finally, satisfied with the visit, my father decided to leave.

"Great tree-house you made. I'm real proud of you!! I'm sure no one else could make such a tree-house," he complimented, as we returned to the lake.

"Whew... that was a close one," sighed my brother.

"Not really. But I'm grateful for Patrick's quick thinking anyway. Oh well, at least dad doesn't suspect anything."

"Yeah."

"Do you really think it's safe to fly in this weather?" asked Samuel.

"Well, it isn't windy, just cloudy," Mortimer pointed out.

"True, but clouds can be just as dangerous," Patrick observed.

"Common! What's the worst that can happen?" demanded Stefano.

"You really want to know?" smiled Charles.

"Yeah."

"Well, we could mistake you for Sir Snoface jr...."

"HEY!!"

"And shoot you down in the lake, ruining the Lightning 5."

"You wouldn't!"

"Well, with all the clouds, how could we tell the difference! Plus, you and Sir Snoface jr. really look alike!"

"HEY!! WHY YOU..."

Charles dashed away, closely followed by Stefano.

"Well, I guess you're right... It is pretty dangerous," I admitted.

"But we only have four days of vacation left!! We can't waste them!! After all, who cares about a few clouds!" Thibault protested.

"Yeah!!" agreed John.

"Listen, you have a choice here: either you listen to us and take it easy, or you have 2 minutes of fun, followed by an eternity of rest," Samuel concluded.

"Okay, okay..." John grumbled.

"Well then, what do we do?" I asked.

"Good question," recognized Mortimer.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to make a few repairs on the Mockingbird, and fix my damn gunsight," Samuel declared.

"Hey, that's a good idea. I can install that pillow I've wanted to put in the cockpit now!" Thibault exclaimed.

As we all proceeded to use our free time, we heard shouts.

"HEY!! NERD HERD!! UP HERE!! YOU BIG [censored]!!"

The NPB were circling around our field, shouting, thanks to their bloated mouths, obscenities at us.

"How come the NPB get to fly, huh?" demanded John.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT YOU BUNCH OF SCUMBALLS!!" Mortimer hollered.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR TO COME UP!! ARE YOU A BUNCH OF CHICKENS, OR WHAT??"

"Why those..." growled Samuel.

"COMMON!! HURRY UP, OR ARE YOU TOO SCARED TO FIGHT US NOW?? YOU BUNCH OF [censored]!!"

"LIKE, WE DEMAND, LIKE, REVENGE, FOR WHAT YOU, LIKE, DID TO, LIKE Sir Snoface jr.!! LIKE, REALLY!!"

"YEAH!! WHAT YOU, LI..., DID TO ME!! YOU'RE JUST POOR JERKS!! YEAH!! THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE!! JERKS!"

"Okay... That's it. I'm going for them!!" announced Samuel.

I was already preparing to take-off.

The NPB watched maliciously as we took off, one by one. For fear of breaking our treaty, they didn't dare attack us yet, as we remained over our field. Finally, I signaled that Mortimer, Charles and Thibault, that is my squadron, could maneuver as they pleased. I also indicated where I was heading, to avoid a collision with them.

Finally, I began circling slowly up, to take some altitude. I took the time to survey the situation: the cloud cover was very low, but there was little wind. I realized that most of the NPB were nowhere in sight, which made me believe that they might be waiting above the clouds, ready to pounce on us. With this in mind, I proceeded to rise towards the clouds.

Li Chang Yen, noticing my maneuver, immediately tried to overtake me. But I was higher, and so I reached the safety of the clouds well before he was able to put in a shot.

The moisture wasn't as bad as I had planned, and the Ace of Spades's electric engine didn't seem to be in any difficulty. Relieved, I proceeded. Eventually, I could barely see the tip of my nose. Flying by the seats of my pants, I could no longer rely on my instruments, not that I had any. The mist around me dull my senses, and I began to think that I was actually dreaming. I shivered, and feared that I still had a long way to go before reaching the open sky. The looming silence around me was, in my mind, I sure sign that the battle was over, and that I was all alone in the sky.

But I continued, keen on reaching my objective. Actually, it was, in a way, kind of fun. I imagined I was a world class pilot, flying over the Himalayas, carrying the world leaders in my plane, the fate of humanity in my hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Please do not worry, everything is under control. We will arrive just 5 minutes late at the world summit. Meanwhile, please enjoy the tasteless snack that will be served shortly. And will the President of the United States please tell his dog to let go of my shoe. Thank you."

At that precise moment, the sky went blue and I found myself flying over a white, fluffy expanse which continued, uninterrupted, in all directions. I also perceived that if I didn't move quickly out of the way, I wasn't going to live much longer.

Adolf's black biplane was looming in my sights, and constantly growing. I pushed on the stick with all my might, and found myself once more, in the clouds. I sighed, waited a minute or two, and pulled back up. This time, my 12 was clear, but my six wasn't. I received a long gush of water on my nape before I reacted and swerved to the right. My opponent apparently followed me, but was unable to score any more hits.

I then swerved to the left, dove down, and then pulled the joystick mightily, causing my plane to go into a looping. My face went red as all my blood streamed into my head. Sweat pearled up my face, right into my nose (a very uncomfortable feeling, trust me), instead of pearling down. After 10 excruciating seconds, I found myself behind Adolf, just as he began to turn. I easily caught up with him and doused his engine. It sputtered, and the black biplane dived down, disappearing into the clouds.

I quickly looked around me, and I realized the sky was completely empty.

"Damn. They all went back down."

So, I decided to do so as well.

I dove back into the clouds, and I hadn't even done 5 meters before I saw a sinister shadow in front of me.

"Whoaw!"

I immediately swerved to the right, to avoid the plane.

Blessing my reflexes, I continued down, wondering who the heck that had been.

Finally, I popped out, about 20 meters over the ground. I quickly glanced around, and once more, the sky proved empty. I slowly scanned the horizon, to make sure I hadn't missed them. But, the sky remained completely void anyway.

"Damn it!! They must have gone back up!"

Regretting the fact that I didn't have a radar, I again undertook the ascension.

As I finally reached the sky, I expected to find it clear once more, and I was already

beginning to head back down. Just as I re-entered the glistening white mass, I remarked a red biplane zoom over me. Quickly, I pulled back on the stick and found myself over the clouds. This time, I looked around and saw a huge melee taking place.

"Finally..." I growled, irritated.

I immediately headed towards Moe's red biplane, the closest enemy to me. He didn't notice me, and I silently approached his tail. I opened fire, but my aim was completely off, and by the time I pulled the trigger again, he had reacted and was just disappearing into the clouds.

Cursing my damn luck (luck, not skill), I began circling in place, waiting for him to reappear. Eventually, he did, but I was already busy avoiding Li Chang Yen's shots. I managed, to escape into the clouds, and after having waited a moment, and changing my direction a few times, I popped out, finding myself just behind Moe. Praising my good fortune, I blasted him out of the sky and snickered as I watched the red biplane head back down.

The rest of the battle, at least from my perspective, was completely futile, for whenever some one was in danger, he or she just vanished into the whiteness to reappear somewhere else later. I was barely able to hit a few enemies (and friends...), and almost got downed myself, by that annoying Li Chang Yen. I finally collided with Moe, who had "returned from the tomb", and was forced to crash.

Eventually, the battle calmed down, and all of us returned to our respective bases. I found my brother raging against the cursed clouds, as he had accidentally collided into Tiffany when inside one of the former (he was flying at full speed when a yellow biplane jutted out of the clouds. As he was moving a lot faster, Thibault was unable to react and he crashed into Tiffany's tail). His plane was really damaged, but repairable. And, to further brighten his spirits, it was decided that Tiffany would be counted as a victory in his favor. Thus, it was also ascertained that, all in all, we had scored 9 victories.

Thibault had downed Tiffany, and had lost his plane in the process.

Stefano had managed to shoot down Benito, but had been the unfortunate victim of a misunderstanding...

Samuel damaged a lot of planes, but was only able to guarantee that one of them had gone down, Sir Snotface jr.'s.

Patrick had played safe, but had nevertheless downed Gabrielle in the first few minutes of the battle.

Mortimer had completely destroyed Daniel, but he was in turn traitorously shot down by Li Chang Yen, Geraldon and Anthony, who had leagued themselves against him, for some unfathomable reason.

John had brilliantly succeeded in downing Li Chang Yen, after having outmaneuvered him, but not before having accidentally shot down Stefano, whom he had mistaken for Sir Snotface jr. in the clouds...

Charles managed to blast Philipp after the sky, after a long battle, but, being a little late in joining us back to base, he was treacherously shot down by Samantha and Moe who joined forces against him.

As for me, I had been able to get Adolf, and, I had believed, Moe. But the latter surprised me (as well as himself) later on, when he suddenly appeared in front of me. Our wings collided, and I was compelled to crash-land. Fortunately, the Ace of Spades was not to damaged, and Moe was counted as a victory in my favor.

While John and Stefano argued about Stefano's facial appearance, and the differences between Sir Snotface jr.'s pink biplane and Stefano's black triplane, the rest of us began discussing while we repaired the damaged crafts.

"Gosh, Mortimer smiled, you were right when you said those clouds were dangerous."

"Oh well, at least we're all all right," Patrick pointed out.

"Yes. I'm afraid the NPB's ploy to get us flying worked admirably, but I'm not sorry at

all for my reaction. In fact, I only regret I was just able to get Sir Snotface jr.. Oh well..." sighed Samuel.

"Well, now that the NPB have automatic firing, they sure put up a better fight," I remarked.

"Yeah," my brother agreed.

"You know how we only have 4 days of vacation left," went Charles, suddenly changing the subject.

"Don't even talk about it," grumbled Thibault.

"Well, anyway, I think that we have to get rid of the NPB completely, before school starts."

"What do you mean, completely?" Mortimer asked.

"I mean, continued Charles, that we should completely destroy their airplanes as soon as possible, so that we can have a calm, peaceful school year."

"Wow!! That's the first time I've heard 'peaceful' and 'school' in the same sentence," exclaimed Stefano, after having, somewhat violently, put an end to the argument between him and John.

"You know what I mean!! What I should have said was that all this fighting is nice, but I'd like to just have some plain fun when I fly. I don't want to worry about who's coming up behind me every 5 seconds!" Charles explained.

"He has a point," Patrick conceded.

"True... But I personally love the feeling I get when I shoot down one of those blanking fools!" Samuel stated.

"Yeah, me too... But on the other hand, I wouldn't mind some respite for a while. I think we should, some how, get rid of the NPB's planes. They'll surely rebuild them after a while, and during that time, we can take it easy," I suggested.

"Well... I guess so... But how will we get rid of the airplanes, short of putting their tent on fire?" demanded Mortimer.

"Good question," I admitted.

We continued to work in silence for a while. Then, John, who was constantly rubbing his chin, spoke out.

"Well, we could just shoot them down over the lake, and make sure they can't save their airplanes, so that they'd sink..."

"And how do you intend doing that, Mr. Smarty-pants?" Stefano sneered.

"Well, if they couldn't shoot us down, we could easily shoot them down."

"What do you mean, John?" asked Charles.

"We can make ourselves invincible by covering our planes with plastic, which is waterproof..."

"Hey!! That's an awesome idea!!" shouted Stefano, having suddenly forgotten the previous disagreement.

"Yeah!" my brother agreed.

"I disagree," declared Samuel.

"Why?" enquired Patrick.

"Because a plastic covering, even if it is quite thin, will interfere with our planes' aerodynamics. Believe me, if we were to cover our planes with plastic, not only would they gain a few extra kilograms, but furthermore, the plastic would make any maneuvering impossible. One could turn, rise and go down, obviously, but not under a lot of strain."

"Yeah John! You big dweeb! God! What a dumbo!" went Stefano, suddenly remembering that he had had a little dispute with John.

"Darn," went Patrick.

We all remained quiet for some time, pondering.

"Hey... I got it!" I exclaimed. I quickly whispered something to my friends.

"I like it... I really like it," decided Samuel.

"We'd better get to work immediately," claimed Mortimer.

"Yes... I'll take care of the secret message," stated Samuel.

"And I'll make the warning on my computer," I suggested.

"That's great! Now let's all get to work. We have to get over with this as soon as possible," John concluded.

We all immediately go to work. It was midday, and I rushed home to my computer. Samuel, Mortimer and Patrick began writing something in some kind of code. Meanwhile, the others repaired the airplanes, except for Thibault's, which he wouldn't need anyway.

I got back at three, carrying, not without difficulty, a stack of printed papers and a staple gun. I handed these to Charles, who began stapling the papers on trees around the lake, in strategic places where the NPB would be sure to see them.

The papers read:

WARNING!

SWIMMING, WADING AND ANY OTHER AQUATIC ACTIVITIES ARE HEREBY PROHIBITED IN LONELY LAKE AND ITS TRIBUTARIES. A SHARK, POSSIBLY MAN-EATING, HAS BEEN REPORTED IN THE AREA. THE FORMER WAS ALLEGEDLY ABANDONED BY ITS OWNER FOR REASONS AS YET UNKNOWN. LONELY LAKE AND ITS TRIBUTARIES WILL REMAIN OFF LIMITS UNTIL THIS POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS SHARK HAS BEEN CAPTURED AND/OR APPREHENDED.

ALL, IF ANY TRESPASSERS WILL BE FINED AND EXECUTED.

While I had been away, Samuel had finished the coded message. But, he had decided to rewrite the message in normal English, afraid that Sir Snotface jr. would not be able to decipher it if he didn't. Thibault had then been assigned the task of getting it, somehow, to Sir Snotface jr..

Sir Snotface jr. was fixing his airplane, or, what would be more accurate, letting it dry, in the middle of a field he had crash-landed in. My brother, taking advantage of the fact that Sir Snotface jr. was alone, approached him from the back.

"Oh, hi Stefano. I thought I'd find you here. Hurry up to the TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting as fast as you can," Thibault went.

"I'm not Stefano!" objected Sir Snotface jr..

"Oops!! Uhh... I didn't say anything, okay?"

"What do you mean? What did you say?" enquired Sir Snotface jr..

"You didn't hear me say there was a TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting right now, all right. In fact, I didn't say it: you never heard me say there was a TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting. This is our little secret, all right?"

"But I did hear you say there was a TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting," Sir Snotface jr. protested, puzzled.

"No, no... You don't understand. I never said that there was a TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting. You must have misheard. And don't even think of going to the TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting that you don't know about and that we're having in half-an-hour, outside the barn, next to the forest which could provide you a lot of cover, so that we wouldn't see you spying on us."

"All right, all right. I won't go to that dumb TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting! Who wants to anyway?"

"Good, because if you did go to TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting that you don't know about and that we're having in half-an-hour, outside the barn, next to the forest which could provide you a lot of cover, so that we wouldn't see you spying

on us, you might learn something very interesting. In fact, you might actually, if you told Samantha about this very interesting thing, become an honorary NPB. So don't go, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah... I heard already! I'm not dumb, like you. Yeah, you're just dumb, that's all."

"Good. So remember: don't go to TOP SECRET, ULTRA-CONFIDENTIAL, PRIORITY 5 meeting that you don't know about and that we're having in half-an-hour, outside the barn, next to the forest which could provide you a lot of cover, so that we wouldn't see you spying on us. And don't learn about our top-secret weapon which would make you a real NPB."

"ALL RIGHT ALREADY!! JUST GET LOST YOU BIG DUMB HEAD!"

"I'm going! Oh, one more thing. I didn't drop a secret message here, okay?"

"What?"

"I said that I wasn't going to drop a secret message here. See that on the floor?"

"Yeah..."

"Well it's a top secret message that I didn't drop and that you shouldn't read. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah... Now just leave, you dumb person. Yeah, that's what you are."

Finally, my brother, after having conscientiously dropped the message, returned into the forest, hid behind a bush, and waited to see what Sir Snotface jr. would do. The latter surveyed the forest momentarily, and then stooped down to pick up the non-existent message. He read it, grinned, and proceeded to place it in his pocket. As he did so, he spoke.

"They sure are stupid. Yeah, that's it. They sure are stupid..."

He then hopped into his plane, which was now quite dry, and he took off, heading for the NPB's hangar. Satisfied, Thibault returned to the barn, announcing that his mission was accomplished.

Learning this, we immediately prepared ourselves for the spy's arrival. We chose a suitable area where he would be able to overhear us quite easily, and we rehearsed our lines. Finally, Stefano carefully motioned that Sir Snotface jr. was there.

We then undertook our meeting. We sat down, placing ourselves so that none of us would be facing Sir Snotface jr., just in case any of us was unable to suppress his laughter. We also carefully avoided to look in Sir Snotface jr.'s direction, to account for our ignorance of his presence.

Samuel began, speaking very loudly, to make sure Sir Snotface jr. heard him properly.

"Well, now that we're all here, we will begin the meeting. John has asked that we'd assemble. Why is that, John?"

"Well, John yelled, I came up with this great idea that would enable us to easily and quickly destroy the NPB."

"What is it?" Charles enquired, very loudly.

"We could make our planes, even ourselves, invincible. And then, the NPB would have no chance!"

"That's great, but how," my brother hollered.

"By covering our planes with water-proof plastic! And we could even wear rain-coats, to protect ourselves!"

"Hey!! That's a great idea!" bellowed Mortimer.

"Yes, but there's one problem," countered Samuel, quite forcibly.

"What is that?" demanded Patrick, at the top of his lungs.

"Ethics, Samuel thunderously proclaimed, I think it wouldn't be a fair fight. The odds would be too greatly in our favor. I refuse to make use of such degrading practices."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It wouldn't be much fun, either: there wouldn't be any thrill, any danger," I declared, blaring.

"True, true. I just hope that the NPB don't get hold of this: it would be our certain downfall," pointed out Patrick, provoking the sudden departure of a flock of frightened,

deafened birds.

"Yeah, we sure hope no one was listening to this very important, secret meeting," a flushed Charles concluded.

Stefano then motioned that Sir Snotface jr. was no longer there, and we congratulated ourselves on our brilliant performance.

"Samantha!! Samantha!!"

"What is it, like, now, like, Sir Snotface jr.?"

"I spied on those stupid jerks, and guess what?"

"Like, what?"

"This is what I learned..." Sir Snotface jr. then proceeded to recount the conversation he had overheard.

"Like, they are like, so dumb. It's, like, an awesome idea, except, like, the part about the raincoats. Like, I would look like, so stupid in one of those! I refuse, like, to put one on. And that, like, goes for all of you two!! Wait till, like, Li Chang Yen learns about, like, this. We can, like, get our revenge, like, now!"

"So you're happy, huh? Aren't you? Does that mean I can join your group now? Huh, does it? Does it?"

"Like, of course not. Don't be, like, stupid. You can't join my crowd! You haven't, like, told me the secret words."

"What is it?? What is it??"

"I can't tell you, like, stupid. It's a, like, secret."

"Is it please? Pretty please?? PRETTY PLEASE WITH SUGAR ON TOP???"

"No, no, no. Like stop bugging me!"

"Is it 'the caravan goes by but doesn't stop'? Huh?? I'm a getting close?? Common!! Tell me!! Please!" Sir Snotface jr. groveled.

"NO! And, like, that's final."

"Okay, okay... It wouldn't be 'I'm dumber than you are', by any chance..."

The next day, we were pleased to notice that the NPB were nowhere to be seen. We assumed, correctly, that they were in the process of making their planes invincible. Taking advantage of this fact, we began practicing for the big day, which was hopefully soon, for, to our extreme disgust, we only had 3 days of freedom left.

This practice consisted of performing the following aerobatics: we would first execute evasive maneuvers against an imaginary foe, and then dive straight towards the lake, zooming back up at the last second. Eventually, after repeating this for 2 days, we were quite good at it, and able to go straight down until the last possible moment.

It was the last day before school. We were all very anxious (as well as sick), for we hoped that the NPB would be ready before the start of school. Fortunately, we soon found out that they were. As we were proceeding to remove our planes from the old barn, the NPB flew around our field, taunting us. It was obvious, by sight alone, that they had equipped their planes with a protective coating of plastic.

We immediately readied ourselves for combat. We had formerly each chosen our future victims, so as to avoid too much confusion. Thibault was not going to fly, but instead had put on a bathing suit and brought a snorkel and a diving mask.

"You know what to do Thibault, so go ahead and to it!" Samuel directed.

"Aye, aye, sir."

He proceeded towards the lake. Meanwhile, we were ready to fight. Our finest hour had struck, and we weren't late.

We took off and immediately gained some altitude, carefully remaining over our field so that the NPB couldn't interfere. They just watched and gained altitude with us.

Finally, when we decided that we were high enough, which was pretty high, we dove towards the lake, so as to gain speed. The NPB closely followed us, but, caught by surprise, they were unable to catch up, especially considering their plastic slowed them down a bit.

We gradually lost some altitude, but, eventually, we made it over the lake, and we waited for the NPB to join us. Not in the least suspicious, and anxious to test their invincibility, the NPB rapidly did so.

They quickly separated into pairs, each of which chose a victim. Patrick and John, being unlucky, each got 3 followers, for as my brother was absent, there were two NPBs too many.

So, the final situation was the following: I was being closely followed by Geraldon and Moe; Charles was being pursued by Anthony and Daniel, who were yelling obscenities at him whenever he played chicken with them; John, unlucky, was desperately trying to avoid the combination of Li Chang Yen, Marvin and Philipp; Mortimer was having a great time outdistancing, thanks to the Swift Angel, Sir Snoface jr. and Tiffany; Patrick was carefully dodging Matthew's, Joe's and Michael's onslaught; Samuel was chasing Benito and Adolf (no, I didn't inverse the order); and Stefano was playing hard to get with Samantha and Gabrielle.

When we had played around for a while, managing, thanks to our intensive practice, to avoid being shot down, Samuel, realizing everyone was ready, hollered.

"NOW!!"

At that precise moment, all of the Crazy Eight dove down towards the lake. We refrained from going down to fast, so as to make sure our somewhat fragile wings wouldn't rip off because of excessive strain.

The wind blew past my face, whizzed past my ears, and messed my hairdo (not that I actually combed myself, though). The hard ground seemed increasingly harder as it grew in my sights. Realizing I was not exactly over the lake, I redressed the situation by pulling a bit on my joystick. My wings creaked ominously. I was now heading straight for the glimmering lake. My pursuers were still close behind me, and they had not noticed our mass maneuver, being to intent on, they believed, the easy kill they were about to score.

As the lake approached, I was able to spot some shadowy forms through the clear lake: fish. One of them, which I had been searching for, was a bit bigger and strangely human like. Yes, my brother.

Anyway, these visions confirmed the fact that I was presently too close for comfort, and I slowly pulled my joystick to level out. My opponents attempted to do the same, but the plastic covering their wings and tails slowed down the plane's response.

"YOWZERS!! MY DAMN [censored] PLANE ISN'T BUDGING!! [censored]!!" cried out Geraldon.

"HEY!! What's going on! That's funny. My plane isn't going back up. In fact, I'm going to crash into the lake any second now. Humm... Maybe something's wrong. I wonder if I should jump..." I heard Moe pondering as his plane rapidly approached the water.

My plane having leveled, I peered behind to witness Geraldon and Moe hurling themselves into the water. They hit the water just as their planes did. Two huge thunderclaps resounded across the lake, closely followed by 14 others. Debris cluttered the lake's shimmering surface. Geraldon's green red and purple biplane was slowly sinking into oblivion. Its propeller was floating lifelessly down, and two of the wings, which had been ripped off because of the tremendous impact. Moe's wasn't in a much better state.

Mortimer was roaring with laughter when he saw Sir Snoface jr.'s nauseated face glaring at him. Samuel was looking at the victims disdainfully. Charles was making faces at them. John was insulting them, pretty lame ones, if you ask me. Stefano was laughing irrepressibly. Patrick was smiling and looking superior.

Suddenly, between the floating wreckage, appeared what seemed to be a shark's fin. It moved slowly, as if stalking its prey, and headed for Sir Snoface jr.. Seeing the fin, the

latter went into convulsions, whimpered, babbled, and began swimming (undoubtedly beating the world's record) towards the shore, all the while hollering.

"THE SHARK!! MOMMY!! SHARK!!! AHHHHH!"

The rest of the NPB soon spotted the killer as well, and in no time (believe me...), they were out of the water.

They then watched morosely as the shark patrolled around the wreckage. As they were a lot too terrified to actually step into the water to salvage what was left of their planes, these, now water-logged, slowly sank down into the clear lake.

Victory.

So, finally, we all became official aces, in fact, the final tally was: Amaury, 11 kills; Charles, 8 kills; John, 6 kills; Mortimer, 8 kills; Patrick, 6 kills; Samuel, 11 kills; Stefano, 5 kills; Thibault, 5 kills. Samuel and I even received the coveted Bully Blaster Badge. As for the others, they were fully satisfied with the title of ace, as they realized that Samuel and I were just lucky bums who hogged all the planes. Even Thibault, who was furious because of his score, decided that he was actually a great pilot, just not very lucky.

Anyway, we were able to fully take advantage of our planes, as there were no longer any NPB to interfere. In fact, they kept away from us during the whole year. They were holding a terrible grudge against us, but were too embarrassed to do anything about it, at least with all our classmates around. So everything was perfectly peaceful, at least until the next summer...

But, whatever happens, we will overcome, because:

MIND MASTERS MUSCLE.

A SUNKEN VACATION.

*DEDICATED TO OUR BELOVED, DEPARTED GUINEA PIG,
DOMINO.*

*MAY HE FIND SALAD TO BE PLENTIFUL IN HEAVEN
WHILE HE AWAITS US THERE.*

*AND FURTHER DEDICATED
TO THE BEAGLE WHO SUCCEEDED HIM,
BANDIT.*

MAY HE REMAIN WITH US FOR MANY MORE YEARS TO COME.

Well, there we were. On one of the innumerable, abandoned islands somewhere off Mexico, smack in the middle of the Pacific. How did this happen, you ask? And I thought you were paying attention! Gosh darn it, I'll have to start all over again from the beginning!

"I can't believe it!! Our parents actually did this to us!!" exclaimed Thibault, my brother.

"They'll regret it!! Mark my words!!" ominously swore Patrick.

"It's so unfair!!" sighed Samuel.

"I refuse to go to that stupid 'Happy Kid's Summer Camp'!! I've never gone to a summer camp before, and I'm not about to start now!!" I asserted.

"I *hate* summer camps!!" moaned Charles.

"I can't believe it!! They're going to Asia, while we stay stuck in some sort of crummy 'Happy Kid's Summer Camp'!!" protested John.

"I know, I know!!" groaned Stefano.

"Well, at least we're all going together!" Mortimer pointed out.

"Oh boy, oh boy! Just what I've always wanted!" my brother grumbled sarcastically.

This comment effectively made us all sullen. After a few moments of consideration, I proposed.

"Why don't we run away?"

"Where? How? Anyway, it's impossible: our parent's would easily find us again," objected Samuel.

"Oh well..."

"Now be careful: don't catch a cold or anything," cautioned my mom. "Your towels are in your big blue bag. And remember: don't swim during a thunderstorm. Oh, and I almost forgot: we can't leave a phone number because our tour doesn't stop at predetermined areas. And we won't call you, unless there's an emergency, because long-distance phone calls are very, very expensive. So don't worry if you don't get any news from us. If anything should go wrong, just call grandma, or one of your uncles. Oh yes, my friend Shayla is also there. Let's see... Is there anything else? Oh yes..." and so on.

"Miriam, we're going to be late..." notified my father, while glancing at his watch.

"Oh yes... of course. Well, I think that's all. Now come and kiss me good-bye," she began weeping.

Here follows an affectionate and slightly embarrassing farewell scene which I'll refrain from relating.

Finally, our parents jumped in the cab, my mom still sobbing.

Anyway, we were left standing in front of the "Happy Kid's Summer Camp" (what a moronic name). We went inside, my brother carrying Domino.

"*He!!!*o there! I'll be your monitor during your stay at HAPPY KID'S SUMMER CAMP!! Our motto is: Your parents want it, you get it -whether you like it or not-!! Now let me show you to your rooms!!" went some dweeby guy, while pushing us across a hall.

The wall was lined with doors, from which came sobbing, crying and moaning. Very promising, indeed.

After about ten minutes' walk, we reached door number 546, and 548. The dweeb whipped an impressive amount of keys from his pocket, went through all of them conscientiously, and finally picked one of them. He shoved one it into number 548, heaved the door open, and shoved my brother inside. He then did the same for me, except with door number 548.

I found myself in a barren cell (I wouldn't really qualify it as a room). The furniture was very meager, at best. Just out of my reach, there was a tiny window, adorned with strong bars. A simple bed had been fixed to the floor, in a corner. Next to it, there was a small table and a chair. And that was all.

"Oh boy! Just great..." I muttered.

I heaved my belongings onto the chair, and then let myself collapse on the bed.

"And to say I'm gonna be stuck here all summer vacation long! I don't believe it..." I grumbled, "I don't even know where they put my friends! They could be anywhere in this huge place!"

Depressed, I decided to go see how my brother was doing: nothing helps a crummy mood more than spreading it around...

But I found the massive door to be firmly locked. Not about to give up so easily, I hammered at the wall separating my brother and me. I heard a faint reply.

"Yes?"

"Thibault?"

"Yes. Amaury?"

"Isn't this place crummy?"

"It sure is! And do you know where the rest of us are?"

"I have no idea."

"By the way, what time is it? I can't find my watch."

"Oh... It's about 12:30."

"When do you eat in this place? I'm starving."

"I have no idea..."

"Hey, someone's coming..."

I listened attentively and heard footsteps, mutters and doors slam. My door was opened.

"Hey kid! Lunch time!" fleetingly yelled a monitor, as he moved on to another room.

I went outside to find my brother. Around us, thousands of kids were storming down the hallway. We decided to join the frenzy and began the long walk to the cafeteria. I kept a sharp look-out for any of our friends, but the number of children -girls and boys aged from 6 to 16- overwhelmed me. I felt as if we were being herded like a bunch of cattle about to be slaughtered. I shuddered at the thought.

Half an hour later, we reached a tremendous, imposing, almost majestic cafeteria. *At least* 5000 kids were already seated, with many more coming to join them from the multitude of entrances that lined the walls. A terrible clamor drowned any sound we uttered. I surveyed the mass in order to find our friends. In vain. I turned towards my brother. He looked panicked.

"What's wrong Thibault?"

"WHAT?"

"EXCUSE ME?"

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!!!"

"WHAT?????"

"HUH?????"

"SPEAK LOUDER!!!!!"

"WHAT???????"

Exasperated, I whipped out a note-pad and pencil and scribbled: *Thibault, let's sit down and eat. We'll think of what do to later.* He read and nodded briskly.

We chose a nearly unoccupied table, sat, and waited, assuming we'd be served. Eventually, the amount of newcomers decreased and finally ceased completely. The whole camp was present.

"SILENCE!!!!!!!!!!!!!" thundered a voice.

All the noise was stifled, as if by magic.

Once I had recovered my normal hearing abilities, I looked at the ceiling and realized that the order had come down from a quantity of loud-speakers placed overhead. They thundered once more.

"WELCOME TO HAPPY KID'S SUMMER CAMP!!!! WE WISH YOU A HAPPY AND FUN STAY HERE!!!! YOU HAVE BEEN PROVIDED WITH THE CAMP'S RULES AND SCHEDULES, WHICH CAN BE FOUND IN YOUR TABLE'S DRAWER!!!! IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS FEEL FREE TO ASK ONE OF OUR NICE, FRIENDLY MONITORS!!!! UNDERSTAND???? [silence]. I SAID UNDERSTAND????"

We finally figured out that he wanted us to respond, and a few kids murmured "yes".

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!!!! UNDERSTAND?????"

A slightly louder "yes" followed.

"WHAT?????"

Suddenly, a kid hollered.

"OKAY ALREADY!! WE SAID WE GOT IT!! SO SHUDDUP NOW!!!"

Stares converged towards him, and it dawned on me that this was none other than a member of the NPB: Marvin. I then recognized the other members of the NPB sitting around him.

"*Just great!*" I reflected.

Then, another voice rang out.

"WHY DON'T YOU SHUT UP, Marvin??"

To my delight, I distinctly identified Stefano.

"HEY STEF!! WE'RE HERE!!" hollered my brother.

"SO THERE YOU ARE!!" he exclaimed as he walked towards us.

"HEY!! AMAURY!! I'M HERE!!" yelled someone, which proved to be Mortimer.

"YO!! THIBAULT!!" shouted Charles, as he dashed towards us.

"What the... What's going on here?? I don't believe this! Who are these kids?" went the loud speakers.

The rest of the kids, having overcome their initial torpor, began giggling.

"STOP!!!! SILENCE!!!! WILL YOU KIDS SHUT UP!!!!" thundered the loud speakers.

But the laugh was now uncontrollable. Chaos was rearing its ugly head. Taking advantage of the situation, we were able to find each other and to regroup.

"We sure made a mess," grinned John.

"Yes, and the monitors mustn't be too happy about all this..." pointed out Patrick.

"Yes, that's true. We'll probably have them on our tails any second now," supposed Samuel.

"Well then, let's get outta here!!" suggested Charles.

"You mean run away?" my brother wondered.

"Yeah, split!" defined Stefano.

"Are you crazy?? They'll easily catch up with us!!" warned Patrick.

"And we have nowhere to go!" John added.

"If we stay, the monitors are going to kill us," Charles pointed out.

"And how do you figure that out? We didn't do anything bad," Samuel challenged.

"Well, we didn't do anything good either. Anyway, I want to get out of this place!" Stefano decided.

"It's worth a try!" I decided, and, before giving anybody the opportunity to protest, I hollered.

"REVOLUTION!!!!!"

Every kid responded to the call by jumping up, yelling, and running madly around the cafeteria. Satisfied with my effect, I headed for the nearest exit, followed closely by the rest of us: our cards were played. At this moment, a special commando force of approximately 50 monitors flooded the cafeteria from the main door. They were rapidly assaulted by a mass of unruly kids. As far as we could now see, the coast was completely clear: we had to take advantage of it.

As we reached the door, my brother screamed.

"DOMINO!! I left him in our room!!!!!"

"Great!! *Just* great!!" sighed Samuel.

"Well, we might as well stop at our rooms to get our stuff: we'll probably need it. Anyway, the monitors have enough problems to take care of right now!" suggested John.

"Yes, but we'll lose ourselves again: our rooms probably aren't close to each other," cautioned Mortimer.

"Well let's just come up with a meeting place: how about hallway 1," proposed Charles.

"Okay! Does everyone know where that is? Good," checked John.

"So hallway 1 it is," concluded Samuel.

"See you!"

"Yeah, bye for now..."

We all went our separate directions.

My brother and I were able to reach our rooms in just over ten minutes, thanks to our rapid pace. We quickly grabbed our stuff, that we had fortunately left packed, and rushed outside.

"It's about time! NEEK! Abandoning me like that without any salad!! NEEK! Shame on you!! NEEK!!" protested Domino as we headed for hallway 1.

We reached it about 15 minutes later.

"Here's Thibault and Amaury! That leaves just Samuel and John," announced Stefano.

"I hope they hurry!" went Charles impatiently.

They arrived together about 5 minutes later.

"Okay!! Now we can really split!!" declared Charles.

"Are you really sure you want to do this?? They can easily trace us down, and we have nowhere to hide... And to make things even worse, how can we get back home?? We have no one to drive us, no money..." Patrick inquired.

"I have some money. Enough for a taxi anyway..." suggested Stefano.

"Do you actually think a taxi driver would let a bunch of kids ride a taxi? And where do you think we'll find one in the middle of a Virginian forest??"

"Listen, we're lucky enough to have gotten this far. Eventually, they'll be able to control the cafeteria, and then we'll be dead meat. Let's run now and straighten things out afterward. Anyway, I'd rather sleep in the street rather than stay any longer in this crummy place!" settled Mortimer.

This having been effectively resolved, we ran towards the exit. But as we passed what seemed to be the enlistment office, Samuel suddenly stopped and dashed inside.

"What's the matter Samuel?" I demanded.

"I just got a great idea!!" he exclaimed.

He then rushed towards the nearest computer and accessed the files of all the children that had joined the camp that season. I began understanding. His fingers flickering on the keyboard, he began to erase any information concerning us.

"You're a genius," complimented John.

"There! Now, like I can tell that this place's whole computer system is linked, I was able to delete all the files in this whole establishment that concern us, so that now they won't be able to trace us down..."

"Great! Like, now you can do the same for ours. Like, cool," cackled Samantha.

The *NPB* had traced us down, and now that nobody was around to see them, they were anxious to get revenge for what we had done last summer to their airplanes.

"Why don't you do it yourselves, or are you too stupid?" sneered Stefano.

"Okay, like, you asked for it!! Get'em!!" she ordered.

A battle erupted. Even though they outnumbered us 2 to 1, we were still able to keep them off for we were fighting out of despair: we didn't want to stick around any longer to get caught by the monitors. As we struggled, Li Chang Yen began erasing the *NPB*'s files two.

My brother finally had an opportunity to use his Tae Kwan Do, which had never come in really handy before-hand. It worked relatively well, of course Mortimer was doing just as well with brute force and Samuel was also doing very well thanks to plain determination and ruthlessness. Patrick was using cunning maneuvers which he had certainly seen on comedy shows. Stefano and John were just throwing whatever they could get their hands on at their opponents. And Charles and I were just doing a little of everything, depending on who we were up against. Oh, and of course Domino would bite anything that got close to him.

Ultimately, we were able to assemble ourselves with our backs towards the door, while the NPB were against the opposing wall. Seeing our chance, we bolted outside and locked the door behind us. The NPB were infuriated.

"YOU SISSIES!!!"

"COME BACK IF YOU DARE!!!"

"Like, I ORDER you to let us out, like, or else!!!"

Grinning to ourselves we then dashed towards the exit.

"There they are!!! GET THEM!!!"

A party of monitors had successfully exited the cafeteria and were now on our tails. This stimulated us to run even faster. Finally, we made it to the exit. We were then faced with a huge predicament: where to go, and how.

"Hurry, they're catching up with us!!!"

"I got it: aren't we near First Flight Field?"

"Yes... why???"

"Let's go there for now!!!"

"But how?? And we don't now where it is exactly from here!!!"

Then, we saw an empty van that was now ready to leave, engine running. Mortimer looked at it and grinned. Noticing him, Samuel protested.

"You can't possibly be thinking..."

Mortimer's grin stretched as he nodded.

"Oh God... We're in trouble!!!"

Mortimer hopped into the driver's seat.

"Do you know what'll happen to us if we..."

"GET THEM!!!" commanded a monitor.

Overcome by the turn of events, we resigned ourselves and jumped into the van.

"You don't even know how to drive!" protested Patrick.

"I do to... kind of," reassured Mortimer.

He slammed the accelerator. The engine roared but we didn't budge.

"The brakes!! The brakes you idiot!!!" hollered Samuel.

"Sorry!!!"

He released the brakes and the car brutally leapt forward, as the bewildered monitors watched helplessly.

"YEHAHAH!!!" went Charles.

"Now where do we go?" inquired John.

"Just lose them while I try to find a map," I told Mortimer.

I found an old, dilapidated map in the glove compartment. We all bent over it as Mortimer did his best to keep the van under control.

"Oh! I see where we are! Okay... Take the next right," directed Samuel.

Mortimer swerved to the right. The wheels skidded madly as we just missed a tree.

"ARE YOU CRAZY!!!" hollered Samuel.

"Well at least we didn't crash!!!" comforted Mortimer.

"Arghh..."

"Okay, now take the next left," directed Patrick.

Eventually, and even for Mortimer's slightly peculiar driving, we reached our destination safe and sound.

"But we aren't there yet!" protested Stefano.

"We're going to abandon the car here and continue by foot," explained Mortimer.

"But why?" questioned my brother.

"Because we don't want them to trace us to our hangar. And furthermore, we couldn't possibly keep a van at the barn!" further elucidated Samuel.

"But they can easily locate it here, and then throw some dogs after us, or something..." Charles pointed out.

"Well, let's confuse them," proposed Stefano.

"How?"

"We'll make it look like we didn't stop here by letting the car roll off farther away..." he illustrated.

"Nah... too dangerous. And they could still trace us down by calling some experts," challenged Patrick.

"Hey!! I got it! There are plenty of lakes around here... catch my drift?" Charles hinted at.

"That's a great idea!! Quick, where's the nearest one?" requested Samuel.

"That she goes!!" bellowed John as the van sank beneath the surface.

"Okay, now let's quickly obliterate all the evidence and get out of here..." I ordered. This was expertly accomplished. We then headed towards our base.

"What do we do now?" interrogated Stefano.

"We can't return to our houses: our neighbors would become suspicious seeing us without our parents and all..." pointed out Patrick.

"True, very true," admitted Mortimer.

"Well, we could stay here," suggested my brother.

"For the whole summer vacation!! And what would we eat??" objected Samuel.

"Well then, what do we do? We could give ourselves up..."

"Never!"

"Well, considering our parents are having fun, we might as well have fun two: let's go someplace!" proposed Charles.

"Where? And how? We don't have any money!" criticized John.

"Yes we do: I got fifty bucks from my parents," disclosed Thibault.

"So did I," admitted Charles.

"And I got 100," confessed Patrick.

We finally found out that if we pooled all our resources together, we had the very quaint sum of one thousand dollars.

"Wow!! One thousand dollars! That's a lot of money..." conceded John.

"Not really, actually. It costs my mom about one hundred dollars a week to feed a family of four, and we're eight: that makes 200 a week. We can just live on our own for about 5 weeks," calculated Samuel.

"And that's only if we had a place to cook! And then only if we actually knew how to cook!" defined Stefano.

"We *could* try to hide-out in our houses..." suggested Charles.

"Too dangerous..." rejected Patrick once more.

"Well then, what do we do!!" I impatiently demanded.

"Let's just go back to the camp..."

"After all we did to get out of it!! Come on!!"

"Well, we can only live about 1 month in the U.S., but how about if we go to a less-expensive country... like Mexico," contemplated Mortimer.

"Are you crazy? Where would we sleep? And how would we get there??" protested Patrick.

"Easy: we can camp out. And getting there is even easier: we have airplanes remember..." pointed out Mortimer.

"That's a great idea!! We can camp out in a pretty deserted area, and feed ourselves by fishing and gathering fruit and stuff! It'll be great!!" acknowledged Charles.

"But... but..."

"Well, considering all the trouble we got ourselves into, what's the worse that can happen? It's the only thing we have left..." realized Stefano.

"But why Mexico? We can easily camp out in a more accessible place!" pointed out Patrick.

"Well, why not Mexico? It is our vacation after all! We should be able to visit new countries. Anyway, this place is too populated..." decided Mortimer.

"Well, there's always Canada!" proposed Patrick.

"Canada's too cold!" I laughed.

"It is not!"

"Listen, Mexico sounds nice this time of year anyways. Let's fetch our camping gear at our houses -during the night, so as to avoid our neighbors suspicious glances- and head for Mexico!" determined Charles.

"I don't believe this..."

"Let's go!"

"NEEK! WAIT! You haven't told me in whose plane I ride! And you could at least help me with my stuff!" Domino neekered, while painstakingly dragging behind him loads full of pasteurized, grade A, moist salad.

"But! Domino! You aren't coming with us! Anyways, we aren't even leaving right now!" someone pointed out.

"He's right! But what *do* we do about Domino then? We can't leave him here, but he'll be a tremendous burden..." pointed out Samuel.

"HEY!! NEEK!! I'm no burden!! You should consider yourselves blessed to have me!! NEEK!!"

"Oh, who cares!! We'll just take him and see what happens!" decided Thibault.

"Are you crazy?? We can't take him!! It would be a lot too dangerous!!" opposed Patrick.

"Yes, I'm afraid he's right, Thibault... We must leave him here. We'll leave him in a pet hotel or something..." I decided.

"But..."

"VERY FUNNY! NEEEK! Listen, I have no time to lose, so step on it! Who is my lucky pilot?"

"But it's not a joke! I'm sorry Domino, but we just can't bring you. How can I say this? Well... it's just because you're so much of a responsibility!"

"WHAT! NEEK! I'm not `so much of a responsibility'! I am perfectly capable of watching out for myself! I was looking forward to a vacation! NEEEK! I'm always so nice to you! And what do I get in return? NADA! I'm coming whether you want it or not! Why the mere idea of you leaving without me!"

"No Domino! No can do! You're going to stay here like a nice pig, and if you don't misbehave, then you'll get a little prize. "What kind of a prize? NEEEK!"

"What would you say to a few kilos of ... salad!"

"Say what! NEEEK! Hummm... What you're asking from me is a terrible sacrifice, but I guess things can be arranged! NEEEK!"

"Good then! Just you act like a little gentlem... pig, and you will get your just

deserves!"

"Anyway, you'll probably crash, NEEEEK! Unless you're eaten by wolves first. So I'm not that sorry! NEEEEK! In fact, I'm grateful you're leaving without me! NEEEEK!"

Having arranged that little matter, we planned to get all our stuff the same night, put Domino in a pet hotel, and leave the next day.

We all knew we were attempting something completely crazy, but it was the only thing we could (and wanted) think of rather than remaining in Happy Kid's Summer Camp.

My brother and I took our collapsible fishing poles, diverse camping gear, and our tent, that could easily fit six of us. We had to be extremely picky though, because our planes hadn't been intended to carry large amounts of cargo, so we had to choose what we believed to be the most necessary equipment. We also left Domino at a pet motel.

"How much is it, sir?"

"50 bucks a month."

"Oohh... That's a lot. I guess we'd better pay out of our allowances. Okay Thibault?"

"Yeah. We need all those other 1000..."

"Well? Are you leaving him here or not?"

"I guess so. Here. We'll be back in about 2 months."

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!! NEEK!!"

"Bye Domino. Sorry we had to do this to you," sniffled my brother.

We left, feeling miserable.

"Hey!! WAIT!! KIDS!! COME BACK HERE!!" yelled the manager.

Afraid that he had become suspicious of us, we played deaf and walked away quickly.

"Let's see now... 2 tents... 2 fishing poles... batteries... flashlights... map... mini-barbecue... charcoal... etc..." enumerated Samuel.

"I think we're ready," concluded Mortimer.

"Okay, now let's load all this stuff into our planes. I think we'd better put the tents and the mini-barbecue in Mortimer's plane. After all, it's the fastest," suggested John.

"Okay," accepted Mortimer.

Meanwhile...

"So... that's what they're going to do... I'd better warn Samantha!"

"Samantha!! Samantha!!"

"Yes, like, what do you want?"

"I spied on them like you told me," reported Sir Snotface jr., "And, thanks to my amazing courage and acute hearing, I was able to find out what they're planning!!"

"Like, what is it?"

"They're going to Mexico!" he proudly announced, "Now can I be part of your club??"

"What?? [censored]! Now how are we going to, like, get revenge on them??"

"Can I?? Please!! Pretty please!!" insisted Sir Snotface jr..

"Like, WILL YOU SHUT UP!! No!! You can't, like, be part of us..."

"*Why* not??" whimpered Sir Snotface jr..

"Did you find out, like, Charles's shoe size??" demanded Samantha.

"No... not yet," admitted Sir Snotface jr..

"Well, like, until then, you can't be part of us..."

"But... ohh..."

"We could follow them to Mexico," proposed Li Chang Yen, "After all, we can't stick around here..."

"Yeah... I guess so... Like, here's what we're going to do..."

The following day, we made some last-minute check-ups, and climbed into our planes.

The cold, gusty wind blew into our enthusiastic faces as we took off. My nine year old brother was the first one off. His good friend, Stefano, followed. John was right on Stef's tail. Not far behind appeared Charles. Then came Mortimer. Right behind him succeeded Samuel. On Samuel's trail came Patrick. And finally, I took-off.

The planes rose slowly, like kites, into the blue, cloudless sky. I loved that feeling of freedom, of complete control, that I acquired during these peaceful, exalting moments.

We all gathered on top of the airfield, then zoomed passed it, heading straight for Mexico, thinking of what was awaiting us there: FUN!

But, we still had a long way ahead of us, even though we had chosen to employ the most direct route: we had to fly across Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana and finally Texas before reaching Mexico. All in all, about 2400 km.! But, thanks to our great engineering skills (and a book I seriously suggest to all you gullible workaholics: "How to Build a Powerful Engine in 2 Easy Lessons!" (and 40 easy bucks for the author...)), we had built new engines for our "babies".

We could now reach 200 km/hour! This was a great advantage for us, and we intended to use it ardently. We expected it to take us 12 hours of non-stop flight to reach El Paso, Texas. But, of course, we needed to stop along the way to refuel and feed ourselves.

Little did we know that at this precise moment, the NPB were also in the skies, and following close on our tails.

I'll refrain from closely describing the flight from here to there, when I can do it in one single adjective: Booring! Hey, don't start thinking my tastes deserve to be flushed down the toilet, or that I have something against American scenery, but I'm used to relative action, and being stuck in a small, not especially comfortable, plane for hours on end did not agree with my temperament too much. I almost attacked my fellow flyers in despair for some action! (I did throw a few water balloons on Charles, though...).

Carefully avoiding any pretty populated areas, to escape detection, we were at the planned destination, Texas, exactly 1 day later (our halts, including sleeping, totaled 24 hours).

We refueled, dined, slept, and the next morning, we were as good as new, which doesn't mean we were in great shape, just as good as new.

"Common, wake up sleepyheads! It's only 5 in the morning! What a sad bunch of lazy bums. I guess I'll have to use plan B."

Soon, the rest of the dripping wet bunch joined me to eat breakfast, after having thrown that early-bird Charles into the frigid waters of the Golf of Mexico (he deserved it!). We sped through breakfast, did some last-minute check-ups, and then took off from the Lone Star State. A few minutes later, we were over the border, and on our way to Fun!

I turned around for a last look at the United States. That's when I saw the NPB on our tails, closing in on us!

"Mayday! Mayday! Boogers (no, I don't mean bogeys...) right behind us! Battle Stations! AAOOUUGAA! AAOOUUGAA! (O.K., so I got carried away!)"

"Very funny, Amaury! This is the fifth time you try to trick us this trip! Your pathetic efforts are useless!," answered Mortimer, without turning around.

"BUT IT'S TRUE! I SWEAR! WHY BLAST IT ALL, IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, I'LL JUST SAVE MY OWN SKIN!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure Amaury. Just do that. We're not falling for this!" continued Mortimer, firmly.

"Just ignore him, guys, he's just making himself interesting," added Thibault, with a slight accent of uncertainty.

Well I didn't wait around for them to believe me, which would have been vain, they knew me too well... As soon as I turned to face the incoming danger, John, not being able to stand it any longer, turned around.

"AAHH! He's not lying! The NPB followed us! Quick!"

By that time, I had already realized the sad fact that we had neglected to reload our water guns. We were sitting ducks! Lucky for me, I had brought along an extensive supply of water balloons that I had reserved for Charles, but this was an emergency! They were already filled, so I zoomed up to one of the bastards, and threw it into her face. Sue began to drastically lose altitude. As I watched, a mighty wind began steadily blowing us briskly westward, without any of us perceiving it at the time.

While I just continued giving freezing cold showers to all those who really needed one. (I splashed my brother...), Mortimer amused himself by outrunning the enemies, Charles headed right for them till they broke off only to splash into the water, Stefano pretended to be still able to shoot and terrified a girl by flying on her tail yelling "Tacatacataca! Tacatacataca!", Patrick was making a bunch sick telling them his jokes, Thibault was having a hilarious time confusing them with diverse acrobatics, and Samuel forced a few to splash into the water. So, actually, it wasn't so bad, and we were able to do very well without our ordinary weapons.

As Samuel downed one more plane, I realized something was terribly wrong.

"WHAT THE HECK ARE WE DOING OVER WATER!!"

"Oh my god! The wind must of blown us over the Golf!" suggested Samuel as he finally discerned the powerful wind.

"But this wind is blowing westward!!" Patrick pointed out.

"What the..."

But before we knew it, the storm struck with all its fury. And we were blown, uncontrolled, like dead leaves on a gusty autumn day, across the black sky, blazing with thunder, to an unknown destination, except to God himself. (or Allah, or Buddha, depending on your religion.)

I lost contact with the others. The hard, icy, rain blinded me terribly. I couldn't see the end of my own nose. The worst part about it was that my darn nose was itching like crazy, and due to the impossibility of spotting it, I couldn't do anything about it! I soon forgot about it though, for the simple reason that I was busier trying to survive than bothering to scratch my proboscis.

The gusty wind blew with a hellish force, and the cold was biting me mercilessly. I tried desperately to keep my plane over the deadly waves, but I hadn't the slightest idea if my efforts were succeeding or not. For all I knew, I was maybe flying upside down! The sound of the whistling wind and roaring thunder covered any others, so I was, in all the sense of the word, lost.

Lucky for me, I'm used to flying by the seat of my pants, so the controls being invisible to me wasn't a big problem, the major problem was the gale. I fought with all my might, but that still wasn't good enough... I had to face the truth: I was in big, big trouble! Fleeting thoughts passed through my head, most of them resembling "Amen", or, "May my soul rest in peace", or even, "Bye, bye birdie!". But I didn't lose all hope! What really helped was the thought of all the pranks I wouldn't be able to play, and all the money I wouldn't make if I went "Kapooie!".

Then, as rapidly as it had appeared, the storm faded away, leaving one very happy boy, indeed! Before all, I thanked God and swore never to become an atheist. My second reaction was to look around to see if my buddies were O.K.. I did a complete 360 with my craft, but failed to spot anything. At first, I couldn't believe the awful truth, so I did another 360. In vain. The sky was empty, except for a few cloudy remnants of the atrocious storm.

Dismal reflections came to my mind at the thought of never seeing my mate Thibault, nor my good yet annoying pal Patrick, nor that great yet slightly sadistic Samuel, nor my old yet kind of immature buddy Mortimer, as well as all of Thibault's friends, yet also mine: John, Charles, and Stefano.

I turned around once more for one last farewell to their poor souls, when I spotted 1, no 2, no 4, no 5, no 7 little dots pop out of a single cloud! At first I thought, "How could they all fit in there?", followed by, "They're alive!". I put full throttle to meet them.

"I thought you guys were goners! Too bad..." I managed to joke.

"Hey!!" went Charles. "That isn't very nice!!"

"How are you doing Amaury? We thought you had failed to make it! Everybody's fine!" replied Sam (if he'll excuse the abbreviation).

"Thank god we're all here! But what happened to the NPB?" demanded Mortimer.

"Who cares? We have better things to do than worry about those dumbbells! For example finding food and shelter!" declared John.

"Yeah, I'm starving!" added Charles.

"Hey what's that there? Do I see what I think I see?" asked Thibault.

"LAND! LAND HO! WE'RE SAVED!" yelled Stefano.

This whole conversation had taken place in flight, and, during it, we had approached what seemed to be a small Island. It's unnecessary to say that we were overjoyed! What a sight for soar, hungry eyes! We immediately set course for it.

"Wait a minute! How about if it's inhabited by cannibals?" warned my brother.

"Yeah! What will we do if the natives aren't too friendly?" asked a dismayed Charles.

"We'll think about that when we're over boiling pots and surrounded by hungry islanders," I said, grinning at the sight of their faces turning white.

"Don't be silly! There's no such thing!" pointed out John, in an unconvinced tone.

Meanwhile, the Island had approached sensibly, and I could see that a few chickens were all but ready to turn back...

"SILENCE, I yelled, This has gone far enough! We'll do the perfectly obvious thing to do if this should occur!"

"And what, may I ask, is that?" asked Samuel.

"Well, we'll trade Thibault, John and Charles, for them to use however they please, in exchange of freedom for the rest of us!"

I almost died laughing at the sight of their faces! The rest of my companions, excluding Thibault, John and Charles, soon joined me, and the sky reverberated with the sound of laughter.

"Shut up guys! You'll warn the cannibals of our arrival!" was able to mumble a terrified Thibault.

We could now clearly see all the geographical details of our haven. The center was occupied by a large, fuming volcano, which loomed over an extensive, dark lake covered by a bunch of small Islands. The rest could be described by three words: green, luxuriant jungle. The Island itself was surrounded by crystal-clear waters. It was a beautiful sight to behold! Especially when it meant food for a bunch of famished kids. Samuel suggested that we contour the Island to evaluate the situation and to find a suitable landing space. We all agreed, and set out to do so. Thibault made sure there were no natives while we searched for a place to land. We easily found several, ravaged clearings on the "mainland" that had been caused by the storm, but we chose a reasonably big, flat, mostly treeless island that was about in the middle of the lake. We picked it for it would be an ideal refuge from dangerous animals that possibly roamed the jungle.

Patrick volunteered to land first, to make sure it was all right. He started to undertake a slow, cautious approach from the south. He aligned himself perfectly with the small Island and did a three-pointer. (perfect landing, in pilot jargon) The rest of us imitated him, and soon we were all crowded on the island. Now I can take it from where I left off at the beginning.

"Being the eldest of us, declared Samuel, I will preside over this meeting. You may

only speak when I grant you permission. First of all, let's get things clear: we were, following a thunderstorm, blown to this Island. No injuries, human or otherwise, have been reported. We have, Thank God, discovered this temporary shelter. It is now approaching night-time, so we must prepare a dinner and a temporary hide-out. This being the absolute necessity at the moment, we must organize ourselves accordingly. Amaury and Stefano, you being the only ones who have a lot of fishing experience are in charge of catching a few fish for our subsistence. Mortimer and Patrick, you're in charge of setting up the tents. John and Thibault will try to bring us some plants to add to our diet. That includes nuts, berries, and anything else that isn't poisonous. Charles and I will collect firewood. Execution!"

"Uhh... truth is that during the battle with the NPB, I did one looping too many, and all the cargo I was carrying fell out..." admitted Mortimer

"WHAT?? You mean we don't have the tents or barbecue??"

"I'm afraid so..."

"Just great!! Oh well, just try to make some sort of shelter..."

Half-an-hour later, I was silently meditating over our predicament while waiting for some mentally-retarded fish to actually bite my unappetizing worm. Suddenly, I heard a scream and a huge splash!

"Stef! Are you all right? What happened?" I yelled out. He appeared, smiling, "Got you!"

A few seconds later, he was really wading in the lake.

Obviously, this didn't help our fishing too much, so we made a truce, and waited patiently. The lake soon proved to be full of retards, and we had more than enough for all ten of us.

"Glad to see you actually caught something! Personally, I thought you..." my brother didn't have the time to finish, he became too busy testing the dampness of the water.

Mortimer and Patrick's shelter proved relatively comfortable, and they had even built a skylight. (they later admitted that the ceiling had actually collapsed there).

Unfortunately, the wood Charles had found seemed to be... particular. When we put it on fire, it emitted a disagreeable odor and some inky smoke, and then some sparkles. Prudent, Samuel ordered us to get away. Fortunately...

"Thar she blows!!" went Mortimer, as the wood suddenly flared, and then detonated with a terrible blast that sent fragments of charred wood flying.

"WOW!" exclaimed Thibault, as he approached the fuming remnants, followed by John.

"I just have to analyze this wood," decided John.

"Yeah," agreed Thibault.

The amateur chemists began gathering more of the wood to conduct experiments.

"Be careful!! That stuff is dangerous!!" Samuel warned.

"Don't worry, we'll be extra careful" said my brother, as he tripped and fell flat on his face.

"Uh oh..." went Patrick.

So we had to interrupt our meal to fetch other combustibles. But soon enough, we were swallowing chunks of "friture de poisson à la retarde", and drinking good, wholesome spring water (BEAHH!). We then began discussing, while Thibault and John did experiments.

"So Samuel, do you have any idea where we are?" questioned Patrick.

"Well, considering that the wind and then the storm both blew westward, we must be somewhere in the Gulf of California or in the Pacific..."

"WHAT?? But we were over Texas just 30 minutes ago!!" Mortimer protested.

"Sometimes winds can reach very high speeds... this one must have reached at least 400 km. per hour..."

"Whoah!!"

"So, what are we going to do? We can't stay here all our lives!" enquired Mortimer.

"Oh... I don't know. I wouldn't mind staying here, away from school, homework, chores... I'd be able to survive," I answered.

"We should wait until tomorrow before making any plans. Tomorrow, we can fly over the Island to clearly establish our situation, and take the necessary decisions," suggested Samuel.

"I agree!" I agreed.

"But! We already flew over the Island today! We already know our situation: we're hopelessly stranded on a deserted Island, away from civilization, and with small food supplies," argued Mortimer.

"I disagree entirely: we are not hopelessly stranded, as you put it. Maybe land isn't far off. We didn't look for it today, so we might have missed signs of it. And furthermore, there's plenty of food on this Island, so that's not a problem," protested Patrick.

"I must agree with Patrick! We are perfectly safe here, we can subsist easily with all the equipment we have! Remember, we even have a magnifying glass! (as well as some matches and a lighter I swiped from my father...). So are ability to make a fire when and where we please is beyond doubt," I pointed out.

"Well, anyway, we have to wait for tomorrow to make up our minds, so let's try to do something else right now," declared Thibault, while he spilled some water and dirt on the wood. "You know, if we have to stay a little longer here, we might as well name the places to make it easier to understand each other in the future," decided John, looking up from an analysis.

"Actually, that isn't a half-bad idea, said Charles, let's call this Island: Charles!"

"NO WAY, we'll call it: Stefano Land," declared guess who.

"I think we should call it Rescue Reef," suggested Thibault "But this isn't a reef!" pointed out Samuel.

"Well, Thibault went on, it's sounds good anyway."

"ACK! Duncuff!" (German-speaking readers will excuse me if I have misspelled a word, but I don't currently, or at all, speak German) Samuel said.

"Maybe we could call this land: Amaury's gift! (this was so far the best suggestion)," suggested I, jokingly.

"No, we should call it: Avis Island, in honor of our first plane: Avis," proposed Patrick.

"Hey! I like that! All in favor, say 'I'," I said.

"I," spoke out everyone.

"So be it, We now christen this Island: Avis Island!" addressed Samuel.

We all applauded.

"Now, I propose we call the volcano: Sleeping Furnace," I declared.

"Sounds good, decided Patrick. All in favor say 'I', again." "I, again" said everyone, humorously.

"And the lake should be called: Lake Hospitable," proclaimed John.

"The jungle ought to be called: Tropical Traitor," mused Charles.

"O.K., said Mortimer, all in favor of those two names, say 'I'"

"I," was again unanimously spoken.

We now had a name for all the important features on our Avis Island.

Satisfied and sleepy, we decided it was time to catch some "Z's", and we made for our beds -after convincing Thibault and John to continue their experiments later-, pooped, and completely un-preoccupied about the fate of our enemies, the NPB.

What had in fact happened to them?

"Where am I? What happened? Gosh, my head hurts a lot! Hey!! I remember! Those ----- (please excuse the outrageous language used by these bloody bastards) "*Little Aces*" shot us clean out of the sky! They're lucky we weren't feeling too well, and that we

wanted to show some pity, or else...(yeah, sure)! I hope the others made it through those awesome waves! They look all dead! Samantha, are you all right! -sob- If those ----- killed her they'll regret it!" declared Geraldon.

"Like, where am I? Oh, Geraldon... Are the others, like, all right?" responded Samantha.

"I'm so happy you're O.K., Samantha! I don't know about the others. We're ----- lucky we made it to this place!" continued Geraldon.

They soon discovered the comforting thought that all their forces were in perfect condition to get revenge on us. Little did they know that that was an impossible task to accomplish.

"Now," pronounced Samantha, "When you, like, hear your name, stop me if your plane is, like, completely wrecked. Gabrielle, Matthew, Tiffany, Philipp, Daniel, Anthony, Moe, Sir Snoface jr., Marvin, Joe, Michael, Li Chang Yen, Adolf, Benito and, like, Geraldon. O.K., like, that means that our planes are all in, like, flying condition. We'll repair them, like, first, then eat and tomorrow, like, we'll see."

The dialogue we've just heard took place at about the same time at which I threw Stefano into the frigid waters of the lake. Obviously, the NPB had survived the terrible storm. And, like us, they were stranded on an Island...

"Rise and shine, sleepyheads, trumpeted Charles, The early bird gets the worm! Guys? Guys? Hey, this isn't funny! Guys! Wake up!"

"Quick, get him!"

Foreseeing that he'd do his normal morning routine again, we had prepared an ambush for him: we woke up approximately 5 minutes before 5, and waited.

Charles was now taking an unintentional bath in the misty Lake Hospitable. After that enriching and amusing entertainment, we ate a frugal breakfast, and prepared our planes for take-off. Patrick was first off. Soon, we were rotating over Avis Island. Suddenly, Mortimer spotted something.

"Hey, look there: there seems to be some inhabitants on this Island after all! Let's hope they're friendly!"

"Let's go take a closer peep," encouraged Patrick.

We lowered our speed, and descended.

"OH MY GOD! DO I SEE WHAT I THINK I SEE? THE NPB!!" hollered Charles.

"Blast it! And my guns aren't loaded! You go ahead without me!" suggested Samuel.

"NO WAIT! DON'T GO! I have a better idea: they haven't seemed to have spotted us, so let's return to headquarters, rearm, and -heh heh- amuse ourselves!" I proposed.

"Hey, grinned Samuel, I like that!"

So we returned to base.

"Quick! Let's reload!"

"Now, spoke out John, this is the plan: Squadron 1 will attack first, closely followed by Squadron 2."

"I have a better idea: we go and we blow!" suggested Charles.

"I personally like John's better," declared Mortimer.

"Remember, aim for their planes!" reminded Samuel.

I was the first one off. We hedge-hopped our way towards the unwary NPB. Then at the last moment, we zoomed up, just to dive back on our victims.

Useless to say that they were taken completely off-guard. We aimed carefully before pulling our triggers. Each Squadron had a mission: Squadron 1 would attack the pilots, while Squadron 2 would strafe the planes.

Incidentally, we had, since our last adventure, considerably improved the armament of our fighters. We now had two "machine guns" that made twice as much damage...

Blasts of water splashed onto the ground. The NPB members, terrified, fled towards the forest. The area was now clear for blasting the planes without worrying about injuring anybody. (although we seemed to be belligerent, we were pretty peaceful, so we tried to avoid injuring our enemies -even though the temptation was sometimes overwhelming-) We aimed for the wings and noses, which were particularly vulnerable components. Once we believed we had done enough damage, we left.

"We got them bad! Oooh boy, I wouldn't have liked being in their shoes!" Mortimer guffawed.

"Yes, this battle was a complete success," continued Samuel.

"Well, not really, now they know that we're on this Island, and I'm afraid it won't take them long to track us down, this Island is so small," John mused, pessimistically.

"We'll just have to be ready for them, I deduced, We have to build a hidden hangar, and I propose we start as soon as we get back!"

"Don't you think we're getting carried away? After all, the NPB can maybe help us escape this Island," Patrick pointed out.

"What? Work with the NPB? With Sir Snotface jr., Geraldon and all those guys?? Never!!" Stefano revolted.

"Then, said Charles, we ought to choose a place to build our new base on."

"That's pretty obvious. I'm rooting for the Island we're on now: it has a beautiful runway, and we're completely invisible from land thanks to the other tiny Islands that surround us. Furthermore, I forgot to mention that I've been doing some exploring on my own last night, being unable to sleep, and I discovered a small hole in the ground. I wasn't brave enough to take a look inside, but now that it's day, I don't mind," I admitted

"What are we waiting for? Lead the way, Amaury," encouraged Stefano.

I moved defiantly ahead, to the hole I had discovered. We had brought some flashlights, so first of all, we illuminated the gloomy hole to make sure it wasn't some kind of burrow. It wasn't. I dropped a rock in it, and listened attentively. A few seconds later, we heard, "Kerplunck, dunky, dunky, dunck."

"Gosh, it's deep," said Thibault.

We attached a rope to a nearby tree trunk and undertook a cautious, painstaking descent. Samuel stayed outside, in case anything went wrong. Being the discoverer, I led the troop into the earth's depths. After what seemed like an eternity, I felt a hard surface. I moved my foot around to make sure it wasn't another ledge. It wasn't.

"I've hit the bottom!"

I cautiously let go of the rope, and when I realized that I wasn't falling straight down, I turned on my flashlight.

I was amazed! And so was everybody else. We had discovered an enormous cavern. The ceiling was about 8 meters above the ground. The walls shined brilliantly, as if they were of the purest crystal. There were no stalactites, no stalagmites, no soda straws (Geological formation resembling straws). The walls were smooth.

I slowly walked around, touching the walls. My friends imitated me.

"Gosh, said Patrick, I'm impressed."

We called Samuel to come and join us. He didn't believe his eyes.

"Blaank it, blaank it, blaank it... To say we were over a huge gaping cavern without the slightest suspicion," were the only words he was able to pronounce.

The youngsters' were already pushing ahead the exploration. We called them back.

"I think this would make an ideal hide-out! We just add a few skylights, and voila!" I proposed.

"I agree," said John and Mortimer at the same time.

"So do I, consented Samuel. All those who don't, speak up now or forever keep your peace."

Silence.

"So it's agreed, this is our new home!"

Applause and hurrahs reverberated through-out the cavern.

"Let's get our stuff and get installed!" shouted John, over the clamor.

We rushed excitedly towards the rope. Charles jumped on it and started to climb.

"CCRRRAAAAAACK!"

He fell right back down on Samuel, who was almost knocked out.

"OH NO! THE ROPE BROKE! WE'RE GOING TO WITHER AWAY IN THIS ----- PLACE!" Thibault yelled, horrified.

"WE'LL STARVE!" added Mortimer.

"WE'LL NEVER SEE OUR PARENTS AGAIN!" screamed tearfully John.

"WE'LL..."

"QUIET! What a bunch of pessimistic bums! All hope isn't lost, there might still be another way out! Or we can climb out thanks to the cracks and ledges!" I interrupted the unanimous cries of despair.

"YEAH! Amaury's right! You are disgustingly pathetic!" added Patrick.

"Everyone calm down..., ordered Samuel, Let's try to climb out. Any volunteer?"

I raised my hand.

"Good Luck, and if you make it, we'll try to follow you, or you can devise some way to save us," said Samuel.

Actually, I had raised my hand to scratch my hair, but I quickly decided to keep this to myself, fearing my companions might not appreciate the humor of it all at such a crucial moment. I approached the cliff-like wall, and started to climb, making sure not to look down. After exhausting efforts, I was about half-way up, when Thibault called out.

"You can do it! Just as long as you don't look down!"

And, of course, silly me, distracted by his warning, I looked straight down. I forgot to mention that I'm scared of heights. So there I was, paralyzed with fear, not even daring to breath. My hands were tightly clenched on a ledge, and had I even wanted to move, I doubt I'd have been able to.

"OH NO! COMMON! You can do it! You'll be all right! Don't worry!" Stefano tried to convince me.

But it was useless. I don't know if you know the feeling, but I would of much preferred been dead than stuck up there.

Samuel, seeing that it was vain trying to make me climb higher, hollered, "Don't be afraid Amaury! You won't fall, and even if you do, we're here to catch you!"

That just made things worst! I was just hanging there, meters over the ground, hoping that I'd live to tell about it. Suddenly, a bat dashed right by me! Startled, I let go of the cliff in a reflex to protect my face.

"AHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Down I fell, at a break-neck speed, murmuring some last prayers and thinking how long it would last and how it would feel like when I hit. I was too desperate to try to grab hold of some kind of a ledge. I was resigned to my fate.

"THUMP!"

"I'm really sorry Samuel! I didn't know you were below me!"

"It's all right, I'm getting used to it..."

Thank god that good old Samuel had been there to break my fall, or I'd be in pancake heaven right now. After the shock and excitement had passed, we decided that it was too dangerous to undertake such a climb, and that Samuel could just take so many falls... So, we set out to find another exit. We were pretty much resigned to our fates, but we weren't about to give up without a fight. So we moved along through the huge cave.

The first few seconds passed like eternities. The cave didn't change too much: same size and direction. About two minutes later, we came to a sharp right turn. Hastening,

because our batteries were running low, we quickly turned, and were suddenly uplifted by a warm, humid breeze.

"LOOK! THERE! LIGHT!" yelled Patrick, overjoyed.

The ceiling tilted considerably downwards up to a hole, which was the long-awaited-for freedom. We ran towards it, and once we reached it, we discovered that this hole, 4.5 meters wide and about 2.5 meters high, opened right above the lake. In fact, some of the lake actually penetrated into the cave, to form a little, deep pool against the cave's left wall. But, we were able to get out nice and dry thanks to a relatively wide passage way (which hugged the right cave wall) that brought us outside. All we had to do was climb up a tiny cliff and we found ourselves just on our airfield.

"I say we move in! That cave is perfect! And plus, there's a hidden runway for the planes!" enthusiastically said Patrick.

"What do you mean?" asked Charles.

"He means that the passageway we just used to get out would make a great runway!" I explained.

"HEY! That's true! What an ideal cave! The NPB will never find us!" stated John.

"Yes, but only aces can land or even take-off in such a small corridor. I mean, what with that pool and everything, it's much too dangerous for us," warned Samuel.

"You forget one thing, Samuel," I retaliated.

"What's that?"

"We are aces!"

"Amaury's right! We're good enough! I mean we've had plenty of experience!" added John.

"Well, I guess the four eldest of us could make it, but I doubt the rest could..." started Samuel.

"HEY! I resent that! We can do it just as well as you! Why! Whoever has the mere thought that I'm not up to something drives me mad!" protested Thibault.

"Now! Let's not get carried away! I'm sure that if properly prepared and taught, they might make a relatively acceptable crash-landing!" I joked, ready to protect my skin from my unappreciative brother.

"Don't be stupid! Of course they can try to survive such a perilous attempt! As long as they're properly insured!" said Mortimer, sarcastically.

Well, alarmed at the thought of having a bunch of revolted tots on our hands, we let them have it their way, but we exempted ourselves of the responsibility of keeping them alive.

It was now dusk, and by common consent, we decided to move to our new base tomorrow, at dawn. Dinner was rapidly found as well as eaten, and we went to bed relatively early (10 p.m.).

When Charles was all nice and dry, we swallowed a quick breakfast, and started to move in the cave. Thanks to our exemplary organization (and to the small quantity of baggage), we were done in two blinks of an eye. Then, we formed a circle in the middle of the field, and had our first lesson since school.

"Now remember, if the wind is too gusty, don't try to push on, just land on the emergency runway. And always line yourself up perfectly before attempting to land. Don't cut your engine until you're well in the cave, because you might need enough speed to break off in case your landing messes up. Keep your nose up, and don't go below stalling speed. Oh, and of course, keep to the left, so as to avoid the pool. Well, I think that's all. Any questions? Good! To your planes!"

"Remember, Amaury will endeavor to land first. Wait to see the results. If he fails, land immediately on the emergency runway, if not, you'll continue by alphabetical order. Thibault, Stefano and Charles, I hope you cleared the secret runway? Good! Good Luck,

to wipe me out completely, when I heard a huge crash. I spun around. Mortimer, out of munitions, had sacrificed his plane to save me. Seeing my unenviable situation, he had dived onto Li Chang Yen to blast him out of the sky. Unfortunately, as he was out of ammo, he decided to smash his entire plane on the target instead. Lucky for him, he wore a parachute, so his only loss was the plane (which is not saying little). I waved at him thankfully, but quickly resumed to landing the *Ace of Spades* as best I could. I guided my plane gently towards the emergency landing strip. Mortimer had dropped to safety near the runway. I let Thibault precede me, for he was more seriously hit. Suddenly, my plane stalled impetuously, and spun crazily towards the hard, uninviting ground.

"[CENSORED]!"

My crippled plane swerved abruptly, floated gently backwards for two breath-taking seconds, and collapsed on itself. The four wings spun lifelessly to the ground, leaving behind the cockpit with yours truly stuck inside. I squirmed, wriggled, twisted my body in an interesting variety of shapes in an effort to free myself from the falling wreckage. Briefly, I was break-dancing for freedom. Seeing my efforts were fruitless, I decided to open my parachute from within my plane. This of course was being very stupid. I knew that the thin nylon ropes could not stand my weight and that of the plane combined. But it was my only chance. I pulled the release string, my parachute unfolded, and... didn't open!

"Why, I'm going to lodge a complaint against that dumb parachute company! They'd better give me my money back! I can't stand it when a parachute doesn't open! You don't now how annoying it is! Third time this happens to me!"

"Amaury, whispered Domino, DO SOMETHING! I'M TOO CUTE TO DIE! -as well as being too hungry!-"

My lightning fast reflexes told me that I was in big trouble, which I had already realized (so much for reflexes...). While whispering a quick prayer, I decided to find out if my emergency chute would work. I released it. A huge shock stretched my body to the limit of human endurance. My feet were my only members still caught in the dropping wreckage of scrap metal. Suddenly I heard a "RIIIIIIP!!"

Soon, I was floating down to safety with a terrified guinea-pig clinging to my hair, and two bruised, bare-feet. My touch-down was far from perfect, but very spectacular, which is comprehensible when a scaredy-pig is hindering one by grasping desperately at one's poor, aching hair, and one's landing gear is constituted of two hanging, freezing feet. I was now safe on terra firma but, somehow, I just kept on moving.

"HELP! MY PARACHUTE IS DRAGGING ME!!"

"HELP! I'M THE HEADGEAR OF A SALAD BRAIN! (speaking of which, I'm hungry!)" neekered my top hat.

"I'M COMING! HOLD OUT YOUR HAND!" hollered Mortimer.

Mortimer to the rescue! He grabbed me, but the wind was vigorous that day, so my parachute continued on its course, faster than ever! Thibault had been following closely, and he was barely able to clench Mortimer's pants. He held on tight. In vain! Now all three of us were being blown across the island, and quickly approaching the edge of Hospitable Lake (which, incidentally, didn't seem so hospitable at the moment)! I desperately resorted to biting the nylon strings, one by one. (I didn't have a knife at the time). Mortimer held on for dear life. Thibault was trying to stop this insane sprint by holding onto anything that he could get his hands on.(branches, grass stems, roots...) Suddenly, his efforts paid off. He seized an agglomeration of tough weeds, and wasn't about to let go!

I felt just like a rubber-band, a frail piece of rubber that was about to snap into thousands of infinitesimal fragments. Mortimer's face turned bright red, became a radiant tint of yellow, and ended up dark purple. But he held on firmly. My brother's hands were slipping.

"HELP!" he yelled with horror.

Patrick came running from his plane. He rushed passed Thibault and Mortimer, raised a sharp, twinkling knife over my head, and sprung his arm savagely.

"I'M TOO SMART TO DIE!" were my final words.

"Don't ever do that again!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it would scare you!"

"I don't believe you cut the rope 5 mm. from my nape!"

"I'm grieved to have frightened you," Patrick grinned devilishly.

"GRRRrrr... Don't expect any thanks from me!"

"Well! If that's my reward for saving you, you can save yourself, next time!"

"I'll do just that!"

"Calm down, you two! We have better things to do than argue between ourselves! We need to hide our planes, recharge them, forage for food, and make our Cave Chaos a little more comfortable! O.K., everyone listen for your instructions. We have to finish before nightfall. All those who still have a plane, park it in Cave Chaos. Those who've lost theirs will come see me during the maneuver. Afterwards, Thibault and Charles will..."

I doubt you want to hear Samuel's long list of orders, so I refrained from writing them.

We all parked our planes neatly in Cave Chaos -as Samuel liked to call it-, making sure that they were in a strong breeze, so as to recharge the batteries (remember, we had those tiny wind turbines installed on our planes). Then Charles, Mortimer and I reported to Samuel what had happened to our aircraft. Charles's was in mediocre shape, but repairable; as for Mortimer's and mine, they were obviously completely wrecked.(his more than mine). Samuel asked me to pillage my wreck to find out if anything was salvageable, which I did. I discovered that after all, the damage wasn't sooo bad, and I would be able to slap up the *Ace of Spades* in no time.

I undertook this painstaking task right away, but decided I would finish the job the next day. Meanwhile, Thibault and John continued their experiments on the weird wood.

Dinner was served at seven thirty. We ate a bubbling, oozing potage of green, mushy material of which I didn't intend to discover the provenance; as well as some supposedly dead fish that wriggled violently when you touched it. Hm! Hm! Good!

Our cave was now snug and cozy thanks to Samuel and Thibault's touch. We were not in the least sleepy, so we discussed.

"Guess what guys!! We found out what makes that wood blow!!!" announced John.

"Oh yeah. What?" inquired Stefano.

"Well, we found abnormally high concentrations of sulfur in the wood," explained Thibault.

"Yes. And we think that it got all that sulfur from the nearby volcano," continued John.

"How? And why?" demanded Charles.

"I assume that, through some kind of evolutionary process, the trees stocked sulfur so as to discourage animals from eating it," elucidated Samuel.

"But, then why don't all trees that grow next to volcanoes blow like that?" questioned Patrick.

"Well..."

"I guess it must be one of those things that happen only on Islands. Maybe the conditions are just right here," I tried interpreting.

"Oh well... It's weird anyways. Not very useful, but weird," concluded Mortimer.

"It is too useful!!" protested Thibault.

"How?? We don't need explosives. And these aren't even very powerful, or practical, explosives," demonstrated John.

"You know, this cave is kind of dark..." said Stefano, changing the subject.

"Yeah. We should build some skylights or something!" I added.

"Yeah sure! Through that rock!!" Patrick pointed out.

"Well then, we'll just make torches," I suggested

"I feel like a caveman," said Mortimer.

"You look like one two!" I said while ducking for cover.

"That's a good one!" said

Samuel. He wasn't fast enough.

They started brawling.

"Common guys! I think Stefano is right!" interrupted Patrick.

"I always am!" said Stefano. Mortimer walloped him.

"Ahh, I needed that!" Mortimer said, with satisfaction.

"I didn't!" grumbled Stefano.

"Yes, we ought to make some torches. We'll start tomorrow.

"I personally think we urgently need a bathroom!" said Thibault, running for a rest area.

"We'll make one of those two," smiled Samuel.

"You know, this hidden base isn't so hidden. Anybody can see the runway from the proper angle! We should make a cover," spoke John.

"He's right! And we should also have some kind of an alert system to warn us of the arrival of the NPB," added Patrick.

"How do you expect us to build that?" demanded Mortimer.

"With strings and a few empty cans!" explained Thibault.

"We'll think about it. For the time being, we should establish a look-out..." I suggested.

"I volunteer!" yelled out Stefano.

"Amaury, what's the range of your talkie-walkies?" asked Samuel.

"About a kilometer."

"That's more than enough! Stefano, are you sure you feel up to the job of spying on the NPB, and alerting us if anything happens?" asked Samuel.

"Yes!"

"Humm, I'm not sure... What do you say guys?" said Samuel.

"If he's says he can do it, let him do it!" decided Charles.

"Yeah!"

"O.K. Get prepared, Stef. You'll leave tomorrow at sunrise. You'll have to try and survive by yourself, using your own wits ("THAT'LL BE HARD FOR HIM!" said someone who lived to regret it...). If anything should happen, join us immediately with your plane, that you will bring with you. Good luck!"

"Aye aye sir!" was Stef's optimistic answer. He left us to prepare his equipment.

We didn't discuss for a moment, pondering about the future.

"Now that we have planes, we should also get go-karts!" suggested Mortimer, attempting to start a conversation.

"Naaah! Helicopters!" put in Stefano.

"Why not a hovercraft?" decided John and Thibault.

"Well, while we're at it, we could also make a submarine!" I grinned.

"HEY! That's a great idea! A submarine would be awesome!" said Charles.

"Actually, it would be nice to have a sub. Not only would we conquer the skies, but the oceans two..." dreamed Samuel.

"Let's make one!" enthusiastically proposed Charles.

"Don't you think we're getting just a little too carried away?" asked Patrick.

"Naaaah... I think we could at least try!" I said.

"It wouldn't hurt!" agreed Samuel.

"It'll keep our minds off our predicament," persisted Mortimer.

"O.K.," said Patrick, resigned.

"Let's start now!" yelled Charles.

"At this time! No! I suggest we go to bed now, and we'll pursue this subject tomorrow night." said Samuel.

"O.K...." impatiently answered Charles.

"Charles and Amaury, how are the planes going?" questioned Samuel, changing the subject.

"Mine's almost ready for action, but I'll need to dive again tomorrow to find a missing piece. Thank god this Island has just the material needed," reported Charles.

"The *Ace of Spades* is recovering, but I'll still need one more day. If only my damn (excuse me) saw didn't wobble all the time!"

"Here, you can use mine," said Patrick.

"Thanks!"

"How about yours, Mortimer?"

"Wrecked, hopelessly wrecked."

"I'm sorry Mortimer, you can..." I stopped. Taking Samuel into confidence, I explained to him a great idea that had just occurred to me.

"I like it, I like it!" Samuel's eyes twinkled.

"Don't worry Mortimer. I'll make up for the loss," I comforted him. My face had a quizzical smile on it. He looked at me curiously.

"What evil plan might be hatching in his crooked mind?" was surely what Patrick and Mortimer were wondering.

"I propose we make tomorrow Official Building Day!" I said.

"Okay. But for now, good night, Amaury," said Mortimer, suspiciously.

"Remember, Stef, wake up early tomorrow!" reminded Thibault.

"Good night everybody!" hollered Patrick.

"Good Night!"

During the night, I was awakened by footsteps. I quietly got up and followed them suspiciously. Suddenly, I heard liquid being poured.

"Somebody's covering our planes with fuel to torch them!" I thought, terrified! Then, I heard my brother's voice.

"GOD! We really need to install a toilet! This just can't go on!"

I went back to bed, trying to refrain myself from giggling.

The next day, we ate breakfast without Stefano, for he was already gone. After, we each went about our own business. I finished fixing the *Ace of Spades*, and did a practice run with it. Then I helped make the torches and the protective cover for the entrance. Thibault was busily making a suitable bathroom.

Work continued well into the night. We received a message from Stefano citing that he had reached his destination and was building a hidden shelter in a tree from which he could spy the movements of the enemy comfortably. He warned us that the NPB were building tough shelters in the forest bordering the beach, and that they regularly sent patrols to search for our hide-out.

Finally, we gave in, and decided to continue our work tomorrow. We were too pooped to talk about submarines, and so we slept soundly, waiting for a new day to come.

I woke up early to go fishing: we desperately needed the food. It took me a whole hour to reel in a huge 7 pounder that I had put my sights on ever since the first day I had seen him jump wildly from the crystal clear water. The little [censored] managed to get away just when I had him, even after all my stupendous efforts!

By the time I had caught an impressive amount of retards as a symbol of my revenge, my companions had woken up. Samuel's first care was to get news from Stefano, who reported that the NPB were still sleeping soundly. He suggested sabotaging their planes, but Samuel said that to do so would reveal his presence, and endanger his freedom. Other than

that, he was having a great time.

We finished all work just after lunch time.

"Good work guys! Now our base is really worthy of admiration!" I declared.

"Yeah! And to reward your efforts, I give you the rest of the day off!" said Samuel.

The *Little Aces* were overjoyed! Samuel and I went to work on a project of our own, while the rest of us dispersed to do whatever it was we wanted to do. We all met again for dinner.

After consuming another broiled fish, I made it clear that we had to find some other food substance. I couldn't stand it anymore!

"Well, are we going to make a submarine or not?" demanded Charles.

"It would be great, I dreamed, Imagine roaming the dark waters of the deep ocean, racing dolphins, admiring the wonders of the aquatic life, searching for the sunken treasures just waiting for me..."

"Figures..." muttered Mortimer.

"Yes, that's all very nice, but for the moment, we have more serious things to think about. Most importantly, we need to get off this island. I know it's all very nice here, but we can't remain here eternally! We also have those stupid, yet estimable NPB to deal with. Furthermore, where do you want us to find the materials necessary for such a task, and lastly, do you expect us, a bunch of pompous kids, to construct what mankind took thousands of years to build? A submarine is no easy matter!" countered Patrick.

"Neither is building an operating aircraft, yet we succeeded! And remember, submarines already existed when planes appeared! But, we must all consider the evidence that Patrick is right: we do have more important things to worry about, and we don't have any available materials," added Samuel.

"But..." Charles, overwhelmed by the irrefutable facts, gave in.

"I suggest the following, suggested Mortimer, "We assure ourselves air superiority, and, taking advantage of that position, we explore the surroundings. If we discover a nearby island accessible to our "babies", we head for it. But, in the event that we don't, then, knowing our planes are of no use in our quest to escape Avis Island, we destroy them..."

"WHAT!" yelled John.

"WAIT! As I was saying, we destroy them, use their pieces to build a more enduring and self-sufficient vehicle: a submarine. Then, we will be capable to search indefinitely for rescue till we run out of supplies. And when we're home free at our residences, we'll just reassemble our planes!"

"You know for once, what Mortimer said wasn't stupid!"

"Yeah! Hey! Wait a doggone minute! You take that back!" threatened Mortimer, fist hovering above Patrick's jubilant face.

"But I just rebuilt my plane!!!" I protested.

"Too bad," Charles went.

"Anyway, we won't destroy them right now," Mortimer specified.

"Umm... Well then, I guess it isn't that bad an idea!" I admitted.

"Yes. I'm all for it!" went John.

"So am I, and I guess we all are. So be it. Tomorrow, it's back to business. Primary objective: complete and total air domination. Your orders: to deny the sky from the NPB, and to open fire if necessary. Any questions?" stated Samuel.

"Yes! Since when are you the boss around here?" asked John.

"Since I was born before you! Satisfied?" retorted Samuel.

"Okay..." ceded John.

"Well, I think it's about time we hit the sack. We have a long day ahead of us!" warned Thibault, who's usually so eager to accumulate as many hours as humanly possible of time before going to bed.

"OH NO YOU'RE NOT! Not until I receive some salad! NEEEEK! As usual, I've been

airplanes, stray as well as accurate shots, parachutes, and a few birds here and there. I was so busy surviving, I hadn't the opportunity to take notes, so my recollections of the event are poor. All I know is that at least half of us were shot clean out of the sky, a quarter didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on, and the other quarter miraculously survived. The figures must be about the same for the other team. There were no injuries or dead, although a few of us became seriously ill (thanks to their extravagant aerobatics). Considering the melee had been so confusing, none of us could have any kills confirmed.

Something that I do remember clearly is a dazzling rescue performed by Thibault, John and Samuel:

Charles had done his little "chicken" act one time too many. He dashed straight for an enemy, and determinedly kept his course, fancying the NPB would break off and dive into the water. Unfortunately, his adversary was just as bull-headed as he. It was a strange and silly sight watching those two making for each other, each as resolute as the other. But, the inevitable had to happen. They collided.

Charles, possessing lightning-fast reflexes, and a great desire to survive, immediately jumped out, and strived to open his chute. It popped out, flapped momentarily, then suddenly opened so abruptly that the nylon snapped.

"OH...oh..."

We all watched, dismayed and terrified. He had jumped from about 50 meters, so the prospect of him not ending up as a favorite American breakfast aliment usually served with maple syrup was slim. We watched, unable to divert the cruel course of fate.

He was now about 30 meters above his doom. Finally, Samuel -who was the one closest to Charles- dived down, in a vain effort to rescue Charles. His wings reached the breaking point, but held fast. He then swerved towards Charles, regained a horizontal position, and yelled, "GRAB THE WHEEL STRUT!". Unfortunately, he was still flying at a high speed, and Charles was barely able to grasp the wheel, which provided a poor support. He felt a slimy mucus, left there by an ill-fated worm that had been nicely crossing a field when Samuel's plane rolled by. Charles yelped, and released the disgusting object.

His downwardly descent resumed. Yet, his short ride had brought him closer to John and Thibault, who were flying at a low-altitude. Inspired by Samuel's effort, they rocketed towards Charles. But they realized that the latter had fainted, and so he wouldn't be able to grasp their planes unaided. Thibault, reacting instantaneously, threw himself onto John's plane. John, startled and surprised at first, then understood what Thibault was attempting, and he continued to head for Charles.

As the *Soaring Freedom* fell to the ground, Thibault nimbly reached John's wheel strut. Twisting and turning, Thibault managed to suspend himself upside down, his legs firmly gripping the strut. He then reached out with his arms.

Charles was barely 5 meters over the ground when Thibault seized his arms. For some obscure reason, I then had the sudden desire to call Barnum and Bailey...

Anyway, Thibault was able to wake Charles up by shaking him up a little. He then told John to bring them over the lake. Thibault then let Charles go, to his dismay, and followed shortly after.

Relieved, we continued our battle, but with less fervor. To our surprise, the NPB soon precipitately returned to their base, and we had to withdraw from chasing them, remarking that we were almost out of electricity. We landed safely, and immediately congratulated the trio.

"That was spectacular," enthusiastically went Patrick.

"You looked like some sort of circus act," I affirmed.

"Yeah, I know," admitted a smug Thibault.

"Thanks a lot guys, but why did you drop me into the lake?" Charles demanded.

"Well, there wasn't much else we could do," explained John.

"Shouldn't they get a medal or something?" Samuel suggested.

"For what? I mean it wasn't that great," Mortimer protested.

"Jealousy is such a terrible thing," I reasoned.

"I'M NOT JEALOUS!" hollered Mortimer.

"Mortimer, don't get carried away! Ammo is just acting stupid!" said Samuel.

"Acting, yes... contrary to you!" I responded.

"AMAURY! YOU TAKE THAT BACK!"

Patrick, between bursts of laughter, calmed us down.

"Grumph! Let's talk about more urgent matters, if you permit!" said Samuel, eyeing me ominously. I refrained from retorting.

"First of all, we ought to call Stefano, we haven't received news from him in a while, and we may need him to help us explore the surroundings," suggested Charles.

"That's a great idea! I'll get the talkie!" said Mortimer.

He scampered for the "talkie", and turned it on.

"Hello! ... Come in Stefano! ... Come in! ... Here's Mortimer! ... I repeat: come in Stefano! ... Come in! ... *Little Aces* on line! ... Stefano! ... Do you read me? ... STEFANO!!!!"

"Is he deaf and dumb?" pondered Patrick.

"This isn't funny! Maybe he injured himself, suggested Samuel, or was captured by the NPB! Mortimer! Try again!"

"Come in Stefano! This isn't funny! Come in! Do you read..."

"BOOH!"

"AAHH!"

"GOT YOU!"

"Why you little preposterous pipsqueak...(trying saying that 3 times straight)! If only you were next to me..."

Samuel grabbed the talkie-walkie and scorned, "Stefano! Don't you ever do that again! We were worried sick! It wasn't funny at all! Next time you're really in danger, we just might ignore your cries for help! And stop puffing! Any news?"

Stefano reported that the NPB seemed to be building two boats, each about 10 meters long, and capable of carrying all of them, as well as provisions.

"Really? Do you know where they're planning to go?" inquired Samuel.

Stefano replied that no, he didn't, but that they were going to wreck their planes and convert the engines for navigational purposes.

"They are, are they? Hummm... Okay, I want you to sabotage all you can without endangering yourself. Then, at precisely 5 this afternoon, one of us will pick you up you know where, and bring you back here. We don't need you as a spy anymore. You'll be of more use helping us build a submarine," assumed Samuel.

"A SUBMARINE!"

"Oh yes, you aren't informed. We decided to construct a submarine," explained Samuel.

"But why a submarine?" appealed Stefano.

"Well, first we were to explore the surroundings of Eagle Island, but I guess we mustn't now, because contrary to our estimations, the NPB aren't that stupid, just a little... stupid! Anyway, a lazy bunch like the NPB wouldn't start building boats for no reason at all! And we know they've been patrolling the area for a while. They must of discovered there was no land in range, so they are fabricating another means of escape. We had also thought of it. Except we chose to build a sub."

"BUT WHY?"

"Well, for a few obvious reasons: a submarine takes no heed to storms -which are pretty frequent in this part of the world-, its construction challenges our intellectual abilities, we'll see the enemy unseen, and it must really be neat down there!"

"Oh well, I guess you're right. But it'll take a really long time to make!"

"No it won't! Ammo and I have already drawn out the plans!" announced Samuel.

"When?" interrogated Patrick.

"Well, we took advantage of any free time we got..." I unfolded.

"But why not tell us?" demanded Mortimer.

"Well, now that Samuel spilled the beans, I might as well give all the details. We wanted to surprise Mortimer, to thank him for his dedication, as well as his upcoming birthday, which is in fact the day after tomorrow. We agreed to name it, and I hope the rest of you won't mind, the SubMortimer! And also give Mortimer its command!"

"Oh guys! You're really nice, but I just can't accept! It would be unfair to the rest of us!"

"No it wouldn't!" exclaimed Samuel. "Would it guys?"

"Nope!"

"Oh yes it would! Anyway, I just can't assume the responsibility of commanding an engine like a submarine!"

"I really hate it when people won't accept their present!" I declared.

"Yes Mortimer, do us the pleasure!"

"No can do! I think you, Samuel, are most suited for the job! So I'm bequeathing the commandment to you!"

"I refuse! And I bequeath it right back to you!"

"Yes, but I just re-bequeath it to you, with the strict order of keeping your title!"

"Okay! But I'm now a higher officer, so I re-re-bequeath it to you!"

"Well..."

"For God's sake! Will you make up your minds! I think Samuel should command the darn sub, and it ought to be christened SubMortimer!" Patrick remarked.

"Okay, but just because it's for you Mortimer," spoke out a visibly-pleased-of-his-new-function Samuel.

"Hello! I'm still receiving you here! Could somebody pay attention to me!" uttered Stefano, distressed.

"Hello? Stefano? We're sorry! But we got sort of carried away here! Samuel wants you to commence operation `Sabotage'! See you later! Over and out!" apologized Charles.

"Over and HEEELP! I'M BEING..."

"Stefano! Come on! Didn't you hear what Samuel said? This isn't funny! STEFANO!"

"His jokes are degrading by the day! Tell that idiot that if he doesn't answer right now, we'll just abandon him to his fate!" ordered Samuel.

Charles repeated his message. Still no answer.

"Oh just hang up! I'll have a little talk with him tonight! For the moment, like the patrols aver themselves unnecessary, we have the whole day in front of us! Let's make the best out of it and commence our building!"

We were each assigned a certain task. To our distress, we disassembled all but one of the planes, so as to have one handy to recover Stefano.

We had carefully studied every possibility, and came up with the following design: the bow would be the site of the make-shift toilet which we would have to empty every so often in the ocean, this would precede the largest compartment serving a double function of dining-room and dormitory, right behind it would be found the supply room, and the aft would be the emplacement of the engine room. On top of it all, the cockpit would be placed slightly forward. The ballast tanks would be located under the vessel.

Due to our lack of suitable materials, we calculated our ship to only have a length of twenty meters, a height of three, and a maximum safety dive limit of fifty. We also planned for many spotlights, to navigate in perfect safety. Port-holes would be strategically placed enabling us to admire with ease the ocean depths. We even planned to install one on the floor of the dining-room. This would take a whole lot of toil, but we thought we could manage it. Anyway, we decided that we wouldn't wreck it after all it had cost us, so we were just going

to rebuild new planes from scratch. With this idea in mind, as well as our precipitation to try it out, we made good time.

Oh, by the way, you might be interested by how we could possibly cook food in a submarine. Well, we didn't. We realized that it would be impossible to cook inside SubMortimer, because first of all, it was a dangerous fire hazard, and second of all, we had no way to let the smoke escape underwater. So, we concluded that we'd have to cook our food outside, meaning we'd have to surface to grill our rations. With this in mind, we gathered all the metal we could find, and we used it to make some sort of cover on which to cook, so as to avoid getting the sub on fire.

Furthermore, our periscope, which was after all pretty rudimentary, could not be lowered into SubMortimer's hull. Although it *could* rotate. This signified that we'd have to be extra careful not to break it, and that, since we didn't want to be too noticeable, we'd have to have a very short periscope (about 1 meter high).

At the end of the day, we had already done considerable progress, having practically finished the outer skeleton. Samuel eagerly went to fetch Stefano, having already thought up some great comments to make him feel like the last scum on earth. In the meantime, we continued the work. We expected to be ready to sail, or should I say sink, in about four days of intensive labor. Samuel returned alone.

"Where's Stefano?" asked Thibault.

"He wasn't at the meeting place!" exclaimed Samuel.

"What? This has gone too far! He just evading us so as to avoid any work!" affirmed Patrick.

"Well, this might seem like a shock, but maybe he actually was captured by the NPB?" Mortimer hazarded to suggest.

"That would be completely impossible! How would the NPB find him?" demanded John.

"Well, I think Mortimer's right! I mean, Stefano's capable of just a certain extent of treachery!" asserted Charles.

"Either way, there was absolutely no sign of him, and like I had no indications as to his hide-out, I wasn't able to check it out," continued Samuel.

"Maybe you didn't look well enough," contested Mortimer.

"I searched the whole clearing as well as the surroundings!" countered Samuel.

"This is no time to argue! Samuel, what do you think is the case?" I interrogated.

"Well, as unbelievable as it may seem, I'm bound to agree with Mortimer," he stated.

"That sure is unbelievable!" put in Patrick "I suggest one of us survey the island by air, looking for any clues. And I volunteer!" I suggested.

"Hey! You're not getting the fun job while we toil down here! I deserve going!" blared Patrick.

After a slight disagreement on who would be the hunter, we agreed to throw dice on it. And Charles, advantaged by his extraordinary luck, was the fortunate one.

We resigned ourselves obligingly, wished the bastard good luck -which he certainly didn't need owing to the considerable quantity that he already cherished- and got back to work.

He flew off, grinning. We promised ourselves to throw him in the lake as soon as he showed up again.

While working, I had a brain surge.

I thought that Domino was surely planning some evil trick to get even with us. And I knew exactly what kind of thing he would do: saladnap our lettuce. He had already had experience in such matters, and very often had accomplished his object: total salad domination. I warned my companions, and we swiftly agreed on a counter plan.

We were going to lock the salad in Thibault's backpack, which was equipped with a proper lock. Then, we would hide the pack in a safe area, and pat ourselves on the back.

Personally, I liked salad in my sandwiches, and anyway, we weren't about to give him satisfaction. The pack was hidden under one of our sleeping bags during the night, to make it impossible for Domino to spot our hiding place. But I'm wandering away from the main plot. We made more progress on the outer skeleton, and were about ready to start building the ballast tanks. The materials we used came mostly from our dismantled planes, but we also took advantage of a very strong wood that grew on the island. Luckily, we had planned to camp out in Mexico, so we had all the necessary equipment to cut trees (Only small ones, though.) As for nails, we didn't use any. In carpenter course at school, we had learned to interconnect wood using no glue or nails. This was accomplished by an actually pretty simple procedure of sculpting.

Charles returned. Greeted by a wet welcome, he sulked and momentarily refused to tell us the information he had gained. Finally, he reported: absolutely no signs of Stefano, and the NPB had given him the cold shoulder. Furthermore, he had suspicions against the NPB.

There were four possibilities offered to us:

- Doing a grand-scale raid on the NPB.
- Asking them nicely if, in fact, they had him.
- Sending one of us as a spy.
- Leaving Stefano to his destiny.

We argued for a while, divided between the second and last possibilities. We came to the solution at about 7. We decided that the first possibility was too time consuming, especially if it proved that Stefano wasn't with them. Anyway, we only had one plane.

The third one was also pretty time consuming, as well as being dangerous for the chosen one, because the rest of the Crazy Eight would be after him for the obvious reason that he would be having an exciting time while the others worked. The last one, though tempting, was rejected because it was really too cruel, even for that practical joker Stefano. So we decided to pick

Charles, the most sympathetic and least important of us, to make a truce with the NPB and ask them about Stefano.

We went to bed early.

The next day, Charles left early on his mission. We, on the other hand, had to keep a steady pace in our work. The submarine was really starting to take shape. Domino seemed to have vanished in thin air, which in some ways, was extremely beneficial. But I couldn't help wondering what in darnation had happened to the little critter. He was a pretty cute pet, and well, he wasn't all that bad. I hoped that he hadn't injured, or lost, himself.

While I was worrying, little did I know that he (Domino) was already attempting a risky yet profitable offensive against us, and more particularly, against our food supplies.

Knowing perfectly well where we kept them, Domino stealthily crept from the tiny crevice in which he had been hiding, across the cave, to arrive at the ice box where we kept our food stuffs. Glancing furtively around himself to make sure nobody had observed his actions, he beamed at the thought of his cunning. He had found the loophole. If he couldn't get the salad directly, he still had one means at his disposition: blackmail.

Yes, you guessed it. He was planning to steal all the food we had, and return it afterwards, for a price. He snickered.

"Those fools thought they had got the better of me? NEEK! Well, they were wrong, hopelessly wrong! You can't be the better of a guinea pig, especially a hungry one! NEEK! Heh, heh, heh..." he thought, gleefully.

Leisurely, he arrived unto the scene of his dreadful crime. Then, he was horror-stricken.

He hadn't thought of a way to pilfer his loot to a safe hide-out.

What was he to do? A tiny pig like himself could not possibly transport all the supplies single-handedly! He mused silently.

"EUREKA! NEEK!"

He was going to make several trips to accomplish the dastardly deed. He immediately got to the job.

"That's funny! I'd swear the ice box's lid was open a moment ago!" declared Thibault.

"Must be your imagination," asserted John.

"Come on you two get back to work! We can't spare time arguing about illusions!" reprimanded Samuel.

"But..."

"Thibault! We must finish this in time, for we may need to escape rapidly from our base when, if, Charles returns."

"Yes sir," grumbled my brother.

"Wait a minute! I just saw that lid slap shut as if by magic! Something fishy is going on!" observed Patrick.

"Talk about mass illusions! I knew those fish were noxious!" decided Mortimer.

"Stop acting silly you two! This is no time for laughing matters!" exclaimed Samuel.

"I don't care what you say Samuel, but if two people see the same thing, I think its worth checking it out!" I pointed out.

"Well you're thinking wrong, Amaury!" joked John, while dashing towards SubMortimer's carcass.

I ignored him and headed towards the ice box. When I was nearing it, I caught a glimpse of movement, and a black and white flash. I was suddenly tormented by huge apprehensions, and dashed the rest of the way. The ice box was empty, except for a cookie, which I grabbed, thinking I might rejoice having done so in the future.

"DOMINO! COME BACK IMMEDIATELY WITH OUR FOOD, OR YOUR IN BIG TROUBLE!" I yelled.

"Neener, neener, neener! NEEK! You can't catch me! And unless your nice with me, and give me all the salad, you'll never see your food again. NEEK! HAH HAH!" Domino's voice echoed across the cave, making it impossible for us to figure out where he was concealing himself.

"WHY THE LITTLE THIEVING, BLACKMAILING RASCAL!"

"Thibault, for heaven's sake! Why did you bring that, that THING of yours!" demanded Samuel.

"For your information, I DIDN'T BRING IT! IT STOWED AWAY WITHOUT MY PERMISSION AND AGAINST ALL MY INTENTIONS!" Thibault hollered, driven to the breaking point.

"Okay, sorry..."

"Listen Domino! We can't give you all the salad! Here, if you give us the food back, I promise to give you one piece a day! Okay?" questioned Thibault, but to no avail.

"NO! NEEK! It's everything or nothing!"

"Okay, then let's make it nothing. Because, you seem to have forgotten that we have means at our disposal to enable us to get more food indefinitely, for example, that tool apply called the fishing pole," pointed out Samuel.

"Oh. do you think I'm really that stupid? I have all your hooks, nets, and bait. NEEK! Believe me, we'll all be better off if you conform with my conditions. NEEK!"

"Let me just see about that!" I exclaimed.

Unfortunately, the pipsqueak was not fibbing, and my hooks, nets, and baits were missing.

"Look here, we're wasting all our stupid time! Give the stupid pig his stupid salad and get over with this stupid argument! Gosh, how stupid this is!" pronounced John, visibly flustered.

"Oh for heaven's sake, here's your salad, Domino! But wait, first bring us back the food," said Patrick.

"Okay! NEEK!" he neekered, contented, as he left his hide-out.

"What a fool! Grab him!" I ordered.

"Hey! YOU TRAITORS! NEEK!"

"Order in the court! The Guinea Pig answering to the name of Domino, alias Cutie Pie..."

"I HATE THAT NAME! NEEK!"

"Silence! As I was saying, the former is charged with the crime of blackmail. How do you plead?" proclaimed Samuel, authoritatively.

"WELL WHAT DO YOU THINK! YOU ALL SAW ME! THIS IS THE STUPIDEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN! NEEK!"

"My client pleads guilty, but insane at the time of the alleged crime, your honor," announced Patrick.

"I see. I will now hear the prosecutor..."

Well, to resume it all, Domino was charged with one week of dieting, with salad excluded from the menu, as well as the obligation of being kept under constant surveillance.

Well, anyway, now that that particular incident was closed, I can return to the "Stefano case", alias, "The annoying practical joker who's prank backfired" case".

A few days later, we were still without a sign of Charles's, and Samuel was worrying feverishly, being, in a way, responsible for us. The rest of the Crazy Eight were absolutely positive that he had taken advantage of his freedom and was now enjoying himself on the beach, chuckling at the mere thought of his companions, straining to think of an excuse to tell us when he would return. We were visualizing original concepts to get a well-deserved revenge on the rogue.

Nevertheless, we forgot about Charles and Stefano momentarily because our sub was almost finished.

"Only two more planks to install!"

"..."

"FINISHED!!"

"Quick!! Let's try it out!!" decided Thibault.

"Wait! It would be fairer to wait until we're all present," protested Patrick.

"But why? Charles and Stefano practically didn't do any work!!" protested Mortimer.

"Yeah!!" agreed John.

"Listen, let's compromise. We'll carry the sub into the pool and perform the sub's 'baptism', but we won't actually try it out," suggested Samuel.

"Okay..." grumbled Mortimer.

"Altogether now!! HEAVE HO!!"

We, eventually, managed to carry the sub to the pool.

"Whew... Now I guess we can put it into the water..." questioned Thibault.

"Wait. First, we have to christen it. Anybody got a bottle of champagne?" inquired Patrick.

"No... But I guess an ordinary bottle will work," proposed John.

"Well... we don't exactly have any of those either..." I pointed out.

"Oh well, let's just use a coconut," decided Samuel.

"I'll get one!!" Thibault said.

He returned with a crummy-looking coconut.

"Well... I guess it'll be good enough..." went Samuel.

Mortimer was chosen to render the ceremony.

"I now christen thee... SubMortimer!" he proclaimed.

"Poor sub... What a stupid name..." I mused.

"HEY!!" protested Mortimer.

"Okay, now we can put it into the water," my brother deduced.

"Yes. But we must proceed carefully, slowly, and progressively," Samuel warned.

"Yeah, yeah!" went John.

We gently nudged the submarine into the water. It slipped leisurely into the pool, dipped a little, but popped right back out.

"Great!! The lests we placed on its floor seems to be doing a fine job keeping it steady," Samuel pointed out.

"Can we go inside?" my brother inquired.

"Well, yes, I guess so," decided Patrick.

We climbed carefully into the sub, one by one. I stayed outside, just in case...

"Well, it's very steady, and pretty water-tight. There are a few minor leaks, but they'll be quickly obstructed. I must say, it's a great success," Samuel observed.

Delighted, all we had to do now was wait for Charles and Stefano.

1 day elapsed.

2 days went by.

Finally, Samuel couldn't stand it any longer. The submarine had long since been erected, and two more days had passed without a sign of Charles's or Stefano's.

"I'll go check up on them. We must find out what's wrong. Something must have happened to them!" ordained Samuel.

"But, Sam, why you? Why not send someone else? We can't afford to lose you! I mean, consider the facts: you're the only one of us who knows all the quirks of our sub, and the bare essentials of underwater navigating..."

"Well, it's true that "Silent Service II" (computer submarine simulator) helped a lot," admitted Samuel

"And furthermore, you are our leader!" brilliantly demonstrated Patrick.

"Since when?" I demanded.

"Yes, I'm not really your leader," Samuel admitted.

"Well, almost," Patrick pointed out.

"Well... maybe. But anyway, I feel responsible for those two, and Amaury knows just as well as I how to pilot submarines, if we know at all, that is..." retaliated Samuel.

"Listen, I say we vote on this! There seem to be two sides here, Samuel and Patrick. The rest of us will just decide who should go and who should stay. Anyway, it isn't as if the spy is doomed. I mean where not waging an all out battle, a battle to death, with the NPB! What's the worst that can happen? The guy gets caught! There's always the rest of us to go rescue him!" I ascertained.

"Why don't we all go?" asked John.

"Of course not! The NPB may know where we hide, we can't leave the sub unguarded! And we can't sacrifice too many troops either! It's essential that we keep most of our forces here! Let's see, I'd say there were 6 of us left, minus 1 (whoever's going to leave). And against us, 16 NPB. I guess that if we turned this place into a fort, and armed ourselves adequately, we could manage to send one of us out there," I spoke out.

We voted. Patrick "won" unanimously. He bid us farewell, and taking advantage of the night, left the Island on a small log, which was the only transportation available, except for the submarine. But we didn't want to lose our sub for NPBs might of been ambushing us, and anyway, we thought it would be only fair to await everyone for the first test swim of SubMortimer.

Two more days passed. Samuel was worried sick. Then, in the middle of the second

night, we heard some commotion coming from the surface of our island. One of us opened the trap-door slightly and peeked outside. There was a full moon (SO?). We heard panting, and some yells. Suddenly, an ominous shadow appeared.

"Quick, let us in! The NPB are after us! Hurry!" whispered Patrick with all his might.

We slammed the trap-door open.

"HEY! THERE THEY ARE! GET'EM!"

"Everybody in the sub! IMMEDIATELY!" bellowed Samuel.

We sped towards the sub, which was already plentifully supplied with all we might need for a long journey, because Samuel had foreseen such an emergency.

We overheard jabbering and loud thumps.

"The NPB are breaking in! And that door won't last long!" noticed Mortimer.

"CRAAAACK!" went the door.

"YOU GUYS GO ALREADY! I'LL HOLD THEM OFF!" I trumpeted bravely.

"But..."

"DON'T ARGUE!" I ordered, while grabbing one of my water-machine guns, which I kept by my side ever since I was forced to remove them from my *Ace of Spades*.

A face appeared in the entrance. It grinned devilishly, its repulsive features brightly illuminated by a nearby candle. Moe!

I raised my automatic weapon, aimed with a steady hand, pulled the deadly trigger, waiting for the fatal burst.

"PSCcccch..." wailed the nozzle.

"[censored]!"

"Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk," went Moe, heading towards me, with his fist raised high.

Abruptly, I felt an overpowering need to dump my hand in my pocket. There, I fumbled upon some crumbs, left by the cookie I had so safely placed inside.

Having nothing else to do, I launched them on Moe. Caught completely off-guard, Moe was unable to protect his big, bulging eyes from the tiny projectiles.

"OW! YOU [censored]!"

Taking advantage of his momentary discomfort, I ran like hell for the submarine's hatch, pushed Samuel from its controls, and put it on full throttle.

"What's the matter with you Amaury!" requested Samuel.

"Moe!"

"Oh..." Samuel nodded, comprehending, "Well, now that your at the controls and seem to be doing fine, you might as well stay there!"

"Thanks," I said, gratefully.

"Now then, tell us what happened, Stefano, Charles, and Patrick!" encouraged Samuel, "Wait a minute, you're all drenched! Dry yourselves off, first!"

When he was nice and dry, Stefano commenced.

"Well, as you all know, I was about to close the communication with you, when suddenly, I was assaulted by the NPB! I was able to call out for help just before they wrecked my talkie, but it seems, from what Charles tells me, you thought I was joking," Stefano began, then stopped to scrutinize us with a disapproving air.

"That was your fault Stef! You kept on tricking us, so after a while, we wouldn't believe you anymore!" protested John.

"Anyway, I was caught completely by surprise, and even though I put up a grand fight, I was overpowered by sheer numbers! They kept me in a guarded hut, where I waited till Patrick rescued me."

"Huu... Samuel, excuse me for interrupting this thrilling narrative, but you being the commander and all, I'd like to know where to head for!" I interrogated.

"Go for the middle of the lake, at a respectable distance from any land, then turn off all exterior lights, and you two", Samuel pointed to John and Thibault, "be helpful, and fasten shut all the portholes' curtains."

This operation completed, Charles started his tale.

"I landed on their make-shift runway, heralding a white flag and making peace signs..."

"Oh brother!" I commented.

"As I was saying, making peace signs and hollering out 'PEACE, PEACE' with fervor... STOP GIGGLING GUYS! Where was I? Oh yes, so, anyway, they jumped me, and I was locked in with Stefano."

Here, Patrick began his account.

"Well, I had decided to stay on the log, and I let the river's current haul me to the Ocean's beach. I wasn't keen on crossing the jungle at night. So, after a peaceful, restful ride, using Stefano's precise directions, I made way for the enemy base, lounging the beach yet traveling through the outer rim of the jungle, to conceal myself. When I got there, I took a rapid bearing of the area, and spotted a sentinel guarding what seemed at first glance to be a cell. I decided that any frontal aggression would mean my certain annihilation. So, I tossed a rock over him. He didn't see it, and it landed well behind him with a loud thump. He twirled around and went towards the clamor. I saw my chance, dashed for the door, opened it (it wasn't equipped with a knot), and directed the two prisoners to follow me. Charles told me where his plane was kept, and after locating it, I hopped into the cockpit, and Stefano and Charles each took place on one of the wings. We sped off, and in doing so, alerted the whole surroundings.

"Unfortunately, the NPB proved to have retained two planes, and a chase ensued. Unable to maneuver or escape because of my heavy load, I was just barely able to reach our island before being shot down. We dropped into the water and swam madly for the shore. The NPB, meanwhile, landed and pursued us. You all know the rest."

"Good work, Patrick!" congratulated Mortimer.

"ALERT! ENEMY SHIPS HEADED THIS WAY! They must have spotted us thanks to the full moon!" I warned.

"Dive! Dive!" ordered Samuel.

We all waited, tense. Was the sub water-proof? Was it dive-worthy?

I worked the water pumps we had assembled with the propeller components salvaged from our aircraft, and the ballast tanks slowly filled themselves.

"HURRY!" yelled John.

We began to sink.

"I can't go any faster! Okay?" I explained.

Thibault and Charles had unfolded the curtains. We beheld the water rising outside us. I felt like if I were admiring a gigantic aquarium. The otherwise clear lake was now murky and seemingly dark because of the sun's absence.

"Sir, do I turn on the search lights?" I inquired.

"No, we mustn't reveal our position to the enemies!" he justified.

"We're completely immersed!" announced Charles.

"Okay, now put half-throttle towards the river's entrance, and keep a constant dive depth," commanded Samuel.

Aiding myself with the crude map we had drawn of the lake's surface, the periscope which was manned by the youngin's taking turns, and a compass from one of our planes, I headed for the river's mouth.

"We can't stay submersed too long: after all, our supplies of oxygen are limited. Every 2 hours, we'll surface to replenish them, understood?" ordered Samuel.

"Aye, aye sir," I went, somewhat ironically.

Meanwhile, Mortimer was preparing our dinner; Samuel was, as you know, giving me orders; Stefano, guided by Charles, was exploring the submarine which he hadn't visited yet; Domino was scampering around, acting pitiful so as to receive some salad; Thibault was making sure Domino didn't get too close to the ice box; John was manning the periscope; and Patrick was helping with the navigation.

After about ten minutes of steering, we reached the river, to behold a lamentable sight: the NPB had placed their second boat in such a manner so as to block the river's access. We were infuriated! We knew, because I had tried to fish there, that that particular area was shallow, so we could not possibly proceed underneath the boat. Samuel had no idea what to do.

"I do not think we can attempt any onslaught today. Let's just find a safe haven somewhere in the lake to pass the night aboard the sub. We'll think up some escape route tomorrow," commented Samuel.

We ate eagerly, envisioning ways to sink or disable the NPB's crafts.

Organizing ourselves to keep a constant alert for the approach of any hostile ship, I was the first on guard duty. Nothing happened, and I was relieved by Charles.

There was an alert given by Stefano in the middle of the night, but it was just a false alarm, the patrolling vessel just passing right by.

The next morning, after a delectable breakfast served by Mortimer, we debated upon the best way to escape. We finally agreed upon the following:

- The obliteration of the patrolling vessel.

- The procuring of more food supplies.

- The celebration of Mortimer's birthday, which we hadn't been able to do yet.

- The obliteration of the second enemy ship, the one guarding the exit.

- The paying of more attention to Domino, who had consistently pestered us for some.

First, we rapidly celebrated Mortimer's birthday, and sang "Happy Birthday", as well as "Oh He's a Jolly Good Fellow" (with a very sarcastic undertone).

Then, we established a calendar to keep an accurate account of who's turn it was to take care of Domino.

Then, we ate.

After that, we smuggled on land to get more food.

And finally, we meditated on a way to get rid of that pesky patrolling craft. Charles came up with an idea, and suggested it:

He was going to swim to an island, patiently seclude himself and await for the arrival of the ship. When it appeared, he would plunge into the water, swim underneath the surface of the lake, come against the vessel's hull, and, using a corkscrew, make a hole to let the water penetrate into the condemned boat.

This amused us considerably, and we agreed. Making sure no NPB were around, we dropped Charles off on a strategically placed island, and dived close-by, to observe the action.

Eventually, the "Revenge" (The boat's name) showed up, and we were all crowded around the periscope, waiting for the lethal hole to sprout open. Charles appeared on the surface briefly, straining for air, but was back in the safety of the water before an NPB could locate him. We waited anxiously.

Finally, our tormentor began to sink. We watched, jubilantly. After surfacing to pick up Charles, we dove once more, and ate dinner, chuckling at the thought of the expression the NPB's faces must have worn when they had discovered that their boat was sinking. We congratulated Charles, and then bunked for the night.

The next day, we woke up early.

"I don't see any way we can pass that boat!" stated Mortimer.

"We can't use that drill thing anymore! It broke under the strain of the first try! Anyway, they'll be on their guard, now!" continued John.

"I don't see..." expressed Patrick.

"I got it!" Samuel asserted, "But there's danger involved..."

"NO WAY!! I'm not going to kill myself for you!!!" protested Stefano.

"No you idiot! Not *that* much danger! Remember that wood Charles found..."

"Oh *yeah*. It will be useful after all," grinned Mortimer.

"Heh, heh, heh..."

"Well, we get some of it, we surface at a secure distance from the ship, announce to its occupants that if they don't leave immediately, they'll regret it, and, if there should arise the case that they ignore us, we use the wood," explained Samuel.

"That's a great idea!"

We immediately headed back towards our island to gather some wood. Positioning ourselves so as to remain invisible from the NPB, we surfaced, and collected some of the sulfuric wood. We then dived once more.

Two hours later, we were ready, and I brought the sub towards the enemy ship, following Samuel's instructions. On the way, we were able to admire the stunning aquatic life of the lake. Fish glittered passed us, in schools. On the bottom, through the layers of crystal-clear water, we could see crabs in shining scarlet armor, and enigmatic fish each one more colorful than the other. We attended the exorbitant mating ritual of saffron-colored tropical fish, and the fight for survival of a tiny mauve baby fish, battling against all odds with a comparatively huge emerald-colored slayer -which reminded me of the beast I had attempted to catch, and made me regret even more its escape-

It was a stupendous sight to witness, and we felt as if we were a part of the daily existence of this exotic universe, so different from ours.

My reverie was interrupted promptly by the appearance of the enemy ship.

"Surface!" Samuel bided.

I did so. Samuel opened the hatch, and yelled.

"Listen up! We're giving you one last chance to survive! If you haven't withdrawn from your position in ten seconds, we will see ourselves obliged to use violence!"

"HAR! HAR! Like, don't make me laugh, you can't do anything against us! Like, you're as good as stuck! Give up, like, now! It's your only, like, chance! And if you, like, get any closer, we'll drop these depth charges on you!" proclaimed Samantha, as Moe appeared, hauling a huge rock.

"10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3..." counted Samuel, "This is your last chance! 2..... 1..... 0..... ATTACK!"

Mortimer ignited his piece of wood and hurled it towards the enemy.

"CAREFUL!! THAT MUST BE SOME KIND OF SECRET WEAPON!!" warned Li Chang Yen.

The NPB, slightly nervous, aimed their water-guns at the piece of wood and shot. The fire was smothered.

"ALL AT ONCE!! FIRE!!" Samuel ordered.

Each of us heaved a blazing piece of wood at the ship. We covered our ears and closed our eyes.

Feeling no detonation, we peeked at the NPB' Spiteful, and discerned a quantity of wood floating harmlessly near the enemy ship.

"We're not strong enough!!" Charles pointed out.

"BLANK IT ALL! I CAN'T LET THIS HAPPEN!" hollered Samuel. He seized a piece of wood remaining, and an unused match. Then, he plunged into the shallow water (feet first) and drove with all his might towards the ship, being extra-cautious not to dampen his precious load. When he was near it, he attempted to lit the wood.

"DON'T YOU DARE! IF YOU DO, I SWEAR I'LL THROW THIS ON YOU!" threatened Moe, while brandishing a huge rock over his head.

But, even if Samuel had wanted to proceed, he was unable to. The match fizzled and died.

"Oh oh..."

The NPB, overjoyed, decided to counter-attack.

"LIKE, THROW THE ROCKS!" commanded Samantha.

"At who? The sub or Samuel?" inquired Adolf.

"First, like, the sub."

A cluster of rocks pounded the water next to SubMortimer, as Samuel swam to meet us.

"PREPARE TO DIVE AND TO RETREAT," he ordered.

We stormed into the sub as Mortimer helped Samuel unto the sub.

"QUICK!! QUICK!! LIKE GET THEM!!" Samantha hollered.

As soon as the trap-door was clamped shut, we began to dive. "Hurry!!" warned John while he watched through a port-hole the NPB preparing to throw another salvo of depth charges.

Just as we were about to disappear into the water, we felt a tremendous shock. The submarine trembled and we lost our balances.

"[censored]!! They got us!!" went Stefano.

"Alert!! There's a leak on the ceiling!!" noticed Patrick.

"AOOOOGA!! AOOOOGA!!"

"Shut up!!"

"Drat!! Quick, surface!! Full speed ahead, towards our hide-out!!" ordered Samuel.

"But if we resurface, the NPB will see us!!" Thibault protested.

"Who cares? They won't follow us, because they'll want to remain at the river's mouth to make sure we can't escape out to sea!" Samuel explained.

We zoomed away.

"What if they posted some patrollers on our base? I mean, they know where it is now..." I pointed out.

"Yes..."

"What we could do is..." Samuel was interrupted by a scream.

"MAYDAY!! BANDITS, COMING FAST!!" hollered Charles.

"Damn! They're sending their planes after us!!" Mortimer interpreted.

"Dive!! DIVE!!" Samuel ordered.

"But what about the leak?" John demanded.

"Try to cover it!" suggested Patrick.

"Hurry!!"

Adolf's plane dived towards us, as we watched anxiously from a porthole. A huge rock plummeted towards us.

"Alert!! TURN!! TURN!!" my brother hollered.

"LOOK OUT!! Li Chang Yen is throwing one two!!" alerted Stefano.

Fortunately, the "bombs" missed, barely...

We finally dove, and not a moment too soon.

"Periscope report," demanded Samuel.

"Bandits taking altitude. Turning back towards us. Seems they still have a bomb or two left," reported Thibault.

"Dive as deeply as possible," ordered Samuel.

I peered out the front window to determine our depth. The water being so clear, I didn't need the lights. Unfortunately, this astounding transparency allowed the NPB to spot us easily from the sky.

"We're too deep for the periscope," notified Thibault.

"Try to confuse them, Ammo. Evasive maneuvers," Samuel commanded.

I led SubMortimer through an elaborate series of turns.

We heard a thunderous splash, and waited anxiously for the shock. There was none.

"They missed!! What bad shots!!" decided Stefano.

"What do I do now?" I asked.

"Let's wait a while. Then we'll surface," Samuel ordered.

We waited ten minutes, which we spent observing the underwater life. We saw green turtles slowly gliding along, surfacing every so often. We watched as schools of colorful fish fed on weeds. And we thought we spotted an otter frolicking, but we weren't sure.

Finally, Samuel gave the order to reach periscope depth. John scanned the horizon, and didn't notice any enemies. We surfaced.

"We'd better leave some one on watch. I bet the NPB are going to return," suggested Patrick.

"I'll watch," volunteered Charles.

"Okay. Now what do we do?" demanded Stefano.

"Let's try to attack the NPB again," proposed John.

"Well, of course. But how?" asked Mortimer.

"Yeah. I mean look what just happened," Thibault pointed out.

"Well... The problem is that the NPB can see us coming with the wood. If we could just surprise them or something..." Mortimer reasoned.

"Yes... surprise them... Like during the night or something," thought Stefano.

"Yeah!! That's a great idea!!" exclaimed Thibault.

"Yes. First of all, it would be a lot less dangerous, because we wouldn't risk hurting someone. I doubt the NPB sleep on their ship," Samuel pointed out.

"Okay. Well then it's agreed. How about tonight?" inquired John.

"Fine. All we have to do is gather some more of that wood. Oh, and while we're at it, we could repair that leak a little better," said Patrick.

"Well, let's go," I concluded.

"MAYDAY!! MAYDAY!! Bandits attacking!!" warned Charles.

"Blank it!! Dive!! Dive!!"

"AOGA!! AOGA!!"

"WILL YOU STOP THAT?"

"*They're here...*" went Stefano.

The two planes were able to reach us just as we began to dive.

"LOOK OUT!! THEY'RE DROPPING DEPTH CHARGES!!" alerted Charles, who was looking out the periscope.

"WHAM!!"

"There's a huge hole in the ceiling!!" notified Patrick.

"Seriously?" enquired Thibault.

"Well... a pretty big hole..."

"We'll have to surface," decided Samuel.

"But they'll get us!!" protested Mortimer.

"Yeah... and the damage isn't that bad. We can block the hole temporarily, and stay under water," proposed Charles.

"I'm tired of playing hide-and-seek!! We're going to counter-attack!!" expressed Samuel.

"Quick!! Get the guns!!" Patrick ordered.

When the NPB moved away to make another dive-bombing run, we surfaced. We then all rushed outside.

"Aim for their engines!!" suggested John.

"Wait till they're close enough!!" said Patrick.

We waited as Adolf and Li Chang Yen swerved to strike us. They approached menacingly, heaving huge rocks.

"Ready, aim... FIRE!!"

We sprayed them.

Li Chang Yen avoided our onslaught, dropped his load, missed, and then headed for the NPB's base. Meanwhile, Adolf's engine sputtered. Nevertheless, he dropped a huge rock, which fell right next to us. We were soaked. He then swerved, to return to his base. But he was losing altitude fast.

Realizing he wouldn't make it home, he veered back and dove towards our sub.

"Oh Oh... KAMIKAZE!!" Thibault pointed out.

"DIVE!! DIVE!! EVASIVE MANEUVERS!!" ordered Samuel.

We dashed back inside, and began diving. Suddenly, we heard a huge crash, but didn't feel anything. My brother peered outside with the periscope.

"AAAAHHHH!!!"

"What? What is it?? Is the periscope broken?" demanded John.

My brother staggered away, panting heavily and grasping his chest. John took his place.

"AAAAHHHH!!!"

"What? What is it??" I entailed, impatient.

But John wobbled away and tripped. I looked outside.

"AAa... Oh... It's just Adolf," I sighed.

"What?? What is he doing?" questioned Thibault.

Adolf, having jumped out of his plane, was now peering furiously through the periscope, while holding onto it for dear life.

Samuel glanced at him.

"Ew... He doesn't have to make faces! Darn. I just can't shake him off! What is he trying to do? Oh no!! He's trying to break our periscope!! Quick, let's dive and get rid of him," he decided.

I did so, and after that little incident, the NPB's last remaining airplane left us alone.

At midnight, we prudently and silently headed towards the Spiteful. Mortimer and Stefano formed the commando force. They had to check whether the boat was empty, and then, if it was, we would blow it to smithereens.

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

They climbed out of the sub and onto the boat. We heard a slight knock. A few minutes passed. Then, Stefano and Mortimer returned, carrying what seemed to be a heavy load.

"Guys!! We found Joe guarding the boat. But he was sleeping, and we kind of made sure he'd stay that way. Here, grab him and put him to safety," whispered Mortimer.

"Okay. Careful now..."

We tied Joe up and then transported him on the shore. Meanwhile, Mortimer and Stefano climbed back on the boat, to proceed with their exploration. We heard some skirmishing, and Stefano returned, detaining what seemed to be a chimp.

"Guys, we found Sir Snotface jr.. We didn't bonk him because he swore to shut up."

"Please don't kill me!! I'm sorry! I'm too young to die!!" went Sir Snotface jr..

"Shut up, or I throw you into the lake!" Stefano threatened.

"No!! Not the lake!! You know I can't swim!! Please! Boo hoo hoo!!" wailed Sir Snotface jr..

"I swear I'll do something drastic if you don't stop!!" menaced Stefano.

"But!! I didn't do anything!! I won't..."

To our delight, Samuel slipped a handkerchief on Sir Snotface jr.'s mouth. We then tied him up and installed him next to Joe.

Mortimer appeared.

"I think that's all!"

"Great!! Now we can blow'em up!" went Charles.

"QUICK!! LIKE, THERE THEY ARE!! LIKE, GET'EM!!" a voice thundered from the thick jungle foliage.

"OH NO!! Hurry!!" went John.

Mortimer and Stefano jumped back on board as the rest of us lit some of the... peculiar wood. We hurled the branches on the boat, and quickly entered the sub.

"Reverse full! Lock the hatches!! Emergency stations!!" ordered Samuel.

"Huh... what are our emergency stations?" my brother inquired.

"If you don't shut up, yours will be six feet underground!!" Mortimer explained.

"Oh oh!! The NPB look mad!! They're looking for rocks!!" Patrick announced, looking out the periscope.

"SHABOOM!!"

A blinding flash of white light and a terrible shock swept the premises.

"Thar she blows!!" went Mortimer.

The Spiteful was now a bulk of blazing flames that illuminated the surrounding night. The NPB, that had been projected to the ground, were now getting up, viewing the spectacle with awe and hatred.

"Darn!! The wreckage is still in our way!" Charles pointed out.

"And the NPB *really* look mad now!! They're coming this way!!" John observed, having taken Patrick's place at the periscope.

"SHABOOM!!"

Another explosion shattered the air. The Spiteful split into two, leaving us a loophole.

"Hurry!! Full speed ahead!!" Samuel commanded.

SubMortimer zipped through the wreck, as the NPB looked on, infuriated.

But, we weren't home-free yet, for the water was shallow, and most of the Spiteful's hull was resting on the bottom of the river. When we passed over it, it ripped a gaping hole through our fragile craft.

"We're sinking!" warned Stefano and Charles, simultaneously.

"[Censored]!" went Samuel.

"Quick! Block it! Put... put... put Domino over it!" cried out Mortimer, desperate.

"HEY! NEEK! I'M NOT THAT FAT!"

"Don't be silly!! Thibault, place the table upside down over it, and keep it on tightly!" suggested Patrick.

The task was accomplished at break-neck speed, and Samuel ordered me to stop as soon as we reached the Ocean, to make repairs.

I did so. Day was dawning, and even though we were pooped, we decided to eat, refurbish our supplies, and then work on patching up the hole.

By midday, everything was done. We ate rapidly, and were about to leave, when, the NPB, having observed our activities, and being keen on revenge, startled us.

"QUICK!! ATTACK!!"

"Oh oh!!"

"Look!! The planes are coming two!!"

We knew we didn't stand a chance in hand-to-hand combat, and, furthermore, the planes could considerably damage to our sub, so we were forced to retreat, contrary to our principles and practices.

We were off! But, unobserved by us, Marvin had hurled a coconut at our sub, and thus made a tiny dent on the top section of our hull, weakening that particular area.

Finally! We were on our way back home. We were ecstatic, and joked around a lot. Samuel had decided that diving was not required at the moment, and that we'd go faster on the surface. Furthermore, it would facilitate the distinguishing of potentially dangerous reefs.

So most of us were outside, marveling at the vast watery expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Everyone was pleased. The water was clear, and you could see through it to a certain extent.

"Why don't we dive? I'd like to see how it looks like down there! I mean, after all the work we've done, I thought we would take advantage of it!" proclaimed Charles.

"I've got news for you! We're going to have to dive anyway! Look at that storm coming up!" I indicated.

"By golly! Do they come fast here or what!" spoke out Charles, as Samuel gave the order to dive.

Soon, we were submerged. Under the raging surface, we were protected from the tumultuous waves above. Everything was so serene and peaceful down there, that you'd hardly think there was a fierce gale blowing just a few meters overhead! It reminded me somewhat of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" by Jules Verne. All that was missing was a ferocious calamary...

"WOW! This is awesome!" certified Stefano.

We observed, bewildered.

"Huh, Samuel," I called.

"Yes," he responded.

"It seems that we're sinking down deeper without any reason! And I can't do a thing to stop it!" I cried.

"WHAT THE HECK!" ejaculated Samuel.

"What's the matter?" demanded a worried Mortimer.

"Nothing we can't take control of," reassured Patrick.

"Try emptying the ballast tanks!" suggested Samuel.

"What's going on?" asked John, unconscious of the great danger that we were running headlong into.

"QUIET! I'm trying to think!" roared Samuel.

Normally, someone would have made a witty comment like "That must be hard for you!" to reply to Samuel, but, somehow, we all felt a looming disaster, and knew it was no time to crack jokes.

I struggled with the controls, but in vain. Now, we were really alarmed. We all endured seconds of tense agony. If someone had had the idea to sneeze, the rest of us would have surely suffered heart-attacks.

The water was obscuring. Someone turned on the exterior lights. We saw the most uncanny, most unearthly, most eerie vision I ever set my eyes upon. Lights, yes, bluish lights, were whisking around our sub.

"Fish," uttered Samuel.

And, in fact, they were hatchet fish.

These deep-sea roaming fish are from 1-2 inches long. Their name adequately describes their bodies, which are flattened from side to side, and with lower surfaces corresponding to a hatchet's blade. Parts of their bodies are scaleless, so they appear transparent, and are in fact in the breast and body. They also generate a bluish, and sometimes reddish, light.

No doubt we were surprised! And Samuel, who's knowledge extended to many subjects, announced that, as proven by this specie's presence, we were 90 or more meters

under the surface of the Pacific Ocean. Thus 40 or more meters under this submarine's maximum intended dive limit.

We were in deep (literally) trouble.

"I don't want to die!" protested Patrick.

"SHUT UP!" said Samuel.

The walls creaked menacingly. Sprouts of water erupted from interstices between the boards. We heard a yelp.

"Oh my gosh! I found the problem!" claimed Charles, who had gone off to the engine room to check it out.

"What is it?" inquired Mortimer.

"There's a huge leak! HELP!" retorted Charles.

"OH MY GOD! HELP!" howled Thibault, who had gone to find out what was exciting Charles.

All of us rushed to the scene, excluding me and Samuel.

"QUICK! COVER IT UP!"

We heard a substantial amount of ruckus, and finally, Mortimer emerged in the cockpit.

"Everything's under control!"

"Try bringing her up now, Ammo," said Samuel.

I tried, but SubMortimer refused to comply with my commands.

"There's nothing I can do!"

"LET ME TRY!" shrieked an impatient Samuel.

He grabbed the controls from me, and after a few minutes of wrestling, he gave up, resigned.

We looked outside, at what was to become our watery grave.

"We have about one hour and a half more to live, before we run out of oxygen. Unless of course we're crushed by the water's pressure first..." calmly announced Samuel.

Brusquely, we felt a tremor. Then, a more violent one.

Soon, the whole sub was quaking frantically. We were unable to restrain its jerky movements, and even less able to discern what was causing them.

Then, with incredible velocity, we started to zip to the surface.

"WHAT IN DARNATIONS!"

Faster and faster we went. I'm absolutely positive that we were then experiencing ,at least, 8 g's.

"Look! TENTACLES!" screamed my brother, Thibault.

"We're being hauled by a... a... a calamary!" revealed Samuel.

"WOW! Just like in Jules Verne!" I remembered.

"It must have mistaken us for a cachalot!" implied Thibault.

We watched, bewildered.

The wild race abruptly ended when the creature had brought us all the way back to the surface. It then attacked our craft savagely, embracing the hull with its deadly and numerous tentacles. The beast was approximately 6 meters long, with 10 tentacles averaging 14 meters each!

"What do we do? In Jules Verne, they attack it with axes, but we don't have any!" summoned Stefano.

"We go out and fight it with anything we can get hold of!" responded Samuel.

"YEAH!"

We heaved open the hatch, to discover that the storm had lulled down, and the sea was calm. This was going to facilitate our task enormously. We leaped outside, and battered the thing's tentacles with mighty, yet pitiful, efforts. Had the situation not been so life-threatening, I'm sure we would have had a good laugh at our pathetic attempts at harming the brute.

Its tentacles fluctuated towards all sides. Its glaucous eyes stared at us ferociously.

Its menacing beak was wide open.

"GET'EM"

"LOOK OUT MORTIMER!"

"BEHIND YOU!"

"WHOA! HELP!"

"OUH! I GOT IT GOOD!"

"TAKE THAT, YOU BLUNDERING BASTARD!"

"OUCH! BE CAREFUL WITH THAT, THIBAUT!"

"LOOK AT ITS EYES!"

"IT'S SMILING! THE DEVIL!"

"MOOOOOOOOM!"

Then, we heard a raging wail.

"NEEEEEEEEEEEEEK! IT TOOK MY SALAD! WHY THE [Censored]! NEEEEEEEEEEK!
GIVE IT BACK! NEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!"

Domino lunged out of the sub, aiming for the closest, flailing tentacle.

"HARA-KIRI! NEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!"

He bit into the unfortunate calamary's rubbery flesh. I felt genuinely sorry for it, momentarily.

Feeling a sharp pang of pain, the marine monster let out a short cry, resembling that of a parrot's, and, letting its prey go free, plummeted back into its black realm, still clutching its salad trophy.

"NEEK! Not bad, but needs some salt!" appreciated Domino, munching on his trophy: a piece of the monster's tentacle.

"HURRAY FOR DOMINO! YIP! YIP! HURRAY!" acclaimed Thibault.

"NEEK! What are you doing just standing there? FEED ME! It seems I've run out of salad..."

We burst into laughter.

Ever since, Domino has been treated like a king.

We then made all necessary repairs as best we could, and proceeded with our journey. Samuel was trying to head for a nearby Island, which he had noticed on his charts (don't ask me *why*, but Samuel always brings a world map along with him on voyages).

1 day passed.

2 days went by.

3 days expired.

4 days elapsed.

We were running low on chow.

We tried fishing, but either our baits were unappetizing, our technique incorrect, the waters lifeless, or we plain forgot how to fish, but whatever the case, we didn't catch a single morsel.

We had to rationalize what we had left.

The water was the first to run out. We were forced to consume salt water from the sea (believe me, it's even more disgusting than tap water!). Samuel comforted us by explaining that our bodies would get nutrients from the plankton inside the water, but he only made it sound more repulsive to most of us.

We stayed inside all the time now, avoiding the sun's intolerable heat, and thus getting less thirsty. We also napped considerably, for "Qui dort, dîne!"

Unfortunately, this maxim appeared to be just an immense hoax!

Soon, we were seeing things.

"WOW! Look at that huge, juicy, fried chicken!"

"I'm more interested in that refreshing coca-cola! See, there it is!"

"LAND! LAND! OOPS, sorry, my mistake."

"A ten-foot long hot-dog! HERE I COME, BABY!"

"QUIET!!! THESE ARE ONLY DECEIVING MIRAGES! NOW SHUT UP AND SLEEP!
AND YOU, MORTIMER, COME BACK ON BOARD IMMEDIATELY!!"

"But, look at that hot-..."

"IMMEDIATELY!"

We just waited, wallowing in appealing thoughts, seemingly dazed.

Every so often, someone would yell "LAND!", but it always proved to be an illusion.

A whole week went by that way. A dreadful, insufferable, atrocious week.

"Guys, men. There's nothing humanly possible left to do. Let us pray to God, and await our fate," decided Samuel.

"NO WAIT! LAND!" I bellowed.

"Poor Amaury. It's just a mirage..." said Patrick, sorry for me.

"NO IT'S NOT! LOOK THERE!"

"BY GOLLY! WE'RE SAVED!" blared Mortimer.

"FULL SPEED AHEAD!"

Saved, yes, saved. Anyway, you all predicted we would be, or else I would have never been able to recount this tale.

We watched, praising the Lord, our savior.

Finally, prudently avoiding the surrounding reefs, we disembarked on the island.

Without delay, we raided the shore for food (Domino was first alighted). When we were bursting with ample nutrients, we got to work re-supplying our sub. Now that we had eaten, we were brimming with energy. Soon, our sub was replenished with necessary aliments, and almost ready to weigh anchor.

Charles, Stefano, John and my brother were in the sub, while the rest of us were getting more provisions. That's when it happened.

"WOOLA! Wombaga digi doogoo!"

"Stop acting silly, Patrick!" I commented.

"Hum... I have bad news: I didn't say anything. He did!" Patrick pointed towards a savage native, wearing what we thought was a ritual mask, which was incredibly repulsive.

"Hum... Hello! Me name Sa-mu-el. Me nice, no hurt you!"

"YUM! Sa-mu-el chow! Lyki!"

"NO! Me no good! Only yucky fat! See? See?" he fretted.

"NO! NO! Yucky fat! See? See?" imitated the islander.

"Guys... I heartily suggest that we... run!" proposed Patrick.

We deliberated, and heartily agreed with Patrick.

"OUT OF MY WAY!" warned Mortimer, who did not appreciate the prospect of ending up as luncheon for the neanderthal.

Unfortunately, the masked man was not alone, and we soon discovered that we were surrounded. They led us deeper into the luxuriant jungle.

"Gosh! We must be near New Guinea! I guess my calculations were a bit off..." admitted Samuel.

"You... You... You mean these are CANNIBALS!" stormed Mortimer.

"I'm afraid so," said Samuel.

"YO NON HABLA! ORE HELSE SHISH KEBAB!"

We ceded to his demands, whatever they happened to be, and remained quiet during the rest of the walk.

We arrived in a constructed clearing. Huts of palm leaves and wood served as homes to the naturals. Our entrance proved to be a long-awaited attraction, and we were soon the center of attention.

"YOU RELEASE US OR GODS WILL NOT BE HAPPY!" daunted Samuel.

"YUSE PEP PERR ORE SALTTE, DER?" the masked man asked what seemed to be

his wife.

"SALTTE BETUR!" she decided.

"Gosh, are we in trouble!" I thought.

A giant, wearing a coat of multi-colored feathers, dumped a whole boat-load of wood onto a piece of scorched earth where human remnants rested. We watched, hysterical with dread.

"KOM!" he commanded, authoritatively.

I was about to risk everything and sprint away from my captors for the jungle, when we heard.

"GO! LEAVE CHILDREN ALONE! VAMOOSE! NO COME BACK!"

The resonant voice came from the sky. Everybody looked up.

Nothing.

"HURRY! OR ELSE GODS MAD!" continued the voice.

"Non comprendo? Wa dew whe doo?" requested the masked man.

"Mee non nowe. Ig nor. LUNCHE THYME!" returned his wife.

"OUCH! WHOA! OW! That smarts!" went the voice, while Charles fell out of a tree.

"WHAT THE..." said a bewildered Mortimer.

"CAT CHE HIMME! MOR FEWD!" directed the masked man.

A number of natives headed for Charles, chanting.

"YUMMY... YUM YUM!! YUMMY... YUM YUM!! YUMMY... YUM YUM!!"

"HEY! Now let's not get angry! WHOA! I'm outta here!" expressed Charles.

"QUICK! LET'S FOLLOW CHARLES'S EXAMPLE WHILE WE STILL CAN!" I implied.

Taking advantage of the dwindled native force, we ran like hell for the jungle.

"O NON! AL CHOW RUNNA WHEIGH!" was the last we heard of the masked man, which did not grieve us in the least.

It's amazing the velocity you can reach when pursued by a tribe of cannibals! I'm sure that, had this been the Olympics, we would have taken home the gold! Spears whizzed passed us, but, fortunately, the indigenous had a very poor aim. We sprang into the sub, and immediately left port when he saw that everyone was safely onboard, including Charles. Samuel didn't have to order me twice to withdraw from the scene.

The savages followed us in the water for a moment, but when they saw us dive, they were filled with terror, and decreed it best to retire.

"Nice try Charles! I really thought you were God for a moment there!" chuckled Patrick.

"I guess I did do pretty well. But those dumb idiots didn't know a word of English! How was I supposed to tell them to leave?" asked Charles.

Samuel then explained that we had deviated to the south instead of to the north because some retard had left a magnet near our compass. The culprit was never discovered.

5 days went by, with no sign of life, except for a few marine animals every so often. It was now so torrid outdoors that we were diving most of the time.

"HEY! GUYS! A BOAT!" announced John, who was on periscope duty.

"Let me see!" required Samuel, "Hum... It seems to be a merchant vessel. We must be crossing a shipping route. Let's surface and ask for directions."

I did so, and we hailed, "ANYBODY ABOARD!"

A seasoned sea-wolf appeared on the railing over our sub.

"What is it, son?" he seemed not in a least bit disconcerted by our miraculous appearance.

"Hi," began Samuel, amiably, "We'd just like to get some information..."

"Go ahead son, don't be 'fraid!" went the man, as he pulled his moustache.

"Well, we'd like to know if we're anywhere near New Guinea, and by which way is

North America?"

"Well now, that's easy, son. Yes, you could say we're near the New Guinean coast. And as for the secon' one, America's right about there." he said, pointing his pipe away from the setting sun.

"Thanks a lot, sir! Good-day!" thanked Samuel.

"Anytime, son! And now, just ya be careful, ya hear, these here are shark infested waters!"

"We'll be fine, thank you."

"Bye now son, and... WAIT A DARN MINUTE!!! WHAT..."

But we didn't hear the rest of his slow reaction, for we were already heading due east. Had we stayed, we would've seen the poor man rubbing his eyes, then opening them wide, looking at the exact spot at which we had been a moment ago, and muttering, "I'd swear that I'd, just now, seen one of 'em divin' contraptions piloted by a bunch of boys! Must of been the sun's glare durin' the day!"

"WOW! We're in shark infested waters! That's so neat!" was assuring an enthusiastic Thibault.

"Don't panic, Thibault, we probably won't meet any!" I, at my turn, assured him. "Good night!"

"WAKE UP EVERYONE!! LOOK!" Thibault awoke us.

"THIS HAD BETTER BE GOOD! I WAS DREAMING ABOUT PIZZA!" cautioned Charles.

"IT IS! Look outside!" guaranteed Thibault.

We all took a post at one of the many windows lining SubMortimer's walls.

"AH! SHARKS! HUNDREDS OF SHARKS!" observed John, perhaps exaggerating a little bit.

We watched, mystified.

Ominous, yet still retaining a certain fascination upon the viewer, the elegant -yes, in a way- creatures were swimming. No, not really. It was more like gliding. Impending, the poised assassins seemed ready to pounce on us. Yet, in a way, they were somewhat debonair. They were swimming slowly, peacefully, a sure sign that we weren't really at risk.

That's when we saw it. At first, it didn't alarm us. We just gazed at it, as it circled sluggishly around SubMortimer. Then, the relatively tiny shark, about 40 cm. long, bashed against our hull, head first, trying to rip it open with its abnormally tiny teeth. That we were terrorized by such a stunted thing might seem excessive drama to you, who might have seen "Jaws". But we weren't, anyway.

What really terrorized us was how it spurred the others. At first weary, when the rest of the deadly bunch saw the pip-squeak fool-hardily assaulting us, they were stimulated, and a shark frenzy ensued.

"BLANK IT, BLANK IT, BLANK IT! Full speed ahead! DIVE! DIVE! NO! NO! RISE! RISE! NO! NO! STEADY! STEADY! OH! BALDERDASH! JUST GET THE HECK OUT OF HERE!" commanded Samuel! Samuel!

The sharks assailed us. Straining heartily to firmly chomp on some flesh, they ardently rammed into poor, battered, SubMortimer. The hull shuddered and strained.

"**MOMMY!!**"

"Woah!!"

"Ahh!!"

"I'm too smart to die!!"

"LOOK UP AHEAD! JAWS!" affirmed Thibault.

"What a mastodon! But don't worry, it's just a whale shark!" I corrected, somewhat to

exchanging a single word, but just by looking into each others eyes, we jumped to the task. Pushing and pulling, we fought to rescue the turtle, which was completely disoriented. The moment its beak touched the frigid water, it was revitalized, and it helped us as we pushed it to safety. Finally, it was safe and sound. As it swam away, it seemed to wave good-bye to us with its right flipper, when we remembered the incoming danger.

We rushed for the sub, but I didn't make it just in time.

"YOOW!"

I had to pilot with my aching feet in chilling water for the two whole following days.

"Only one week of navigation left, if my calculations are correct, before reaching the West Coast," announced Samuel, about 3 days after my heated experience on Turtle Island (as we thereafter called it).

"GREAT! I can't wait to play Super Nintendo again!" declared Patrick.

"I can't wait to play Game Gear again!" reported Thibault.

"I can't wait to eat some GOOD salad! NEEK!" said guess who.

"Well! I need to play on my computer!" stated Mortimer.

"I don't even remember how my Sega looks like anymore!" claimed Charles.

"I don't believe you guys! We've been having a great time..."

"HUM HUM!" I corrected, thinking about my feet.

"Okay! A reasonably good time, and all you can think of is your electronic games! Shame on you! Look at all the things we've seen, been through!" scolded John.

"Well, I guess so..." admitted Charles.

"BUT I STILL WANT SOME GOOD SALAD! NEEK! NO MATTER WHAT YOU SAY!" protested Domino, indignant.

Our laughter reconciled us.

I was more and more upset the closer we got to our home in Washington D.C.. Did our parents think we were deceased? Had they gone to meet the camp's director? Had they rented out our rooms?

Thoughts like these nagged me during the day, and even in my dreams, at night. Finally, I was able to fight the irritating doubts away, knowing there'd always be a place for me at home, whether my parents had sold my stuff and rented my room or not!

This awareness safely and well encrusted in me, I took advantage of the last days of our trip.

Either our map was faulty, or Samuel's calculations were, but our trip surpassed the predicted week by one, two, three days.

"Has some joker been putting a magnet near the compass again!" demanded Samuel. No one answered.

"I don't believe this! I couldn't be so far off my calculations! We must be drifting because of some strong currents! I'm going to check the map too see if there are any powerful currents around here!"

He did so.

"Amaury! Patrick! Come here a second!" was his reaction. "What do you say about this?"

We looked at the spot on which his finger was resting.

"By golly! We must have drifted backwards instead of towards California!" I commented, kidding of course, but very close to the reality.

Samuel was pointing at some arrows marking a strong westward moving current, where he assumed we were.

"We have to move out of here!" decided Patrick.

"Full speed ahead, heading north-east," ordered the skipper.

Finally, we were on the right course again, but only after having wasted a lot of time. But, we were able to make the best of it, and we explored the wonders of the deep ocean.

We contemplated a school of dolphins raiding a school of tuna, and decimating the latter, we attended a lone shark's failed attack on another school of dolphins, we admired the frolics of a great Blue Whale, we even glimpsed a sea turtle, leisurely roaming the deep, plentiful waters.

We avoided any touristy or inhabited islands, wanting to escape nosy adults and annoying regulations.

Every so often, we'd catch a fish, or find a small atoll, thus remaining replenished in matters of food.

The days lapsed away. We were getting restless. Fortunately, I, personally, had something to do: steer the sub. But, it was a tedious job when nothing exhilarating was going on, and the rest of us had little to do. We began playing games, usually betting some stuff of little value, just to make things a little more exciting.

We ceased that when Stefano started to win all the hands all the time, and anyway, Domino had chomped on the cards, in an access of fury, so that they were now easily recognizable.

Everybody had read all the books onboard three times over -even my brother!!-, and Patrick was almost hanged when he ventured to share a laugh with us.

Having nothing else to do, everybody took up fishing, but not everyone had the necessary patience for it, and these waters were particularly fish-less. So that idea went down the drain, following the footsteps of its predecessors.

Singing was took up, but it caused thunderstorms more often than not. Domino even started a tap-dance act, which was hilarious, before he mentioned his fees (in salad, of course).

Everyone craved for Washington D.C.. Its movie theaters, its "Air & Space" museum, its... pizza -or salad, depending solely on one's specie-!

Wishfully thinking, we'd dream that we were going to hit California the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that...

Briefly,... it was awful!!

Charles, outside one gloomy day, raging that land was still not in sight, began jumping madly. The hull was slippery, and he fell in the water. Yelling till he lost his breath, Charles, his clothes infiltrated with water, could not possibly swim after SubMortimer, and he drifted away.

He was alone at the time, so the rest of us were not conscious of his disappearance, until Thibault went outside to join him.

"CHARLES IS GONE! I LOOKED OUTSIDE, AND HE ISN'T THERE ANYMORE!"

"WHAT!" yelled Samuel.

All of us climbed up to confirm Charles's evaporation.

We scanned the horizon, in vain.

We called out, unavailingly.

Charles had been swallowed by the sea. We returned in the ship, sulking and silent. The sub's life had been drained away. We would miss the guy. Tears came to my eyes as I heard my brother, whimpering in a corner.

The atmosphere was crushing. We tried to ignore the feeling, but whenever we made conversation, the tabooed subject kept resurfacing.

So we stayed quiet, keeping to ourselves. Domino was the least sorry of us all, for he deduced that the less people, the more food for him.

Then, we heard a knock from outside. Our hopes raised high, we hastened to open the top hatch. To our disillusionment, we discovered a gull, trying hard to break a clam on our hull. We returned to our isolation, more discouraged than ever.

A huge thunderstorm struck a few hours later, but we were too disheartened to fight back effectively. It drove us northward.

"LAND HO!"

The storm had blown us to an island, and we profited from the occasion by getting more food and stretching our legs a little.

"Guys," Samuel solemnly began one of his long speeches again, "I believe that we must properly honor Charles's soul. His accidental death has not permitted an appropriate burial, but I believe we should, at least, build a small cross bearing the words: 'To the south, on June 20, 1991, a fatal accident brought Charles's blessed soul to Heaven before his time, for he was but 11 when he slipped from SubMortimer to the water and drowned. His friends all love and remember him.'"

Most of us started sniffing.

We built a make-shift cross, had trouble carving the words in the wood, but made a worthy effort, then we walked in procession and each of us said a few words about Charles's sudden death and how he had been such a good friend.

We left, not capable of speech.

A few days expired, and we began to regain our joy of living and good humor, as well as the ability to talk between ourselves. We hadn't forgotten Charles, we had just decided that we couldn't live cursed by the terrible memory forever, so we tried our best to forget a little.

Samuel announced that he was absolutely positively certain that the West Coast was just two days away.

He was right. We spotted land just when he had predicted it. Some passing dolphins, curious, accompanied us to shore, thus making us a little bit merrier.

We followed the beach southward till we came to a man, fishing. He looked at us, eyes wide.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you know where we are?" asked Samuel.

"Huuuuuh... What the? Somebody pinch me!"

"Excuse me, sir, but where are we?" repeated Samuel.

"I must be dreaming", was all he said, while slapping himself in an effort to wake up. "This can't be!"

"SIR! WHERE ARE WE!" demanded Samuel.

"Huh? Oh excuse me! You're in North California... I have to be dreaming! Wake up Joe! Wake up!"

We left him to his hypotheses and continued to move South.

"What do we do? Two choices are offered to us:

-we find a port and try to contact our parents so that they send money or come to get us.

-we go south, to the Panama Canal, take it, then head for Washington D.C..

The former will mean getting home sooner but divulging Charles's death sooner too, the latter will mean a longer journey, but easier transportation of our sub to the East Coast," I established.

"I'm for the latter," ruled Thibault.

He was unanimously followed, so we went southward, towards the Panama canal.

The dolphins, maybe to keep our spirits high, followed two. We played with them, cherished them, and fed them all the extra fish we caught.

The weather became noticeably warmer, and we were in our swimming suits most of the time. The landscape changed too. We were now admiring extravagant vegetation, including palm, and especially tropical, trees.

Our fateful escort finally left us, to our regret. We concentrated thereupon on watching

with awe the tropical forest's animal life, which we caught glimpses of, every so often. When we would get close to civilization, we would dive, and make ourselves inconspicuous, but, for the moment, we could remain on the surface. Soon, we were nearing the Panama canal. We decided to remain, until we were well away from the infamous canal, under the water. The next day, we spotted it. Boat traffic was congested, but this didn't affect us in the least, for we just went under everyone.

"2 degrees right!"

"6 degrees left!"

"Dive to 10 meters!"

"Left 1 degree!"

The orders were rolling in, but I could cope with it.

Leaving the periscope unmanned for a while, John had an urgent need...

He returned swiftly.

"DIVE! DIVE! DIVE FOR GOD'S SAKE!" he hollered.

"WHAM!"

"NOW LOOK WHAT YOU DID! YOU SCARED ME SO MUCH, WE'VE HIT THE BOTTOM!" I yelled.

"BUT A STUPID BOAT WAS GOING TO HIT THE PERISCOPE!" protested John.

"OH NO! WE SCRAPED SO HARD, THERE'S A HOLE IN THE FLOOR!" observed Mortimer, not without a certain dreadful foreboding.

"THE ENGINES AREN'T WORKING PROPERLY!" I added to the list of plights.

"WE MUST STOP!" assured Samuel.

The night was falling, so we agreed we could, with relative safety, stop at a port. We searched for a nice, dark one, and, to our relief, found just what we needed. It was a small, seemingly abandoned and deserted pier, homing just an antique, broken down freighter.

I got out, to find something to thatch up the hole more effectively, and maybe some useful tools.

"HEY, YOU!" a dark stranger hailed me. I was going to run like mad for SubMortimer, when he continued.

"Gotta ligh'?"

"HUH? OH! No, I don't smoke," I excused myself, as if I had to.

"Too bad. Say, wha' you doin' here at thi' time o' nigh'?" he questioned me, with a sideward glance.

"Me? Oh, just getting back home! Bye now!" I replied, moving off rapidly in the opposite direction, before he could put in any other questions.

When I got back with what I had been looking for, I learned that the damage wasn't too bad, and, fortunately, the propeller was just a little bent, nothing we couldn't fix easily -for the top of the propeller blades jutted out of the water, therefore we didn't have to dive to reach them-

We were gone the same night.

As we left the Panama Canal, I wished we'd never gone on such a vacation. It had cost one of my buddy's life, and had been nothing but trouble. It was... it was... it was a Sunken Vacation! I picked Domino, who was walking near me, and started petting him. It made me feel better.

The days went by at a slow pace, and we had dwindled into a "slump" again. Meaning we kept to ourselves and rarely talked. Domino was now petted around the clock, which suited him fine, as long as he was fed.

We crossed the Mexican Golf with no difficulty, and we were closing in on Washington. And, contrary to what we were expecting, we got considerably upset the closer we got to home. How would we explain Charles's demise? How would we explain everything at that?! Would they be really wrathful? How would Charles's parents take it? We discussed these

matters between ourselves.

We arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Ships were now commonly seen, and we had already been diving stealthily for a while. We did feel some kind of relief getting home, but we would have much preferred been all together and alive. Patrick convinced us that we ought to stop at his home first, because his house was the largest, thus, if we had to stay over for a while, it would be more easily arranged.

Finally, we reached the Potomac River. All we had to do was follow it up, now. Patrick knew approximately where his house was in relation to the river, so when we reached what we thought was an ideal spot: close to his house yet with no habitations around, we dropped anchor and camouflaged our sub.

Having most of the money intended for our stay at Mexico left, we were able to ride a bus part of the way. Patrick rang the doorbell. No answer. He fetched the emergency key, and soon, we were inside. There was a message on the answering machine for Patrick.

It went:

Dear Patrick,

We're really sorry but we've decided to stay a little longer in Asia. It's a very, very nice place you know. We realized that your camp closes before we'll be home, so, as you know, we've asked our baby-sitter to fetch you and take care of you until we return, which will be just a few days after the camp closes. Oh yes, the refrigerator...

The rest was not important, at least to the reader.

So are parents were still gone... That left us time to think.

We decided that it would be best to phone my parents, who were in charge of Charles, first. We would reveal everything to them. But to do so, we needed my parent's hotel's name and phone number, which we didn't have. But Patrick's parents had left their current hotel's address, so we decided to give them a call to see if my parents stayed at the same hotel. The manager notified us that my parent's didn't stay there, and that Patrick's parents were presently absent, so we presently couldn't ask them where my parents stayed. Patrick would also call his baby-sitter to tell her that we were already home.

Meanwhile, my brother and I decided to leave the rest of the group at Patrick's house, and we walked to our house, which was very nearby, so that we could see if our parent's had given us their phone number.

Having arrived, we discovered that the door was unlocked. Fearful, we slowly opened the door and peeked inside, waiting to see a ransacked interior.

"WHO'S THERE?" a voice came from inside.

That voice! NO! It couldn't be!

"CHARLES!!!" Thibault hollered.

"Thibault? Gosh! I've been waiting for you here for a whole week! What's been keeping you?" went the voice.

Tears came to my brother's eyes as we saw the resurrected Charles run down the stairs.

Together again, at Patrick's house, Charles told us the story of his narrow escape.

He had been about to lose all hope, and consciousness, when a freighter spotted him. He was heaved aboard. The captain interrogated him, and Charles decided that it would be better to conceal the truth (Nah duh!!). He told the captain a plausible story explaining his presence alone in middle of the Pacific. The captain, kind-hearted, agreed to take Charles to Washington D.C., which was near New-York, his destination and home-port. This gave Charles lots of time to think things over. He knew that his lie would be foiled when they would reach Washington. He had to, somehow, get off the ship before this happened.

Finally, when they were sailing in the Chesapeake Bay, he left without notice, one night while the boat was anchored in a harbor. He made his way to my house, by riding the

bus (the captain had given him a little money). He finally arrived, to find the house empty and locked.

Unexpectedly, his efforts to find the emergency key paid off. He found my mother's message, and decided to wait for our arrival, or my parent's, whichever came first.

Having elucidated that mystery, we immediately changed our plans. We would tell Patrick's baby-sitter that the director, having closed the camp sooner than intended, had been kind enough to drive us home. We would refrain from telling our parent's what really happened, and instead tell them that the camp had been crummy and that we'd never want to go there again. In fact, we would say that it had been so crummy that we would refuse to talk about it (this would conceal the lack of souvenirs we'd have been required to relate). And, hopefully, since our parents had paid the camp up-front, they wouldn't have to correspond with it anymore (and therefore they wouldn't find out that we had never actually stayed there).

Two days later, our parents arrived, and our scheme worked fine. We've been able to keep the truth from them until now. But, since we've published this story, they're bound to find out, so I hope they won't be too irritated...

We also learned that the NPB had been able to rebuild their boats, but having no map, they went astray. They were eventually able to work their way home by toiling on a vessel that they had bumped into (literally). I'm not sure how they were able to conceal the truth from their parents, but at any rate, they did.

Anyway, we immediately rebuilt our planes, with a few improvements of course, and we roamed the skies once again. As for SubMortimer, we kept it in its hide-out, and every so often, we take it out again to go fishing -or exploring-.

And, of course, Domino received a "truck-load" of salad for his meritorious service against the savage calamary.

So, as the old saying goes,

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL!"

Well, almost:

"Hello class."

"Hello Mrs. Maple."

"Now then, I know you all regret your summer vacations, but we must get to work now. Your first assignment will be the following: write a summary of your vacation. No less than 200 words, please..."

"Uh, oh..."