It happened in 1945.

The commanding officer of a Mongolian armor unit walked briskly from the headquarters of a Soviet contingent toward his dark green car. Two soldiers were talking next to it, a Russian air force lieutenant and the Mongol driver. They needed no interpreter. The Russian pointed to the dark, star-studded sky, trying to explain that his native Leningrad lay in the direction of the North Star. The Mongol nodded understandingly. He knew well the custom of seeking one's lucky star and smilingly explained to the flier the old Mongolian saying, "The son of a noble father is led through life by his lucky star, but the son of a commoner by his courageous heart." He looked admiringly at the campaign ribbons of his new buddy and cursed his young age which did not let him fight the fascists earlier.

"Let's fight them together now," he said. The flier understood and gave tankman Jamts a hearty handshake.

"See you later!"

* * *

The battle was at its height. Shells burst all around Jamts' tank, but it crawled on, drenching the enemy with deadly fire. Suddenly there was a deafening blast; the tank was being attacked from the air. A second bomb knocked it out. The stunned crew rushed to the driver whose body slumped to the side.

"Get the driver out!" the tank commander shouted to the gunner. He clambered out of the burning tank after all the rest and collapsed. The loader knelt over him. The officer was wounded in the
leg. The other crew members dressed his wound. War is a bloody affair!

"Is the driver alive?" the commander inquired when he was helped to his feet.

"Killed," the gunner said quietly, glancing at his buddy's corpse lying on the ground. A dark stream of blood ran from his pierced chest and seeped into the sand.

The soldier's lifeless brown eyes stared up at the dark clouds from which the enemy planes appeared but a few minutes previously. The tankmen picked up the wounded commander and carried him away from the blazing tank.

"They'll pay for this," the commander whispered hoarsely. "I'll live to see their planes smashed to the ground!"

The roar of aircraft came from the sky again.

"They'll strafe us now, those skunks," the commander said, clenching his fists in impotent fury. "Scram or they'll make mincemeat out of you."

The tankmen hid their commander in a gully and concealed themselves nearby. Two planes roared down, raining bullets on the tiny figures below. Hugging the ground, the gunner did not see the gravely wounded commander choke with impotent fury and the loader die under a hail of enemy machine gun bullets. The gunner fixed his gaze on the hateful red circles on the wings of the Samurai planes and thought, "Why don't I have wings? I'd fly up and blast those vultures out of the sky."

The wave of enemy planes began to move away. Fluffy clouds floated northward high up in the sky. The gunner wanted to get up and run to his commander but, noticing a dark dot on the horizon, ducked down again.

"Don't get up. They're coming back," he heard the weak whisper of the officer.

"He is alive," the soldier thought with relief.
The plane pierced the clouds. The pilot saw the ruins of a demolished enemy emplacement and a crippled, smoking tank nearby. Suddenly he noticed a Japanese plane come from the west and dive, belching fire at something hidden among the sand hills. "I see, they've knocked out the tank and are now after the crew," the pilot thought, preparing for the attack. The Japanese plane almost touched the ground. "He won't have time to come up. I'll pin him down!" the Soviet pilot decided.

In the meantime the Japanese flier was getting ready for the second run, this time from the east. Carried away by the attack, he did not notice the Soviet plane coming after him. Diving at a terrific speed, the Soviet pilot chose the right moment and opened up. Smoking heavily, the enemy aircraft began to drop and suddenly burst into flames. The Soviet flier streaked across the ground which resembled a huge piece of quilt. The shrubs and trees seemed to rush up against him, but the pilot managed to straighten the plane out in the few split-seconds left at his disposal. The plane zoomed up to encounter another Japanese plane which was coming to the rescue. "Too late," the Soviet pilot muttered and looked around. The sky was clear. A dogfight began. The two pilots executed some wild twists and turns, fiercely drenching each other with machine gun fire.

Two men watched the dogfight from the ground, the bleeding tank commander and the gunner who perspired heavily from excitement.

Suddenly the Soviet machine gun fell silent; it had run out of ammunition. As though guessing this right away, the Japanese plane approached the adversary and pumped several rounds into it. The Soviet fighter's tailpiece burst into flames, and black suffocating smoke filled the pilot's cabin.

"You won't get away just the same, I'll ram you!"

The enemy seemed to guess the intention of the Soviet flier and swung away hastily. But the Soviet plane which had more speed
quickly overtook it. The Russian rammed into the adversary's tail at full speed. Both planes, which had demonstrated their power and prowess but a short while ago, streaked down like two huge torches and crashed near the burnt tank.

The gunner saw two parachutes open up in the sky. He ambushed the descending Japanese flier and stabbed him to death. When the Russian flier reached the ground, he thought: "You wanted to come down first and finish me off. It didn't work!"

He sat down on the hot sand and looked around. There was nothing but a boundless ocean of sand extending in all directions. "Just like the Sahara," he thought.

Then he saw a man running toward him. Despite his sooty face, the flier recognized Jamts the tankman.

"Comrade," was all that Jamts could say as he hugged and kissed the Russian flier.

"Where are the rest?" the lieutenant inquired.

"Only the commander and I have survived. He is gravely wounded."

"Let's go to him," the pilot said, rising to his feet.