

T.N.T. Transport

A Buzz Benson Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

At the Sunkist Airport a few boundary lights still flickered feebly through reddened eyes, as if weary of waiting, and men bent sadly over radio dials for the news that never came. Ten days before, three gigantic Boeing transports had vanished from the sky—never to appear again. Then out of the mist came the roar of a sleek, speedy Corsair—and in it was Buzz Benson—on the worst assignment he had ever had.

A GHOSTLY dawn crept across the landing field of the Sunkist Airport in Los Angeles. A few boundary lights still beamed through their reddened eyes, as if weary of waiting, and the rasp of opening of hangar doors whined across the field.

Strange shadows appeared between the garish working lights that flickered beyond wide wings. Shadows of men who were ashen, weary and plainly horror-stricken crawled back and forth beneath the great motors; that seemed to hang dejected in their monstrous spiders. Their eyes, bloodshot and listless, rolled back and forth in hopeless search. Their ears, tuned for the steady beat of beloved engines, strained for one detonation of hope that should come from out of the northwest. There was nothing. For ten days there had been nothing to give them hope.

Up above, in the business offices of the Century Air Lines, haggard men sat at desks, hunched over the teletype machines or stared out of the observation windows. They picked up telephones; they fumbled with radio dials and scribbled more messages on telegraph forms. Still no reassuring response, no booming of two 550-h.p. Wasps, no flash of Boeing transport wings or healthy rumble of under-carriage wheels. For ten days they had listened, traced and searched.

For three Boeing transports of the latest pattern had flown out of Las Vegas on their last 225-mile leg across the continent for Los Angeles—only to disappear completely.

Then when the darkest hour before the dawn had crept away, there came a roar of hope—a roar from the steel throat of a Pratt and Whitney T1C-1 Hornet motor fuming in the grim snout of a brand-new Corsair V-80.

Out of the mist it came, with a bellow of power. A curling glide, a sleek dash at the runway, and it was down.

Then, before anyone could get across the open field, it had been taxied down the field into the waiting maw of a private hangar. As the engine subsided, the doors rumbled together with an ominous boom, and all was silent again.

Billy “Buzz” Benson, flying reporter of the Los Angeles Mercury, was back at his home field for the first time in weeks—on hand to solve the mystery of the missing Boeing transports,

Charlie McGurk, his old mechanic, clambered up to greet Benson.

“Well,” he grinned broadly, “back again, eh? You ain’t been here for months. Buzz. ‘Bout time you laid off them Japs and went to work, ain’t it?”

“You sing a good song, Charlie,” replied Benson, slipping out of his chute harness and overalls. “What’s the news?”

“You tell me. All we get is the cock-eyed rumors about the Boeings. Where are they? Someone said they been flown out to sea and stuck on a Jap transport. Someone else claims the gov’ment has taken them over and turned them into bombers. War, or somethin’. What’s the real story?”

“I wish I knew,” snorted Buzz, “Might be the Jap Junkers again, and it might be that they’ve been taken over. If so, where are the pilots and the passengers?”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” replied McGurk wearily. “What you gonna do?”

“Find ‘em,” replied Buzz laconically.

“Where?”

“Where they are.”

“What’s this boiler for?” went on Charlie, giving up the argument.

“For you to work on. Get to it—gas, oil and have a squint at the guns.”

“New one, ain’t it?”

“The first off the block. How do you like it? Does 190 with all the Christmas tree ornaments on it.”

“Ya mean the four guns and the bombs?”

“Radio and 170 gallons of gas. Enough for 800 miles. Got any paint?”

“What’s the paint for? She’s pretty enough.”

“That’s the trouble. She’s too pretty. Got to daub her up a bit and make her look like something out of the boneyard.”

Charlie brought a brush and three cans of paint. With these Buzz went to work and daubed the beautiful bi-plane up in the most hideous of color schemes, so that within half an hour the trim war bird resembled something that might be used for joy-hopping on a gypsy field. Charlie winced as he watched Buzz slap the colors on, but he continued his job of checking the big 700 h.p. motor and refilling the tanks.

“They say there was a Jap on Logan’s bus,” went on Charlie.

“Yeah. There were several Americans and a Russian, too,” said Buzz, eyeing his work. “Let’s see—Logan’s ship, the NC-13304, was the first to go, wasn’t it?”

“Right. Then Gus Schneider was the next. He flew NC-13306. Had eight passengers and a lot of mail. The third one was Larry Jacobs’ bus, the NC-13309. There were a couple of Japs aboard that crate. Ought to make a law stopping Japs from riding on our airlines. Too damned clever.”

“There weren’t any Japs on Schneider’s ship,” remarked Buzz, “and that went like the rest.”

Charlie screwed a tank top down. “I don’t get it all, Buzz. What’s your idea?”

“None yet, Charlie. Too many twists to it all. I’ve got to call Norton in Washington and see what the latest is. Be back in a minute.”

Buzz went over to the small office built in the corner of the hangar and called long distance. In about fifteen minutes he had Major Norton of the U. S. Secret Service on the wire.

“THIS is Benson!” snapped Buzz into the mouthpiece.

“Okay. Get this,” answered the Secret Service man on the other end.

“Aboard the ship NC-13304 were the Honorable James P. Jillard, of the State Department, and Commander Weymyss Burton, British Naval Attache at Washington. They were on their way to the Coast to make an important survey prior to the drawing up of a naval treaty between this country and Great Britain. You know, to protect the western coast of U.S., Canada and Alaska. There was something in the arrangements, too, about the treaty’s including the protection by the combined American and British navies of all U. S. possessions in the Pacific, and the use of Australia as a combined naval base.”

“Damned good idea,” answered Buzz. “About time, too.”

“Both Jillard and Burton are missing with that Boeing, and we’ll have a nice mess on our hands if they are harmed,”

“What’s the rest of the story?”

“Aboard the second ship to go—the one flown by this man Schneider—were the detailed plans for the new fortifications in Hawaii. They were to be gone over by the contractors before the construction crew and engineers were sent to Honolulu. They are missing now. Isn’t that a pretty mess?”

“Agreed,” grinned Buzz into the phone. “Now, what was on board the third job—the one flown by Jacobs?”

“Nothing of importance. Just ordinary mail and a few passengers of the usual run.”

“That kind of gums the old theory, doesn’t it?” asked Buzz. “The Japs are out, this time, eh?”

“How do you figure that?” snapped the voice on the other end.

“Well, what would they go after the third boiler for? They had what they wanted—the diplomats and the plans. There’s something new to all this.”

“I don’t know what they wanted the third ship for, but they got it, and it’s up to you to see that they don’t get the fourth. You meet this man Dudley, in Las Vegas today. He’s flying a Boeing numbered NC-13305.”

“I’ll be there.”

Buzz hung up and went out to talk to the officials of the Century Line. There was nothing new in the way of information. The ships had

taken off from Newark and completed the greater part of their cross-country journey, only to disappear during the last 225-mile leg from Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

All of the pilots were of exceptional ability and unquestionable character. The passengers were the usual types, ranging from moving picture actresses, hustling business men, society matrons and professional men to a few travelers who were making their first cross-country trips by air. As Charlie McGurk had said, there were two Japanese men aboard the first ship to disappear, but a close checkup disclosed that one was a professor of Oriental history at Harvard and the other a New York importer of unquestionable standing.

On the same ship had been the two diplomats who were to make a complete survey of the west coast defenses in hopes that a protective naval treaty could be drawn up between the two great English-speaking nations for their mutual welfare. Whether their presence aboard had anything to do with the mystery could not be explained; neither could the matter concerning the proposed fortifications to be erected in Hawaii.

This was all Buzz Benson had to work on, but he was confident that his plan to escort NC-13305 that night would bring something tangible to work on. It did.

IT was mid-afternoon before Benson climbed into the glass-sheltered cockpit of his bedaubed Corsair and started the motor.

For several minutes he warmed it up inside the hangar and then watched Charlie McGurk open the wide doors. Without waiting for a check run, he gave the ship the gun and roared out of the shed. Before anyone on the field could realize what was happening, the disguised V-80 was roaring away toward the northwest.

The ship handled beautifully. Buzz inspected the new Browning guns again. They were electrically controlled—two fitted high in the center-section, wide enough apart to avoid the spinning prop, and two down in the cockpit and synchronized to fire between the shining steel blades. There was a control box near his hand by which he could cut in any gun he desired, so that by depressing his trigger-release, he could fire one or four guns at will. There was a two-way radio

set. He could handle this from his seat, plugging in the muzzle-mike and helmet phones with a jackplug so that he could talk with nearby fields or pilots in other ships so equipped.

He was enjoying all this aerial luxury when suddenly he sensed that there was another ship nearby. The old airman's intuition came to his aid again. With a quick glance around he spotted just what he least expected to see—a Boeing 247 transport, heading north about 2,000 feet below him.

“Hello!” he beamed. “What luck! Where did this baby come from?”

He swung over, gave the Wasp the juice and shot after the big two-motored Boeing. Almost immediately the great ship seemed to leap away and make the most of her 195 m.p.h. top speed.

“No use, baby,” grinned Buzz. “I’ve got too much height on you. You’d better sit tight while I get a look at your numbers.”

The race was fast and furious for a few minutes as they roared northward over the San Bernardino range toward the dusty wastes of the Mohave Dessert. But Benson had the benefit of the height, and the new Corsair soon came within sighting distance of the big transport. Another minute and he could pick out the license numbers.

“Whew! NC-13306!” he gasped.

“Why, that’s Schneider’s job—the one that carried the fortification plans!”

With a final ram of his throttle, Buzz roared down at the big Boeing and decided to hail her. No sooner had he sidled his craft alongside than a terrific torrent of lead smacked out at him from one of the cabin windows. Two streams of fire sparkled in the blackness of the openings and sprayed his bedaubed machine with pounds of Thompson gun pellets. Buzz zipped away and tried to signal to the pilot to go down, but owing to his glass-covered cockpit he was unable to make much impression. Another torrent of leaden hail spanned all around him.

Buzz snapped a lever and fired a burst across the nose of the Boeing. Only one gun responded, for he had cut out three.

“Just to let them know I’m in this game, too,” he rumbled to himself.

He felt for his automatic, confident that he would be able to force the transport down and take the crew prisoner. But he had not figured

right. The crew aboard the Boeing had no intention of giving up that easily. Another burst of fire screamed across at Benson, and he had to fly the very devil out of his machine to keep out of danger. He leaned down and flipped in another gun.

“Well, you’re asking for it, my lads. Here it comes.”

WITH a scream that curdled the blood of the men in the cabin of the Boeing, the new Corsair went down the sky funnel and lanced two streams of Browning blasphemy into the cabin of the transport.

Almost from the instant the first fangs bit in, there was action. First came a belch of flame that tore through the big body. The black windows became yellowish square eyes. Then, as Buzz yanked his diving Corsair up over the air surfaces, there came a gigantic boom that deafened him and sent him over on his back.

The air all around him, as he fought to get the single-seater back into a normal position, was black with chunks of metal, wood, strips of three-ply and lumps of motor.

Like a madman, Buzz fought the controls and tried to get clear of the flying wreckage. At last, he managed to right her and sideslip out of the tumbling cloud of debris that was settling earthward through a great pall of black smoke.

“Good Lord!” gasped Buzz. “What the devil did that? The whole bus went up as though I had poured a ton of T.N.T. into her. There won’t be a stick left to look at, by the time she hits. What a blast!”

He eased his throttle back and went down in a curling glide, watching the wreckage of the Boeing as it fell earthward. Chunks of metal wing went wafting away, like broken box-kites. Sections of silver dural flopped in the sunlight and slid off like sections of newspaper dropped from a skyscraper window. Heavier pieces went whistling down in tight twists and disappeared into the greenish gray foliage below.

The greater part of the blast-bitten wreckage tumbled into a grassy low-land near some trees.

Buzz brought the camouflaged Corsair down, and planted it between two trees. He sat a minute, stared at his watch, checked his time and position and then got out.

The tangle of dural tubes, sheets of aluminum and steel lay in a grotesque heap, a scorched monster that had died in agony. Gaunt wounds showed the wrenched ribs, struts, spars and supports. Great seared scars, where the blast furnaces of hell had eaten into the light metal, only added to the heap of horror. It was some time before Buzz could get close to the wreck. The wings and engines were nowhere to be found.

“Queerest thing I ever saw,” mused Buzz, kicking a tangle of still warm metal out of his way. “What the devil made this thing blow up like that? I couldn’t have fired more than thirty or forty rounds. She must have been carrying explosive of some kind.”

He finally managed to rip a section of the battered cockpit windscreen away, and crawl inside. The first thing that met his eye was the body of a man, dressed in light khaki clothing. He was dead—blown into the instrument board with force enough to break every bone in his body. There was no one else in the control pit.

Buzz looked at the man who had died with a fearful mask of horror on his face, but could not recognize him. He went through the pockets of light clothing, but could find nothing that would give any indication as to his identity. A little change, a wad of small bills, a pocket knife and a schedule of air-mail collections in Chicago was all that was to be gathered there.

The rest of his examination of the wreckage was efficient and startling. Whoever had been in the cabin section of the ship handling those machine guns had gone without leaving a trace. There had been an explosion somewhere forward in the cabin that had blasted both wings off, taken the rear half and cut it into long slivers of metal. It looked like the pictures of war-time howitzers that had suffered from pre-detonation, showing the blasted muzzles curled back like splintered cornstalks. Only a ghastly blob of scarlet, splashed against what had been the roof of the cabin, gave any evidence that there had been anyone inside at all.

But, like all explosions, this one had its queer twist. While the cabin and control pit had been blasted to an indescribable jumble of wreckage, the bullet-nose of the ship, in which was carried the registered mail, was almost intact, except for the effect of the smash into the ground. Buzz

managed to pry the nose door open and peer inside. The sight of a number of blue and white mail bags gladdened his eye. They had not been touched by the explosion.

Buzz yanked them out. There were ten, and he bundled them across to his own ship. He laced one to each of the bomb racks. Three he stuffed down inside his cockpit behind the seat. The rest he tied to the lower struts and let them lay on the bottom wings.

“Well,” he grinned, “if those fortification plans were sent on this ship, as old Norton said, they still ought to be here. Let’s go!”

Within five minutes he was zooming away again and rushing toward Las Vegas with his load of retrieved mail. The bedaubed Corsair was a startling sight in the air—looking more like an overgorged prehistoric bird, making for its mountain lair, than a trim Army craft designed for high-speed action.

BENSON’S arrival in Las Vegas caused a great deal of curiosity, as he ran his ship into a small private hangar of the Century Lines.

Ned Horton, the field manager, rushed in.

“Been looking for you Buzz. Where you been all this while?” he inquired.

“Pickin’ up some mail for you. Get a crate of this. Off your old bus NC-13306—Schneider’s old bus, isn’t it?”

“Good God, you work fast! Where’d you get this?”

“What’s left of the ship is piled up outside of Barstow, probably nearer to Yermo. She blew up in the air after I fired a few rounds into her.”

Buzz gave a detailed account of what had happened. Horton listened, amazed, and then led Buzz up to the control tower.

“But I can’t understand it,” said Horton. “We never had a Boeing blow up before.”

“You never had a Boeing carrying the stuff this one had aboard.”

“But what’s the idea? Who has them and what are they after?”

“You’ve got me. I didn’t know the mug who was flying it, and where the guys who fired on me from the cabin went we’ll never know. Probably crow bait by now. Got a telephone handy?”

Buzz called up Norton in Washington again and reported. Needless to state, the Secret Service man was more puzzled than ever.

“From your description, it must have been T.N.T., or something equally powerful,” he fumed. “But what the devil do they want with that stuff and where are the other ships?”

“If I’d been able to lay doggo and follow, I might have found out,” growled Buzz. “But I was so keen on getting her numbers that I gave the game away. I’m a swell detective.”

“Yeah—blow up all the evidence! You ought to be a prohibition agent. Well, keep your eye on this next job. Has she arrived yet?”

“No. Horton expects her in twenty minutes. I’ll be on the runway when she comes in.”

“And you’d better be on her tail when she goes out. Don’t forget your radio. I had them fix Loudon, the co-pilot who handles the set, with one of those lapel microphones that the broadcasting outfits use on remote control. If anything happens, he can chatter without showing that he is actually talking into his set. If anyone pulls a gun on them, he’ll be able to tip you off, so keep your ear-phones plugged in.”

They cleared the runway and kept everyone from the covered gangway when Hal Dudley brought NC-13305 into Las Vegas. Buzz took charge while the mail was removed and new bags placed in the nose compartment. The passengers got out and stretched their limbs while the big tanks were refueled again.

During this time Buzz went over the whole ship and inspected her from nose to rudder. He turned up seats, removed panels and even crawled into the wings to make certain no one had hidden there. Satisfied that all was well, as far as the ship was concerned. Buzz took over the passenger list from the co-pilot and examined every one as they got back into their chairs.

The first was Miss Mae Merton, a well-known motion picture actress on her way back to Hollywood. With her was her secretary, Miss Rose Blaine. Buzz was satisfied that neither of these two women was to be feared. Next came another celebrity, Roger Eckles, a nationally-known radio orchestra leader who was also on his way to the Coast for some motion-picture work. He was out of the argument at once.

Mrs. Osgood Payne, a society matron from Southampton, Long Island, was the fourth passenger. Next was a Ralph A. Sprague, who identified himself as a business man interested in mining projects. He submitted to a close search and smiled pleasantly when Buzz nodded for him to take his place.

A Miss Anna Holt, who explained that she was an author of magazine stories, came next, with a brief case and portable typewriter. She took notes as Buzz questioned her. He recalled the name dimly and allowed her to get inside, satisfied that he was dealing with a story-hunter, and no one who need be feared in this case. A diamond merchant, according to his card, came next. He was listed as Mr. Robert Seeland, a bland-faced individual, who seemed to have been through hundreds of such inquiries. Buzz was not quite satisfied about him at first, but after the man had shown a baggage stub proving that he had brought aboard a leather case of diamonds and jewelry, which had been correctly registered, he was more satisfied.

The last on the list was a quietly dressed man with a florid face. Buzz was on his guard at once and questioned him while he kept his right hand in his coat pocket. The man answered questions with a low snarl, and seemed impatient to get inside again. Finally Buzz wormed it out of the man that he was a follower of the turf, an out-and-out gambler who made his living by following the most important racing events all over the country. His name, he said, was William Blodgett, and he showed paddock stubs, bank books and a pair of binoculars, all bearing this name. He was not sure of his destination, however, and Buzz was not satisfied about him. However, as Hal Dudley was impatient to get away on schedule, he allowed the man to enter, after warning Bill Louden to keep an eye on him at all times.

Before they closed the cabin door and rolled out to the runway, Buzz had a short talk with both pilots. He told them what had happened earlier in the day, and warned them to keep a close watch on everything.

"You use that lapel mike, Louden," he ordered. "Keep me posted all the time. I'll be about three miles behind you and 2,000 feet above. The instant something queer happens, give me the office, and I'll sit your rudder all the way down.

Don't try to fight them, if anything crops up inside. Let them take over and I'll go anywhere they go. Get the idea? But use that lapel-mike to the limit."

I'D like to know who that racy guy is," growled Buzz, rubbing his chin as NC-13305 waddled away for the runway. "I'm going to get Norton to check up on him."

The lights of NC-13305 were flickering away ahead as Buzz raced away into the gloom in his Corsair.

Buzz S-turned back and forth to get height and then moved up into a position where he could just see the red and green riding lights of the Boeing ahead. After he was well settled, he tuned in his radio and called the NC-13305.

Louden responded almost at once and Buzz sensed the new tone from the lapel-mike. It was clear, but not quite so strong in tone as usual. This he figured came from the co-pilot talking out of the side of his mouth.

"Give me the low-down on them," jabbed Buzz, tuning the set even closer.

He switched over to receiving and the monotone from Louden came in again:

"We're at 3,600, doing 146. All quiet behind. The racy guy is sitting reading a *Sporting Life*. The movie Jane's asleep and her gal is writing a letter on her lap. Mrs. Payne is reading a book. The crooner bloke is trying to eye the jane who writes them stories. The other men are all quiet, looking out of the windows. The writer gal seems to be fumbling with that typewriter case of hers. Guess she's gonner have her story all written by the time we get in. Must expect some action, eh?"

"Okay," answered Buzz. "Report again in fifteen minutes unless the fireworks go off."

He left his set at "receiving" and checked his position again. Buzz kept a smart eye open for all around him. He hardly knew what to expect.

"There might be something queer up here," he mused. "There might be another ship in the action somewhere, but I doubt it."

Suddenly, his ear-phones began to buzz again and he listened intently. A call coming through from the Boeing. At once Buzz sensed that something was wrong.

"Benson!" came Louden's voice in a husky tone. "Something queer. Come up!"

Buzz shot the switch over, rammed the throttle forward and sensed his ship leap ahead,

“What is it? Let’s have it,” he rasped into the muzzle-mike.

But Louden was still talking. He had missed some of the words.

“Jane with typewriter case going over to that egg Sprague. Both motors have conked. Dudley’s trying to switch to another tank. No go. Won’t start....Got to go....Hello....the writer gal....got a gun....”

The rest was a dull mumble, and Buzz saw the Boeing transport nose down gently and head for an open patch of carpet that lay below.

Then the ear-phones began again.

A new voice was talking now. Buzz realized that Louden had twisted around in his seat so that the lapel-mike was taking in someone’s conversation.

“And no funny work,” the voice was rasping. “I said soda....get her down on your emergency....others are out. Fixed gauge with water....dive and clear your line and get over to the emergency.”

“Where?” Buzz heard Dudley yawp.

“You heard me the first time. Any funny work and you’ll never need a hat again. I’ll blow the marcel clean out of your hair. Soda....soda....soda. And if that mug Benson....oh, so that’s your game, eh?”

The radio suddenly went dead, and Buzz sensed that the girl had caught the lapel-mike in Louden’s coat.

“Now what the devil has happened there? What a sap I am,” growled Buzz. “That jane had guns in that typewriter case all the time. Wonder who’s helping her.”

BUT whatever Buzz thought, there was action going on in the big Boeing. There were no more radio signals, but the transport ahead started dancing a wild fandango. It was evident that there was a struggle going on in the control pit. She dipped, swayed, zoomed and fluttered back and forth, like a winged bird that had lost all control of its faculties. She curled over sharply on one wing-tip, and Buzz visualized the panic that must be going on in the passenger cabin. He could hear nothing, but he knew they must be struggling.

“The fools!” he groaned. “I told them not to fight. Let them take it. Louden. Let ‘em have it. I’ll stay with you!”

He was screaming into his muzzle-mike, but the head-set had been torn away from Louden’s ears, and the words were lost.

Buzz gave his motor the gas again and tore on after the floundering transport. By now the riding lights were settling to a more even dance, indicating that the ship was under more careful control. In all probability Dudley had decided to obey orders, or someone else had taken the ship over and was getting used to the controls.

“I’ll have a look,” snarled Buzz, staring hard through his center-section. “I’ll find out who is at those controls, if they only keep the cockpit lit up a little.”

On charged the snarling Corsair under her false colors. Buzz gave her everything she had, and the air-speed indicator needle was trickling well past the 200-m.p.h. mark. In three minutes he was almost alongside, fighting for every foot, to get up close enough to see what was going on. Before he had come up even with the shark-like tail assembly, the cabin lights flickered and went out, but there was still a mellow glow up front.

“What’s their game?” snorted Buzz. “Can’t see a thing up there. Must have everyone locked in the rear section. Well, I’ll find out what their destination is, if they only keep....”

Br-r-r-r-r-tttttt! A streaky splutter of lemon-colored flame spat out of a forward Window and sank its fangs deep into the vitals of the roaring-Corsair. Before Buzz could sense his danger and realize how he had placed himself in such a position, the service ship was struggling under another wicked lacing of lead.

Three slugs slashed through his overalls. Another clipped the thigh band of his chute harness. The Corsair trembled, and then hurled herself about like a harpooned whale. Buzz withdrew the throttle and tried to hold her in check, but something had gone wrong somewhere and it was several minutes before he realized that something had happened to the steel prop. The uneven swing of the steel blades was slinging the nose back and forth.

At last Buzz steadied her and nosed down gently. He cursed in his slug-shattered cockpit as he watched the Boeing slide away into the night

gloom and disappear. Buzz watched it for several minutes as he let the still trembling Corsair ease down toward the ground. Once he was almost certain that the red and green riding lights had reversed themselves and the ship had been turned around, but there was no hum of motors to show that the big transport had returned toward Las Vegas.

The earth was creeping up fast now. He could see the gleaming rails of a railroad as he slated down, seeking a landing place. He took a quick glance at his map and decided that the lines were those of the Tenopah and Tidewater Railroad that ran from Death Valley into Ludlow. There was little time to make much selection, but Buzz finally selected a field near an outlying freight yard to set her down. He pulled the landing flare plug and heard the great tube hiss and throw a globe of white light out below him. In another minute, still cursing his own stupidity, he put the battered Corsair down and let her run up to the side nearest the road.

IT was almost eight o'clock that night before Buzz could send in a report on the loss of the latest Boeing and make arrangements to have a new propeller brought out. He had come down at a small place known as Razor, which was a few miles south of Baker. As luck would have it, a propeller was found at Barstow, about 45 miles away, and a mechanic was rushed out to put the new prop on and check the interrupter gear timing.

"I can't figure it all out," Buzz bellowed into the phone to Norton in Washington. "Where it went I don't know, but I have a feeling that it turned back."

"But you heard this girl talk to the pilot for a minute or so, didn't you?" rasped Norton.

"Yes, Chief. But all I could make out was something about soda. She kept yelling 'soda' all the time. What the devil does that mean?"

"Bah!" spat the Secret Service man on the other end. "Did you think she was running an ice cream fountain? Have you a map of the district in front of you?"

"Just a minute....Here, I have one," answered Buzz, unfolding his chart. "What about it?"

"You say you are down at a place called Razor. Is that right?"

"Perfect!"

"Right! You just left the air and heard a conversation in which the girl ordered the hijacked pilot to bring his ship to a certain point. In doing so, she kept yelling 'soda'. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes. What now?"

"Well, look at your map!"

Buzz stared at the sheet again. Before he could answer; he heard the Secret Service man hang up his receiver with a bang.

"Well, I'll be damned!" gasped Buzz. "Not five miles away. No wonder that ship seemed to turn around. It went back to Soda Lake!"

His finger trickled across the paper and came to rest on the broken blue line that indicated the dry bed of what had at one time been a good-sized lake. Today it was a smooth, natural, sand-swept space, sheltered on the east side by the twining finger hills that crept out of the Providence Mountains. It was a perfect spot for landing mystery ships. As Buzz recalled, there were rocky caves on one end.

Buzz started outside for the small field where the bedaubed Corsair stood receiving treatment from a grease-smudged mechanic.

He could see the glow of the portable work-light as the mechanic struggled with the battered prop. Out of the railroad freight office from where he had been calling, Buzz started down the road for the field.

Trudging on, he pondered on the new angle that had appeared in the picture. For one thing, this was a new line of opposition. There were no Japs mixed up in this, as far as he could see. Who was at the bottom of this monstrous plot? What were they really after? It certainly looked as though there was some big money behind a system that could plan and successfully steal four high-speed transports right out of the sky with their crews, passengers and mail. They had to have money to get enough people in their gang who could successfully carry this thing out,

"They must have had at least three people on each ship, one of them an experienced pilot to take over the ship in case they have to belt out the real pilot," he pondered. "Then there's another angle to it. Why are they concentrating on Boeing transports of this type?"

Suddenly it all came to him with the memory of an advertisement he had seen some time before.

It showed a Boeing bomber in the air and a transport pilot looking up at it, saying, "Boy, what a transport that bomber would make!"

That was it. They had selected Boeing transports for just the opposite reason. "What a bomber that transport would make!" It was impossible, or next to impossible, to capture a number of Army Boeing bombers, so they had taken the next best thing—a number of Boeing transports, which were only Boeing bombers revised for high-speed transport work.

"But what the devil do they want them for?" he argued with himself as he climbed the crude picket fence that surrounded the field.

The glare of the floodlight used by the mechanic brought back the blinding glare of the Boeing which had blown up in mid-air earlier in the day. Explosives! Bombers! Boeings! Bombs! Soda Lake!

But there the chain of thought halted. Nothing tied up to any focal point. Who had stolen the transports did not matter. Someone had taken them, and to all intents and purposes these transports were to be used as bombers. But what were they going to bomb? Not a thing in this section worth considering—except

Then like a blow from a sledge-hammer it came to him. For an instant Buzz had to clap his hand over his mouth to prevent himself from crying out. The Death Valley Gang, that notorious power trust outfit that had been terrorizing the whole state of California for years—smug, underhanded thugs who, masked behind bland faces in mahogany-paneled places of finance, were making their last stand to get their final grip on the hydro-electric and irrigation projects of California, Nevada and Arizona. The modern hordes of an even more modern Ghengis Khan who would stop at nothing to destroy the grim fortress of humanity being erected at Black Canyon at a cost of \$165,000,000. A gigantic fortress that would stave off the yearly onslaught of famine, drought and private industrial piracy—Boulder Dam!

FOR ten minutes Buzz and Andy, his mechanic from Baker, worked on the Corsair. At last they managed to get the steel prop off the shaft and rip the lid off the box that contained the new one.

Then out of the gloom and bearing down from the north came the high-pitched screech of Wasp motors.

Buzz and Andy halted operations and listened intently as their tuned ears caught the roar of two motors that had been badly synchronized.

"Get it?" husked Andy, standing with the gleaming prop in his hands.

"I do, and it's a Boeing transport, or my name's Hector," replied Buzz, staring up. "Come on, let's get this damned cloud-cutter whirling."

The great, hawklike bird went over at about 4,000 feet, screeching and wailing for all to know. Heading almost due south, she roared on.

Buzz fumed, tortured with the knowledge that he would not be able to take the air for nearly an hour. By that time the Boeing would be almost 200 miles away.

They went to work again, and for twenty minutes neither spoke a word. Buzz inspected every wire and every cable. Struts were gone over and strengthened where necessary. The instruments, radio and guns were checked, and at last the ship was ready for a test run.

"Run your motor at about 1,600 and try your lower guns. You can't hurt anything, blasting away up to-ward those hills," grinned Andy.

Buzz set his brakes, opened the motor and warmed her gradually. Then, when the thermometer needle had reached the satisfactory degree, he took a chance and opened both guns, sending a stream of lead squealing across the open fields as a test of the synchronization gear.

Buzz shut her down again and the mechanic inspected the blades. There was not a mark on them. He grinned broadly and indicated that all was well.

"Okay," replied Buzz, getting out and slipping into his parachute harness again. "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm heading—hello! What the devil's this?"

"Never mind. There's your meat! Go up after him," screeched Andy.

Another big Boeing was heading back north, booming along at about 3,500. They caught the same blend of motor power as the two Wasps roared their challenge.

"Is that the same one?" yelled Andy, staring up.

"I don't think so. The other one went into Mexico, I'll bet a buck. Clear that junk away!"

Andy kicked tools, a crate, a bent prop and hoisted the portable floor-light away. Buzz gave the bus the gun and roared away, standing the Corsair on her tail to get height and a chance at the prowling Boeing.

THE new prop made all the difference in the world. Like a winged projectile, the Corsair hit for the 2,000-foot lane and then hurtled after the Boeing. As Buzz raced on, he suddenly remembered Soda Lake.

"I'll catch him trying to get in, I bet. I'll stay down here, and the minute he makes a bid to go down, I'll blast him out of the sky!"

He gave the Corsair the last notch and headed for the open splotch that lay ahead. The lake bed might have been a hollowed-out drome for a squadron of night-riding hellions, so perfect did it appear now.

"How have we missed that place before?" Buzz said to himself. "It's perfect as a landing ground. They can put those Boeings in there like a kid playing with an electric train."

The splotch was moving up fast now, and Buzz could see the twinkling riding lights of the big transport as the inexperienced pilot swept her back and forth to get her in. Like a blast out of a massive blow torch, Buzz roared into the picture and opened all four guns.

The big Boeing staggered blindly, as if slashed with an invisible quirt. Again the Corsair slashed in, and again four pitiless streams of death forked into her, but still she stayed in the air, floundering about at 2,000 feet.

"What is keeping her up now?" he raged, swinging over so that every wire in his ship screamed in taut horror. "I've given her enough to sink a battleship. Why doesn't she blow up the way the other one did? Well, I'll try again."

By now someone had broken out a machine gun aboard the Boeing, and a flickering line of yellow-spitting hornets hurtled itself at his ship. Buzz tore in, trembling now with passion and rage. His guns flamed aloud, the four muzzles dancing with gleaming pennons of livid death. The quartet of Browning sprays slashed across the tracer-slit sky and flamed into the wings, body and snout of the great transport, but still she

wobbled about like a wounded elephant. A trickling reply came back from the dim cabin window and slashed at Benson's struts, as though they intended to slice his wings away.

Buzz tried from a new angle. He fought like a madman and charged across the sky for another flaming burst.

"You'll get it this time, or I'll know the reason why," he yelled.

Down the chute the Corsair tore, and Buzz set himself for a last burst. He drew the nose around so that the wobbling bomber was dead in the sight and depressed the trigger release.

Nothing happened! Something had spiked his guns completely. With a howl of rage, Buzz threw all caution to the winds and rammed the throttle even farther forward. Still keeping his eyes into the gun sight, he directed a winged projectile smack into the broad tapered wing of the bomber. In the fraction of a second before his nose hit, Buzz caught the license markings, NC-18309—the bus once flown by Jacobs and Trewin.

But there was no time for reflection. The new prop, glistening the glow of the Boeing's riding lights, flashed its last as it sank its whirling fangs into the dural and steel framework of the wing. The long, narrow aileron flashed up like an up-ended board and slapped the wing and struts of the charging Corsair. There was a splutter of sparks, a forked design of flame and an instant of inky blackness. The Corsair came out of the splintered mass and charged on into the shark-like tail. By this time Buzz had uncovered his face from the cradle of his folded arms and was yanking at his safety-belt. In a second he was up in his seat and diving over the side.

He dropped away from the wreckage, and as he fell, he saw the opening scene of the last act of this mad drama. The Corsair had tangled herself with the tail section of the big transport. Fluttering wildly, she finally wrenched her nose clear, bringing the major portion of the control assembly away in her gaunt and battered snout. With a final flutter of tortured rage, she dropped her nose and began her final flight to earth.

The Boeing halted in its mad flight, as if staggered by the blow. Then, with everything ripped away, it began a helpless, whirling glide to earth—to Soda Lake.

Buzz ripped the release ring out. Another few feet of breathless tumbling, and he was jerked back to some degree of sanity as the great chute opened with a thunderous clap. He then began a normal descent earth-wards, watching carefully the tumbling wreckage above him.

As he went down, he could see dim figures huddled together in front of a black, shapeless cavern that seemed to have eaten its way into the rocky wall on the northwest side of the dry bed. The secret of Soda Lake and the disappearing Boeing transports was about to be disclosed.

BUZZ hit gently about a quarter of a mile away from where the Corsair and the Boeing piled up. As his feet touched and folded up beneath him, he moved to unbuckle his harness. There was a loud boom and he knew the Boeing had gone to a splintering finish, leaving little hope for those who were inside. A blaze glowed up beyond, and Benson sensed that his own ship had gone up in a blaze.

"Well," he mused, skirting across the even sand for the shadow of the rocky shore, "there are four guns and probably some ammunition they won't get."

He felt for his gun, and gasped anxiously. It was not there. In leaving Razor, he had forgotten it.

Steadying himself for a minute, he took his bearings and then started a circling course back toward the black splotch he had noticed on his trip earthward. He had to scamper lightly over yards of coarse shale, stagger over piled-up heaps of rocks and through narrow spaces between boulders that had been hurled there by the storms and upheavals of centuries.

For fifteen minutes he glided on, with catlike movements that enabled him to cover much ground. At last he came out of a crumbling pile of rocks and saw the still burning heap that had once been his trim Corsair. In the glow of the flames he could see the wreckage of the transport.

"Hello!" he mumbled quietly to himself "What are they up to?"

He could see a number of masculine figures scrambling in and out of the battered cabin that lay across the floor of the dry lake bed. They came out, bearing great burdens—some that had to be carried by two and three men. In the dim

light, it was impossible to tell exactly what they were, but Buzz had a hunch.

"Bombs!" he gasped. "Where are they getting them?"

Then his mind raced back to his reflections at Razor. The grim transports stealing across the Mexican border, where for money, one may purchase anything. They were running bombs in this time—not open explosive. No wonder the Boeing did not explode. A chance in a hundred of getting to the detonators of a bomb.

A quiet survey of the fascinating scene soon cleared up this mystery. Off to the left, more activity was taking place. Out of the grim black walls of the lake bed came the jaunty snout and trim, tapered wings of another Boeing. The figures carrying the great loads seeped across the dry lake bed. They were taking the bombs from the wrecked Boeing and placing them aboard the ship that was being trundled out of the cave hangar.

Voices were raised and new groups crept about, as if searching. Buzz grinned as he heard someone bellow, "How the hell can we tell whether he's in there or not until that blaze dies down? You can't get within ten feet of the heap."

So that was it! Until the burning wreckage had flamed itself out and cooled off, there would be no chance of their knowing what really had happened to him. He took another look around.

"Aw, the hell with him!" someone else called. "Let's get to work and get it over. We've been here too damn long now."

Buzz skirted back into the shadows of the gaunt rocks and made his way closer to the cave, in front of which much activity was going on around the other bomber. Creeping quietly down through a flinty ravine between a crude wall of jagged rocks, he was able to get within twenty yards of the open sandy floor, and near enough to the Boeing to get her numbers.

"The NC-13304," he observed. "The first ship to go—flown by Logan and Marsh. Wonder where Dudley's boiler went to."

The activity around the Boeing was at high pitch now. Men climbed all over her. Great projectiles were hoisted up into the cabin and taken by eager hands. Drums of gasoline and oil were rolled out and siphoned up into the tanks. More bombs, more men, more boxes. The great

gang movement was clicking as neatly as a sewing machine.

But Buzz was not satisfied. Skirting close to the rocky wall of the lake bank, he eased toward the entrance of a cavern. He had no weapon of any sort, so he selected a round smooth pebble. With this cupped in his palm, Buzz worked along closer and finally slipped inside the great opening.

“Wow!” he gasped in low tones. “What a place! Must be able to shelter half a dozen Boeings in here.”

ACROSS the cave he could see dim lights which showed up the wide, smooth floor in silver strips.

He sidled along and realized that the main cave had other passageways running off it to what were probably smaller caves or nature-hewn chambers. Buzz decided to try one of these passageways and see where it led.

At first he could feel nothing but dark dampness. Then, as his hand went along the moldy wall, he sensed a turn in the passageway which brought him into a tunnel dimly lit with a small railroad lantern. Buzz halted, uncertain what to do next, when something moved ahead of him and made a darting move toward him.

With a swish, Benson’s hand came up and the round pebble was hurled directly at the oncoming figure. There was a grinding crunch, a gasping sigh and a thud as the figure fell flat on its face at Benson’s feet.

“Got you, eh?” gulped Buzz, peering around. “Let’s have a look at you, boy.”

The first thing his hands felt were a holster belt, and a gun half-drawn from the leather container. Buzz whipped it out like a flash, inspected the chamber of a massive Colt revolver and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Now I’ve got a chance,” he beamed to himself, rolling the figure away into a gloomy corner.

Down the passageway he strode, more confident now. About twenty paces farther on he came to a widening of the chamber. A barred aperture in the form of a window looked down on another chamber that was fairly well lit up. A glance through, was all that Benson could manage, but the view was enough to satisfy him that he had come on the prison chamber of the

passengers on the ill-fated Boeings. They were low down in this high-ceilinged chamber—a pitiful group of weary, ragged travelers who had been waylaid and jammed into a rocky fortress prison without knowing how or why.

As Buzz stood peering through, he realized that there was no way of getting to them or even of attracting their attention. The prison chamber was in another section of the cave, and this aperture was used as a secret lookout. No plans they might evolve to escape would do them the slightest good, for every move they made could be watched by a sentry who was well out of range but within seeing distance.

From where he stood. Buzz could see a number of men in airline uniform. Two of them had their heads bandaged, showing that they had been in heavy action of some sort. Another group were huddled around a crude couch on which a woman lay. Two or three more strode up and down in silence. Another seemed to be peering through a small hole in a heavy barred door. Buzz could see one or two women, sitting together on newly opened crates. The pilots strode up and down like caged tigers, snarling and glaring at the doors.

“They seem all right, though,” he mused. “Nothing I can do for them now. I’ve got to get back and see what I can do about blocking the game.”

Taking a new grip on his gun, Buzz retraced his steps and came out in the main chamber again. As he emerged and slid off to the left into a dark corner, he realized that the hangar was gradually becoming the center of activity again. The men who had been working on the Boeing and bringing the bombs in were coming into the center of the great cave. Outside, there were still a few raised voices, but the workers seemed to be heading for the cave.

“There’s nobody in that wreckage, I tell you,” snarled a voice. “I poked around as close as I could get, and I’ll bet a buck he sneaked out somehow. That Benson bloke is the devil’s own when it comes to getting out of crashes.”

“Well, he must be around here somewhere,” snarled another. “Have a few men take rifles and go out and look the lake bed over closely. He might have fallen, or been thrown out. I’d like to scrape him up with a shovel.”

BUZZ grinned to himself and watched the movement. Outside, he could hear the moan of another motor. The men turned and watched the sky intently. At last the ship came in and rolled past the Boeing and up into the cave. The men stood by and Buzz saw that it was a new Stinson "Reliant," a four-passenger cabin job of neat proportions.

Three men got out. The pilot taxied the ship farther in and had it turned around. While all this was going on, several men detached themselves from the group and went over to the three men who had just arrived.

"Everybody here?" boomed the big man who appeared to be heading the mob.

"Everyone but the men on sentry duty below. One or two out, also, looking for this egg Benson. We don't know what happened to him. Get our message?"

"Yeah. We picked it up over Kingman. What a mess! So you can't find him, eh? Must have jumped and taken to the silk."

"We got men out looking. How soon will Fretchet be in with the other job?"

"Any minute now. We caught a message from him twenty minutes ago. They put the racks in on the way down. They're coming back with about six big ones. That ought to do the trick, but we've got to work fast now."

"We're ready when you are, boss. When do we leave?"

"The minute the two Boeings get away. There'll be three busses in from Baker within half an hour. The last man who leaves will release the prisoners and clear off. You have the rest of your instructions. Your money will be paid the minute you all get to Nogales across the border."

"We can't get it here?"

"Of course not. I don't carry money like that around with me."

There were rumbles of dissension in the ranks behind. The big man drew a gun that had a barrel seven inches long. He walked up and scowled at the mob.

"Did anyone say anything?" he snarled.

"That's all right, boss," soothed the leader of the working group. "Everything will be carried out to the letter. All we're waiting for is Fretchet."

"Fretchet?" mumbled Buzz to himself. "Wonder if they mean Hans Fretchet, the German

war pilot who got himself in bad some time ago bringing drugs in from Mexico. I'll bet that's who they're talking about."

"Where's Banks?" snapped the big man, pocketing his portable artillery.

"Right here," snapped a voice. "What's new?"

"Nothing. Just want to make sure you know what your job is tonight. Remember, you have the 100-pounders set for delayed action. You are to blow out the two main tunnels which are diverting the water of the Colorado out of its original channel to leave the dam site clear. Take the one on the west side of the canyon first, then return and destroy the one on the east side. Blow out either one successfully and you will have done a good job."

"What about Fretchet?"

"He has his orders. He takes the big babies and hits dead into the newly poured base of the dam. If he can hit that and you guys get the tunnels, we will not only destroy the work of twenty-eight months, but we can run the water back into the original channel and wash it all away."

BUZZ listened, amazed. He had been right, at that. They were going to blow up the Boulder Dam construction, but he had never considered an enterprise like this. The tunnels of which the big man had spoken had been completed after months of hard work, and now the Colorado River had been diverted so as to leave the dam site clear for the monstrous concrete redoubt—an engineering feat that would be the largest man-made dam in existence.

Its turbines would create electric horsepower four times greater than that built up by the mighty Niagara. It would offer a domestic water supply sufficient to fill the thirsty needs of three states. It would conserve enough water for irrigation and reclaim 1,500,000 acres of new ground or 2,160,000 acres in all. It would tame the yellow Colorado and prevent floods which had cost the farmers and property owners of California and western Arizona no less than \$2,000,000 yearly. It was a mighty giant of peacetime effort which had been the fortress on which the financial guns of the power trust known as the Death Valley Gang had been trained ever since the project was first considered back in 1902. For years they had fought it in Congress and Senate. For years they

had bribed, forced, cajoled and inflicted their objections. At last the money was forthcoming by a clever arrangement of Government finances and carefully selected private corporations. Everyone was satisfied with the arrangement, and the work began. That is, everyone but the Death Valley Gang, who had been ramming their private commercial enterprises down the throats of these western citizens and manufacturers for years. This was their last thrust to blow the Boulder Dam, and all it meant to them, clean out of the picture.

Buzz gripped his gun-butt tighter. An ex-German airman, flying an American transport that bore legitimate license numbers, would swoop down tonight and spew a load of high explosive on the great concrete base that had already been put in to bear this massive pile. The other pilot, a man recognized by Buzz as an ex-convict, would send a load of delayed detonation bombs down through the rocky banks of the Colorado which would nose into the 50-foot deep diversion tunnels, blowing away all the work of months and millions of dollars in money.

With the channels blocked up, the diverted water of a raging river would buck and rear, and then, with a gigantic roar of triumph, would swirl back into the original course and blot out the dry bed and the great concrete base. Whether any of it could ever be reclaimed was a question. Most certainly it would cost millions more to begin all over again.

Buzz hardly knew what move to make next. He took in all that was going on. The big man was talking again. Action would begin in a minute. The men were swarming out to the Boeing again. To all intents and purposes, they were all set to make the 90-mile trip up to Black Canyon a few miles southeast of Las Vegas.

The big man, followed about closely by his bodyguard, watched the final arrangements for getting the big Boeing bomber away. It was getting late now, and Buzz knew he had to work fast if he expected to stop this raid. If he only had to stop one ship, it would have been easy, but there were two to consider this time, and he had nothing more than a Colt in his hand and one chamber of ammunition.

"When Fretchet comes up," bellowed the big man, "he'll circle the lake once. He'll fire a green light and you'll take off at once."

That sentence about sealed Benson's chances. The second ship, piloted by the German, would not land at all. Before this he had been hoping to be able to wreck them by fire or some other means before they could get away. What might happen to him afterward had never entered his head. The main thing was to get rid of the other two stolen Boeings. He had taken care of two.

"I've got to work fast now," he murmured. "Got to get aboard that boiler and go with them."

That was the only course open. Making a flash decision, he suddenly skirted along the side of the great cave, continued on in the shadows and came up behind the parked Stinson. Then, watching the pilot, who had gotten out of his cockpit, Buzz listened to the last orders from the big boss up front.

"All right," he was yelling, "Get away, Banks. This is Fretchet now. No....Only Staunton, the radio man, will go with you. He will release the bombs. You, Strike, stay here and keep charge of the getting away. Your cars should be easing out of Baker now. Meet them out on the highway."

THAT was all Buzz stopped to hear. With a quick sweeping dash he slipped up behind the Stinson's pilot and with a crunching blow, dropped him with the butt of the revolver. The man went down like a log and Buzz dragged him away. Then, stepping inside the Stinson's cabin, he scratched a match quickly and dropped it in the cockpit beneath the instrument board. The drenchings of gasoline and oil the ship had taken on were enough. There was a spurt of flame, and then a veritable holocaust that ate the shape out of the control pit in one mouthful. Buzz slipped back, dropped into the shadow of the wall and started moving quietly toward the front of the cave hangar.

Instantly there was a cry of anger from up front. The men who had gone out to see the Boeing off came tearing back into the cave. Orders rasped out. Men swept forward to see and try to make out what had happened. Nothing was done about it, except that amid the whole of the flare-up, a dim figure glided along the shadow-flecked wall and made for the opening.

The big boss stood transfixed. He gazed into the hangar where his burning ship crackled, then turned back and stared at the big bomber. For an

instant he was speechless. He couldn't make up his mind.

So Benson made it up for him.

Two shots rang out, and two men who had been puzzled as to what to do saw a man in civilian clothing glide toward them. Someone yelled, "Benson!" and their guns came out.

As they did, Benson shot twice, and made no mistake about it.

Two huskies dropped their guns on the floor, clutched at their belt-buckles—and rolled over. Benson snatched up one of the guns and rammed the long snout of his Colt into the big boss's ribs.

"Move—and move damned quick!" he snapped. "Get going for that cabin door. Signal to Banks that you want to come in."

It all happened so quickly that few saw what really happened at all. Keeping the boss in front of him, and taking the gun from the big man's pocket, Benson went out to the Boeing.

The radio man slipped down the aisle and opened the door. Buzz pushed the big man in and crashed the radio man on the head with his left-hand gun. He sprawled across the floor, and the glare from the open control pit door showed that the regular seats and equipment for passenger carrying had all been ripped out and a set of temporary bomb racks built along each side of the cabin.

Before the big boss knew what had happened to him, he found himself trussed up by his wrists to the uprights of the temporary bomb-rack. Behind him rattled the setting of eggs which were intended for the diversion tunnels of Boulder Dam. But Buzz Benson had other ideas about them now.

As quick as a flash, he had the radio man tied up. Then, while Joe Banks sat up front, wondering what had happened inside, Buzz slipped in beside him, rammed the gun into his ribs and said, "Go on, take off. You fly her as long as you do what I say. Never mind the big boss. He's hung up on the wire. Let's go!"

His words came crisp and sharp, and they made Banks' teeth set on edge.

"How the—" he started to say.

"Never mind," roared Benson. "Get going. Your pal's coming up, spitting green lights. Step on it, jailbird!"

Two shots rang out. One splashed the glass out of the front window and hurled a bagful of splinters into Banks' lap.

"You see, even your best friends don't like you now," grinned Buzz. "You'd better beat it,*"

The gun went into Banks' ribs again, and he gave the idling Wasps the sauce. They rolled away under a new salvo of rifle fire and climbed into the night.

"And don't get gay with any phoney take-offs," warned Buzz. "Unless you put this boiler exactly fifty feet above the one flown by Hans Fretchet, your name's mud, not Banks. I can bring this tin-can in myself, you know, but I want you to fly her for a short time. After that, we may have some other ideas."

And with that, Buzz watched Banks climb the big Boeing up to join the other transformed transport, while he slipped in the muzzle-mike and set the wave-length lever to the ether zone selected for all Century Line ships. He started calling Ned Horton's office, hoping that the radio set in the German's ship had been tuned to the wave-length selected by the two ships and their own station.

For several minutes he gave the Las Vegas field call, watching Banks like a hawk.

Finally he switched over and was delighted to get a response.

"Las Vegas calling....Las Vegas calling.... Answering Benson in ship NC-13304....State position."

Buzz sensed the station switch go over, and he returned to the muzzle mike.

"Benson calling from near Soda Lake....Have taken over ship from Banks, former Consolidated Airways pilot....En route to Boulder Dam to prevent bombing of dam site....Issue warning to all government fields in vicinity. Make certain to send heavy police and service troops to No. 66—Six-Six—Highway to halt movement of number of busses heading from Baker to Soda to take ground crew across border. Keep all planes out of Boulder Dam area until I report area open. Repeat message!"

The repeat on the message came through crisply, but excitedly and Buzz switched off and turned his attention to Banks,

"Dumb-bell!" grinned Banks. "Look!"

Buzz looked out of the cockpit window and saw the other Boeing making a fast turn toward them. Evidently they had had their set open for the line wave-length after all.

“Right!” he snapped. “We’re still going after them. You put this boiler over them, or get a nut full of lead. Get the idea, now?”

Banks stared at the gun in Benson’s hand. Neither of them had parachutes, and it was neck or nothing. Banks went to his controls determined to carry out Benson’s orders. With a swirl, he whipped the big ship over, too, and raced toward the oncoming transport. A gun spat out of a cabin window and the fight of the behemoths was on.

“Don’t forget,” growled Buzz. “You get this baby over them or I’ll finish you off and fly her myself!”

Again Banks went to work, stirring his control wheel and fighting for every foot of altitude. Buzz sat tense, watching the mad drama. He was certain of one thing—the ship he was in carried much less weight than did the other Boeing, which was toting the heavies for the great dam base.

Evidently the German in the other ship realized this, too, for suddenly he swung away and began to nose down for the north again. Banks grinned,

“See?” he yelled. “They’re going through, anyway, to get the dam.”

“They’ll never do it,” snarled Buzz. “Come on, go after them. You got a few more revs in there,”

THEN began the wildest ride of transport aviation. Two highspeed cabin jobs were racing across the midnight sky. One was intent on destroying a massive piece of civil engineering with the aid of one of the finest products in aviation engineering. The other, loaded with the same weapons of destruction, was after it in the hope of preventing this destruction.

Ninety miles, they say the distance is—half an hour according to the rated speed with the two Wasps full out. But before twenty minutes had passed, the great gash of the yellow Colorado river was within plain sight, and Fretchet’s ship was nearing it with every whirl of the two great steel blades.

Behind, holding every inch of altitude it had gained, came the ship under the orders of Buzz Benson. Only a few hundred yards separated them now, and the huge gorge seemed to writhe as if

realizing the great danger which threatened it. Buzz sat tense, watching the dials of the instrument board and the flickering riding lights of the Boeing ahead.

Then, suddenly, the front ship dipped sharply, as if making a last game effort to get far enough ahead and low enough to score a clean hit.

Buzz swore. Banks grinned, but felt that grim gun muzzle still rammed into his side. He dipped, too, and the depression gave them the last few yards they so sorely needed. Buzz got up, stood in the doorway and felt for the bomb release handles that had been affixed to the cabin wall. He was in a position where he could see forward and down through the openings that had been cut in the floor for the released bombs to slide through.

But the Black Canyon was getting dangerously close. They would have to work fast now. He leaned back over Banks’ shoulder and yelled: “Get this! If that guy drops one bomb on that dam, you’ll go overboard, weighted with lead. Get me?”

Banks got him—and leaned grimly over the wheel. Buzz stepped back and stood at the release board again. Then began the last few minutes of the hair-raising flight for the canyon. Buzz prayed that Fretchet would hold his bomb load and handicap himself with that unusual weight long enough for them to catch him.

He glanced forward again and then felt a steel girder fall on his head. Something caught him a glancing blow above the ear, and he went down in a heap on the floor. Instinct prevailed, and he groped to his knees, threw himself forward and clutched like mad. The figure of the big boss loomed up above him, and the flash of a wicked wrench gleamed in the dull light.

The big boss had managed to release himself—at the wrong minute.

Again the wrench came down across Benson’s head, and a shower of stars and great blades of light flashed across his vision. But he hung on and brought his man down. Together they rolled, fighting, scratching and clawing like tigers. Buzz found something soft and realized that he had reached the man’s face. He clutched and clawed, but a cruel knee came up and banged all the breath out of him. Like a sprinter running blind on nerve reaction alone, Buzz clawed again and stuck two forked fingers in the man’s eyes. There was a

squeal and something rattled on the floor near Benson's head. He clawed for the wrench. With a left-handed swipe, he brought the tool down on the big boss's forehead, and the man relaxed like a sack of wet meal.

LIKE a shot, Buzz leaped to his knees, stared down through the bomb rack and saw the glistening upper surfaces of a Boeing. With a last desperate effort he clawed up, tugged at the bomb release, and the big transport gave a wild leap as six 100-pounders slid down the guides and into the night.

"Over! Left!" roared Buzz, scrambling up into the control pit.

But Banks never heard him.

There was a gigantic boom. A great curtain of lemon and scarlet flame mushroomed back off their metal wings and a belch of concussion hurled the big Boeing over on her back. A chunk of metal came through the cockpit floor, and Banks let out a scream that could be heard over the roar of the remonstrating motors.

They hung there for what seemed hours. Finally Banks slipped away and rolled from under the wheel—a screaming madman, clutching at his chest. Buzz yanked him away, dragged him down the aisle and hurled him where he had last seen the big boss.

Somehow Benson got into the control pit and grabbed at the floundering wheel. Instinct told him to neutralize everything and ease down on the motors. They came out and slithered through a tornado of sheet metal, lengths of dural tube and chunks of timber. What was left of No. NC-13305 was either floating away or hurtling in wailing spins for the churning waters of the Colorado—less than 300 yards from the site of the Boulder Dam. Benson's bombs had found their mark in the T.N.T.-choked vitals of Hans Fretchet's destroyer.

Boulder Dam was saved!

A PRODIGAL son came home to the Las Vegas field of the Century Air Lines—guided by a gore-spattered newspaperman, who was on his last legs. The big bomber rolled in, dipping and struggling.

She fell into a sideslip and missed the beam for a minute, but gradually the weary pilot brought her back and slapped her hard on the runway.

Taxiing a few yards, he shut off everything and passed out.

They found him there, still at the wheel. Down in the battered cabin they found a struggling man, fighting to get from under a dead man who had had his chest blown away. Farther down they came across another who was lashed securely to a bomb-rack strut, babbling something about bombs, dams and a man named Benson. In the racks still hung a few 100-pounders, swaying ominously. NC-13304 had returned.

Two hours later, Banks was in the morgue. The big boss was on his way by special train to Los Angeles. Benson was sitting up in a control tower bed, drinking coffee. At his side sat the Honorable James P. Jillard and the British Naval Attache, Commander Weymyss Burton, trying to find out exactly what had happened—and why.

"Don't ask me," grinned Buzz. "All I want to know is, did they get those guys at Soda Lake?"

"Did they?" broke in Ned Horton. "Every mother's son—and daughter of them. And what's more, after this we're going to watch every jane who gets aboard our ships carrying a portable typewriter."

"Portable typewriter is right," grinned Buzz. "And how that baby clicked!"