



# SKY LINES

by RAOUL WHITFIELD

*“Buck” Kent matches his airman’s wits with the snarling bullets of bandit guns.*

**N**EW ORLEANS had sweltered in the heat since a few hours after dawn. Now the sun was dropping down and it was growing cooler. On the level stretch back of the city side of the Mississippi levee, eight miles from St. Charles Street and the center of town, rested the gray-colored Ryan plane.

Lou Parrish had just finished work on the smoke box—she was ready for the night flight, the sky writing. Lou lighted a cigarette and strolled toward the spot where “Buck” Kent was seated on an upturned box, using a pencil on yellow paper.

“The lobster I had for lunch didn’t agree with me,” Lou stated grimly. “Figure the stuff without loops, if you can.”

Buck looked up, grinning. “I’ve got to use loops—in these sky lines, Lou,” he said. “Got the sulphur stuff rigged ready for action?”

Lou nodded. “What do we write up there?” he asked.

Buck chuckled. He read from the paper on which he had been scrawling the letters as they would be spelled out, a quarter mile tall in the dark sky.

“Otis—for awnings,” he announced slowly. “And that bird, Otis, is wise, Lou. They sure need awnings around here right now! There isn’t a breath of wind tonight. It’s a short line and should show great. We’ll write it three times—fifteen minutes interval between each sky line. He’s getting it cheap at three hundred.”

Lou groaned. “Those round letters mean loops,” he

muttered. "But 'awnings' isn't so tough."

Buck rose to his feet. "Got it clear in my head," he stated. "We'll take off at seven thirty—and go up three thousand feet, then write the three words with the wing lights on, not using the smoke. We'll get a line on which way the stuff'll drift. Then at eight we'll write the first line. The next two will be fifteen minutes apart. We'll just loaf around in between, and we won't land after. Otis is coming down with the motley. Then we'll wing for Biloxi—get a dip to-morrow."

Lou sighed. "It sounds good," he said. "Well, she's right. It took me five hours to hook her up. She'll pump the hot stuff out when you're ready."

Buck Kent nodded. "Should be a big crowd on the streets Saturday night."

He glanced at his wrist watch. It was almost seven—and getting dark rapidly. Beyond the levee, the Mississippi was running sluggishly toward the gulf. The lights of the main section of the town flared the sky in the distance. What little breeze there would be up above would drift the glowing smoke letters to the southward, Buck figured. But he couldn't be sure until they go up in the air.

Lou dropped on the grass and stretched himself out. There was the sound of a machine coming along the dirt road that ran close to the stretch back of the levee. Buck walked slowly toward the road.

"That's Otis, I suppose," he called to Lou. "I'll let him look over the smoke box."

THE CAR that halted along the edge of the road was a battered sedan. It wasn't Otis' car—that merchant was prosperous and had driven a shiny roadster when he had come out in the morning to talk business.

A short individual climbed down from behind the sedan's wheel. He came toward Buck. He smiled.

"Lookin' for the pilot," he said. "The sky writer."

Buck smiled faintly. "I'm the gent, in person," he stated.

The other had dark eyes, small and shifty. He forced a hoarse chuckle.

"My name's Hager," he said. "Figured you might want to kill two birds with one stone."

He chuckled again. There was the sound of a machine, far down the dirt road—he jerked his head nervously. Buck spoke in a quiet voice.

"It depends a lot—on the stone," he said simply.

The other turned toward him again. He reached into his pocket, and produced a roll of bills.

"Don't expect you to do it for nothin'," he said

huskily. "Seen in the papers this morning that you was doin' this sky-writin' stunt for Otis. Figured you might want to kill two birds with——"

Buck cut him off, nodding. "What do I do, Mr. Hager?" he asked steadily.

The short man smiled. "Nothiu' hard," he said. "Across the river—down yonder about five miles," he pointed in the general direction with a stubby-fingered hand, "there's a guy havin' a birthday. He's crippled up—been that way since the war. He was a flyer. Some of us fellows figured you might do some dives around his place to sort of cheer him up. We'll have him pushed over to a window. It's his birthday, you see. It's just——"

A boat whistle sounded up the river. The short man broke off, his body jerked nervously. Buck smiled with his lips, but his eyes narrowed.

"Sure—glad to do it, Mr. Hager," he said. "What time?"

The short individual was peeling off some bills. He was very nervous. His hands shook a little.

"How about eight thirty?" he asked. "You can drop down low there—it ain't right in the city. Of course, there might be a little fine——"

"I'm winging down to Biloxi tonight, without hitting dirt after the sky advertising," Buck said slowly. "I won't worry about the fine. Make it twenty of nine—the time. I'm doing the last sky lines at eight thirty."

The short man nodded. "Good enough," he returned. "An' say—could you toss down a little package I got in the car? Some of us fellows rigged up a little 'chute for it—just a little gift."

Buck nodded. "Trot it out," he said. "I'll try to drop it close to the house, but I can't promise."

The short man grinned. "Long as you get it pretty close," he said, "that'll be great. It'll cheer Eddie a lot, I know."

HE MOVED toward the car, and presently came back with a small package. He handed it to Buck, who inspected the miniature parachute that dangled from it. The short man chuckled again.

"Don't hit anybody with the gift," he warned. "It ain't so heavy—but from the air——"

"I'll make sure it'll drop without hitting any one," Buck interrupted. "But if the 'chute fails to drop it gently—will it break?"

The short man grinned. "It's just a joke," he

explained. "Can't hurt it much, even if the 'chute doesn't open."

Buck nodded. The short man unfolded some bills he'd peeled off from the roll.

"You fellows take chances," he said. "Will fifty be right?"

Buck narrowed his eyes. "*Just* right," he replied. "Eight forty—and I'll be diving over this ex-pilot's shack. Now—where's the place. I don't know much about New Orleans."

The short man chuckled. "You can't miss it," he said. "On the other side there's three ferry slips—cars use 'em, going west. The ferries take out the west traffic, see? The third slip has a green night sign—a V on the piles. They use it for fog, see? You fly over that sign—head right on westward. Town's sort of spread out over there, an' it ain't the highbrow section of the city. Light company's got a radio control station out there—all colors on the towers. About three squares west of it—there's the house. Eddie's place. It's a frame house, set back in a yard. The street below it's kind of busy—lighted up. Stores an' things. But we've fixed it so you can't miss the house. Got a blue bulb in a lamp up against the front second-story window. If you come in low——"

He broke off. Buck nodded. He repeated the directions. The short one grinned at him.

"Decent of you—it'll help Eddie a lot," he said, and moved toward the car.

Buck nodded slowly. The man climbed in, waved a hand and drove off. Lou came up, staring at the package in Buck's right hand. He hadn't heard the conversation.

"WHAT you got there?" Lou asked sleepily. "I was just dozing off when—say, what is it? You handle it pretty gingerly. Somebody slip you a bomb?"

Buck Kent swore softly. "This is the stone with which I'm to kill two birds, Lou," he said grimly. "An ex-pilot's having a birthday across the river. He's crippled up. I'm supposed to cheer him up by diving the crate around his house—and then dropping this. It's something funny—for this guy that's having the birthday. It's so funny that the gent who handed it to me also' handed over fifty bucks."

Lou Parrish drew a deep breath. He squinted up his eyes.

"It *sounds* funny!" he snapped.

Buck Kent smiled grimly. "It might not sound so funny—not if I went through with it and dropped

the thing. It's pretty heavy—and the 'chute is made of *rotten* silk, Lou!"

"Bomb!" Lou spoke in a low voice. "Framing you to——"

The sound of a car approaching caused them both to turn and stare down the road. It was Otis' machine. Buck spoke quietly.

"*Something's* funny about the thing. And the five tens are pretty new and crisp. That bird acted nervous—and his line was dumb. Any pilot would have been suspicious. He shouldn't have offered the money. He might have known that almost any flyer would do the kind of a job he wanted without pay. I'll tell Otis about it. You and he can take the package and the fifty to the nearest police station. My guess is that the bills are phony. Handle the package carefully. Come on—we'll talk to Otis."

They talked to Otis, and the latter agreed to investigate the matter. He took the bills and the package and started off excitedly for the police station.

IT WAS seven thirty. Buck Kent stood near the gray-winged plane, his eyes on the air-cooled Ryan engine. But he was thinking about the short man who had called himself Hager. There was a grim smile on his face. The man had been a fool—he had not been clever enough. He had made the mistake of thinking that pilots would toss objects cut of their ships without knowing what the objects were. The story he had trumped up was a weak one—that was Buck's idea.

He saw the flare of car lights on the dirt road beyond the level stretch back of the levee, and moved away from the ship. It was Otis' roadster coming back. Otis was a tall, middle-aged man with blue eyes and a pleasant smile. He was smiling now as he moved toward Buck. Lou Parrish followed him, a frown on his face.

"False alarm, Kent!" Otis spoke cheerfully. He extended the package toward the pilot. "I talked with Police Lieutenant Harding. The object in the package is nothing but a souvenir of the War—a shell with some German markings on it! A small one. Here." He handed over the bills. "The bank cashier at the Third National says he wished he had a flock of 'em just as good!"

Buck Kent stared at Otis. He folded the bills and stuffed them in a pocket. He muttered to himself. Otis was still smiling.

"The police officer knows the section over there, though he's never heard of this ex-pilot. He

wouldn't—with the chap inside all the time. Bad section—but no particular reason to use a bomb."

Buck drew a deep breath. He was thinking of the short man's actions. He swore softly.

"All right," he said quietly. "Sorry to bother you, Otis. We'll get right up and do your stuff. Hop into flying togs, Lou. Sorry——"

The awning merchant grinned. "Forget it—you had me excited, too. Just one of those things. The lieutenant said to tell you that if you go through with the stunt—watch out where you drop the package."

Buck grunted. "I'll go through with it. Wish I could get that fifty back to that guy! I wouldn't have taken it—only I figured he wasn't on the level. Right away I thought it was bad coin. I've had that happen before."

Otis nodded his head. "It sounded like a funny story," he agreed. "But it's not a bad stunt, come to think of it—that poor devil laid up. It'll tickle him some."

Buck nodded. Lou Parrish was winding the inertia starter. Their stuff was packed aboard. Buck shook hands with Otis and thanked him.

"We'll write you up good," Buck said as he climbed into the front cockpit of the two-place ship. "Tilt your head—and watch the sky lines!"

Otis nodded, and got back away from the prop wash. Lou climbed into the rear cockpit. Buck snapped the ignition switch, releasing the inertia starter. The engine roared. He was frowning as she warmed up. There were no blocks under the wheels. He was thinking about the man who had called himself Hager.

"Two birds with one stone!" Buck muttered. "I *still* think there's—something funny."

THE TAKE-OFF was smooth. Buck crabbed the ship around into the wind and climbed over the Mississippi. As he was getting altitude, he picked up the ferry slip on the far side, and spotted the green V. Wing lights were flashed on. At three thousand feet altitude he banked to the left, toward the heart of the city. Presently they had four thousand feet of altitude over St. Charles Street. The avenues below were brightly lighted. Even from the heights they could see the crowds.

Buck roared the ship over the French Quarter—the old section. He wanted to get into the wind—there was wind at this altitude. It was mild, but enough to drift the sulphurous smoke toward the main thoroughfare.

At five thousand feet, he twisted his head and grinned at Lou. Then he nosed the ship downward and got speed for the first loop—the O in Otis' name. Lou

was not working the smoke box this time. The ship was screaming downward. Buck pulled back on the stick. The nose came up. She was pointed toward the stars. Now she was over on her back, out of it—going down.

He maneuvered the plane as he had figured on paper—and when he had finished he smiled grimly. It had come off pretty well, though the word "Awnings" would be a little ragged. He had lost five hundred feet of altitude—the next time he would not lose so much.

Pulling back on the stick, he climbed the plane again, heading for the French Quarter. At five thousand, he twisted his head and nodded to Lou. Then he dived again. There was a streaking behind of brown-red sulphur smoke.

"Let's go!" Buck muttered grimly. "Here's where we give Otis his money's worth!"

In quarter-mile letters he wrote the word "OTIS." Twisting his head, he shouted above the drum of the Ryan.

"Break her, Lou!"

And then he began maneuvering into the first form of the letter "F"—a tough one to write in the sky. He nodded his head again.

"Cut her loose!"

The word "FOR" was shaky, but clear enough. There was another break, then he roared the ship into the final word "AWNINGS." He pulled her out of the S from the top, coming down in a half outside loop, a dive and a quarter zoom. He shouted to Lou for the last cut. The smoke trail died.

Banking widely, he and Lou stared back at the slowly drifting writing. The first of the letters was already fading—but most of the writing glowed dully in the sky. From the city street it could be seen plainly, and the spelling was clear enough. Buck nodded his head slowly.

"Better next time!" he called back to Lou. "We'll loaf a bit."

The wing lights showed the path of the plane as Buck banked, dived and zoomed for the next fifteen minutes. He glanced at his wrist watch after the second sky advertisement. It was eight twenty.

Gliding, he lost a thousand feet in ten minutes, using power and level flight to break the dive. Back a half mile from the French Quarter, at four thousand feet, they went into the first loop of the final writing. And this time Buck stunted with all his skill, handling the plane like the veteran he was. As she screamed down out of the final S, he shouted loudly to Lou.

"Cut her! Save the rest of the stuff, Lou!"

MAKING a wide bank, Buck looked back at the drifting words. It was a good advertisement—the crowds in the streets could not help seeing it. The wind was making the glowing smoke lose form in spots; but the words could be easily distinguished. Lou shouted above the roar of the engine.

“Otis has no kick on that!” Buck grinned and banked the ship toward the silver-brown water of the Mississippi. He shouted back at Lou:

“We’ll do this other job next. May use some smoke—write hello!”

He was roaring the plane downward now, coming down with power on. Far in the distance was the green color of the ferry-slip sign, on the west side of the Mississippi. Buck headed the ship toward it.

He shook his head slowly. There was danger in the job—if the engine should quit, go dead—while they were down low, diving and zooming. It would mean a forced landing at night, in a section of the city that would not be so good. The other business didn’t worry him. He’d get the souvenir of the German shell down without hitting any one. He swore softly. Hager had said that the ex-pilot was crippled—had been smashed up in the war. The dropping of a piece of German shell wasn’t so funny—not from Buck’s standpoint. But then, there was no accounting for people’s sense of humor. Perhaps the war veteran would get a kick out of it.

The Ryan-engined ship was down to two thousand now, over the Mississippi. The green V on the ferry slip was less than a quarter mile away. Buck came in at an angle, banked and headed west directly over the letter. He picked up the two towers of the radio station, brightly lighted.

Throttling down a little, he dropped the ship to a thousand feet, then roared her westward. A glance at his wrist watch showed him that it was exactly twenty minutes of nine. He’d be a little late.

Nosing downward, he had the ship at an altitude of five hundred feet when he picked up the blue light in the open window. The house was a poor one, set back from the street.

Less than a square away was a busy thoroughfare, brightly lighted and thronged with people.

Buck smiled grimly. His eyes were on the house ahead—the blue light in the window. It was strange; but he had been fooled once this evening. He was going to go through with the thing he had promised to do.

The ship roared down at the house. Lower and

lower Buck dropped her. Then he shoved the throttle forward with his left hand and zoomed. Three hundred feet above the ground he went into a vertical bank, but slipped out of it.

From the pocket beside the cockpit seat, he pulled out the package. The street in front of the house was deserted. He dived out of the slip and headed toward the front yard. The small ‘chute was dangling from the package. The plane was low now, a hundred feet above the yard, slanting toward the house and the blue light. But Buck Kent saw no face framed in the window—no human form.

He tossed out the package. Then he zoomed the ship. Lou’s voice came to him.

“The ‘chute’s drifting it—the silk’s holding the weight, Buck. It’s almost over——”

The plane was in a sixty-degree bank when Lou’s voice died. Both men were staring over the side. Above the beat of the engine sounded a sharp explosion! The whole rear of the frame house seemed to lift into the sky! Red flames shot tip from the darkness!

There was air concussion. Buck fought the plane out of the bank. His face was twisting. He heard Lou cry out fiercely.

“Buck—a bomb!”

THE SHIP was five hundred feet in the air now—almost over the street that was brightly lighted. Buck could see the crowds running toward the scene of the explosion.

Stores were being emptied; people were running from all directions toward the burning house. He circled the plane over it. His mind was working fast. What had happened? The ‘chute had opened and had drifted down with a piece of a war shell!

He thought of Otis—suspicion stabbing through his brain. But Lou had been with Otis. And there had been no chance to talk much with Lou. Had there been a switch of packages?

Buck shook his head. It was the rear of the house that had blown up. The ‘chute had borne the package down toward the front yard. He swore grimly.

“They framed us! We gave a signal!” he shouted back at Lou. “But—what for? Why?”

The house was burning fiercely. Sparks were shooting up into the sky. Buck banked wide of the place. A great crowd was surrounding it. The ship was out over the lighted street now, it was almost deserted. Almost—but not quite.

On a near corner was a low, white building. In front

of it was a car—back of the car was another. Two men stood near the second car—and they were staring toward the sparks that were shooting up a few blocks away. They did not take their eyes from the entrance of the corner building.

Buck was tense in the cockpit now. His head was out in the prop wash. He stared over the side. One of the men looked up—and then men came running from the corner building. Three of them piled into the first car. They carried bags in their hands. A fourth headed for the second car. A fifth man staggered out, raised his right arm— then pitched forward on the sidewalk. The first car was jerking into motion now. Another man ran from the corner building, waving his arms wildly.

Buck Kent got it, then. He understood. He shouted back at Lou.

“Bank stick-up! Blew up that house—to pull people away. Made a get away. Tried to frame us—alarm would go out for a plane——”

He was roaring the ship over the lighted street now. The first car was an open one, with a top up. The second was closed. Both cars were traveling fast, away from the scene of the robbery. From the air, even though he was forced to bank wide at intervals, they had a fine view of the whole thing.

From a side street curved a black, open car. It swung wide and sped after the two others. Back of it came another car. There was a small flash of red from the first of the two pursuing machines.

Buck banked the plane in toward the street. The lights ended abruptly. There was a curve to the left where the road became narrow. The lights of the speeding cars showed how rough it was. The beams jerked badly.

Lou was shouting, leaning across the few feet that separated the two cockpits.

“They’ll get ‘em! Some one buzzed an alarm!”

Buck nodded. He swore softly as “the second car of the four suddenly swerved around and skidded to a halt. The third car tried to swing wide, but failed. It crashed into the rear end of the car that was half blocking the road. Men were piling out of both cars—there was a fight on. But the last car was around the other two now. Its driver was speeding toward the one in the lead. The road had become one of dirt—it was straight, running along the levee on the west side of the river. There was no traffic ahead of the two speeding cars.

The car into which the men with the bags had hurried was gaining on the one behind.

Lou Parrish was shouting in Buck’s ears now.  
“They’ve got a faster car. They’ll get clear!”

BUCK roared the ship over the two cars below. Almost a quarter of a mile separated them now, and the car in the lead was gaining steadily.

Buck groaned. They had no mounted gun on the Ryan-engined plane—no machine gun. He twisted his head and stared back. There was a red glow in the sky, from the burning house. Staring down at the car in the lead, Buck muttered to himself.

“Saturday night—bank open until nine! A lot of coin on hand. They made a big haul, ten to one! Risked blowing up that shack!”

He straightened in the cockpit. His eyes narrowed back of the goggle glass. He was thinking back now. The road was below. Both cars were speeding dead into the wind. On the right of the road was the levee bank. On the left was swampy ground. The section was very little built up. Only an occasional shack flashed behind. Buck banked the plane to the left, wide. He jerked his head around.

“Lou,” he shouted, “get this: I’ll come up from behind—down low. I’ll get ahead of that first car, and skim the road. You cut loose the rest of that smoke! Understand?”

He caught the expression in Lou’s eyes, back of the goggle glass—and knew that Lou understood. He banked the ship in again, over the road. She was halfway between the two cars now. He opened her up wide. There was no chance of the leading machine turning—not so far as he could see.

The Ryan-engined ship gained steadily on the car below. Buck dropped her to a hundred feet—then fifty. She was roaring up over the car now. He moved the stick forward a little. Her nose dropped.

Now they were ahead—almost skimming the road with the wheel rubber and tail assembly. Buck held the roaring ship steady. He twisted his head a little.

“Let her go!” he shouted above the drum of the motor. “Smoke ‘em to a stop!”

Sulphur smoke, shooting back from the smoke box, hooked up with the plane’s exhaust pipes! A steady stream of it, brown-red in color, pouring out from behind the plane, was swept back by the whirl of the prop! There was no wind to turn it aside. It blinded the driver of the car—choking him and the others.

Ten seconds elapsed, then Buck shouted for Lou to cut. He zoomed the plane and banked around. The smoke was hanging over the road. Suddenly a shape

shot through it. Lou cried out and Buck stared down with narrowed eyes. The bandit car was through, but it was heading for one side of the road rolling and jouncing. It was out of control!

It skidded badly, and jumped over a narrow ditch at the left of the road. It seemed to leap into the air. And then it was rolling over—and men were being spilled from it.

Buck Kent banked the ship at sixty degrees, directly over the spot. Two men lay motionless. A third was trying to limp from the scene of the wreck. Back along the road, the smoke was disintegrating.

Through the thin hangings of it came the pursuing car. It stopped fifty yards from the wreck. A half dozen men poured from it. Most of them had rifles. Buck Kent twisted his head and shouted at Lou.

“They’ve got ‘em!” He smiled grimly. “And we’re going to find a spot and get down!”

BUCK KENT stood near the hospital cot, beside the police guard. He was looking down at the short figure on the cot. The man had dark, shifty eyes. His stubby fingers moved nervously outside the sheet. Buck grinned.

“Hello, Mr. Hager!” he greeted. “I’ve got something for you.”

He tossed a small roll of new bills on the bed. The dark eyes of the wounded one gleamed faintly. But he didn’t talk.

Buck spoke in a cheerful tone. The police guard sat

back and listened.

“The story was a bum one—but it worked, Hager,” Buck said. “Figured it pretty close, eh? When we dived for the house you birds at the bank went inside and did your stuff. You didn’t care much about my dropping that package—you had a man outside with an ordinary dynamite pump—a blasting pump. And he did the blow-up, after we’d done a couple of dives. He did the talking, too—said he didn’t see me drop the package. I did—but I won’t take that fifty for the job. I don’t feel just right, about it. You see, instead of winging away and having the police thinking I had something to do with the stick-up, I killed two birds with one stone.”

Buck chuckled. The man on the cot muttered thickly. Buck spoke cheerfully.

“Didn’t use all that smoke up above, Hager—so you got what was left over. It left a bad taste, eh? Well, you almost got away with it, at that. You had some good lines, Hager—only I had some, too. The bank’s giving a reward for mine—that’s one reason I’m handing back the fifty.”

Buck Kent grinned at the police officer, then turned away. At the foot of the cot he faced Hager and spoke again.

“‘Otis—for awnings,’” he said slowly. “Remember those lines when you get up in the Big House, Hager. You got what was left over from them. Sort of classics of the air, eh. Sky lines!”