



# THE CHRISTMAS CRATE

by RAUL WHITFIELD

*Into the teeth of the storm on a mission of mercy, "Buck" Kent staked his airman's skill against the blizzard's might.*

**T**HE OPEN COCKPIT SHIP was crabbing into a gusty wind blowing over the Red Mountains from the northeast. "Buck" Kent, bundled warmly in his flying overall suit, his head covered by a fur-lined helmet, held the stick in a thickly gloved hand and twisted around.

He saw that Lou Parrish was crouched low in the rear cockpit, protecting his face from the cold blast flung back by the whirling prop. He smiled grimly and turned his head to the front again.

"Almost over!" he muttered to himself.

The gray-winged, radial-engined ship had an altitude of fourteen thousand feet—and she'd had to fight for over thirty minutes to get it. Mount Crescent, vising more than eleven thousand feet above sea level, was behind. In another five minutes he could nose the ship down, lose altitude. Somer City would soon be in sight.

The left wing of the plane dropped under the force of a battering gust. Buck gave her right stick—pulled the crate on even keel again. The gray clouds were less than two thousand feet above the plane. They were

moving fast. They looked like snow, and they felt like snow. But the plane was across the range now. They had fought a nasty gale wind eastward over a tough spot in the mountains—the Red Mountains.

Buck relaxed slightly in the cockpit. He eased up his foot pressure on the rudder pedals. A frown crossed his browned face. It was the first time he had heard from Burt Kendrick in almost a year. The wire had come to Dana Field, where Buck and Lou had been visiting Ed Chase on their flight northward for Christmas. It had been brief and to the point:

If you want to make a lot of kids happy Xmas, pack landing skis. Land at marked field half mile north of Somer City. Come on, Buck. To-morrow.

The wire had reached them yesterday; it had been signed by Burt Kendrick. And now they were approaching Somer City, the small mining town that was certainly no city, high in the snow-covered mountain range.

Buck nosed the plane downward, cutting the throttle speed. His eyes were on the slopes of a mountain that became a narrow ledge. There were houses and a few frame buildings. Everything was covered with snow—but it did not seem deep or drifted. The gray-winged, radial-engined plane lost two thousand feet of altitude, then circled over the town in a fifty-degree bank.

Lou Parrish was staring over the side of the fuselage now. His voice reached Buck Kent as he leaned forward in the rear cockpit and got his head close to the pilot's.

"There's your—city. Swell place to spend—Christmas!"

Buck Kent grinned. It didn't make much difference where he and Lou spent Christmas, and he knew that Lou realized that. They had been planning a trip northward to Seattle, but both were sky-hoppers with few relatives and a lot of air fields they could call home.

And if Burt Kendrick wanted them, and the crate, that counted big.

BUCK slipped the ship a thousand feet, then banked her over the town at an altitude of eight hundred. He looked to the northward; his eyes picked up the field. It was not too long, and very narrow. There was a wind sock up, and a half dozen figures were on the white surface, waving their arms. Mountain slopes rose all around. They were snow covered. But to the northward the slope was not so severe.

Nosing downward again, Buck roared the plane

over the field. The wind was directly from the north, but it was tricky. He circled the field three times at five hundred feet. There was a thin coating of snow on it—elsewhere the snow was deeper. He guessed that the field had been cleared.

Lou Parrish shouted above the beat of the engine.

"Nice spot—for a nose-over!"

Buck jerked his head and grinned. He shouted back at Lou.

"We'd better not—or we'll be here New Year's day, too!"

And then he banked the ship, south of the field, winged her northward, losing altitude rapidly and coming down with power on.

Fifty feet above the white surface at the south end of the field a strong gust of wind dropped the left wing, kicking the nose to the westward. He got her back on the course and gave her more engine. He leveled her off ten feet above the thin coating of snow.

Ahead of the ship men were scattering. Buck cut the throttle, pulled back on the stick. The nose came up—the plane dropped heavily. A current of air shot her upward—he was forced to use power again. Then she came down, and struck. The landing was pretty fast.

But the snow was fairly soft. It slowed her up rapidly. She was nearing the north end of the field—there was danger of over-shooting. Buck cut the throttle. A two-foot bank of snow was running back toward the plane. If the tip of the prop whirled into it——

Buck cut the ignition switch and pressed down hard on the right rudder pedal. She skidded around, the hoop of the left lower wing digging through the white stuff. Her tail started to come up. Buck pulled the stick back against the material of his flying overalls. The tail assembly hung a few feet off the snow—then dropped back. The ship rolled to a halt, with her left wing-tip less than five feet from the snowdrift.

Buck Kent snapped his safety belt, slipped out of the 'chute pack, stood up in the front cockpit, bending over. Men were running up. Burt Kendrick, big and husky, was the first to grip Buck's hand.

"You made it!" he muttered. "But you sure gave us a scare."

Buck grinned down at Kendrick. He spoke hoarsely.

"When it comes to providing a landing field, Burt," he muttered, "you're no Santa Claus!"

THEY sat around a glowing stove in the mining company's general store. Ben Harris, the company

official, looked at Buck, pulled on his pipe and spoke.

"There're about thirty kids up at White Cliff," he stated. "This last storm has been one of the worst we've had. Every Christmas we send up gifts. Burt usually goes up rigged as Santa Claus. The kids are poor—and it's a big thing for them. After the last storm we started to break the trail around Mount Macy. We were going pretty good—then the second storm broke. That was the day before yesterday. The place is fourteen miles from here by trail—it's a bad one. Yesterday morning 'Mush' Henning came in with the trail-breakers. Said they couldn't make it. Snow ten feet deep in places—slides all along. The town's shut off—and it looked like no Christmas for those kids."

The company official smiled at Burt Kendrick. Burt spoke:

"I'd read in a paper last week that you were going north from Los Angeles, and stopping at Dana Field. I took a chance and wired there. Figured you'd come—if you could."

Buck nodded. His eyes went from the blue ones of the big Kendrick to those of Ben Harris. They held a questioning expression. The company official answered the question.

"We figured you could get up there, Kent. You've done some big flying things—and you don't seem to consider money first. There's a small lake on the edge of the town. They call it Deep Lake. It isn't deep now, because it's frozen over. There's a lot of snow on it. With skis—you might be able to land. That's up to you. We can pack your ship with the toys for the kids. Candy and stuff. Burt said he figured you'd want to try."

Buck's blue eyes were smiling. He nodded his red-topped head.

"Christmas is for kids," he said simply. "I sure do want—to try."

Burt Kendrick grunted. "Phone and telegraph wires are down, Buck," he said slowly. "Deep Lake is small. Mountain slopes on two sides—steep ones. I can draw you a rough map. We figure there'll be wind on the lake, and the snow will be pretty smooth. It's mighty cold up there—the snow should be hard packed. There's a chance—but we don't want you to crack up."

Buck nodded. "It won't be easy," he said quietly. "But it doesn't sound impossible. It's about noon now. Looks like snow. It'll take us a couple of hours to get the skis in place of the wheels. We'd better get going."

He got up from the chair. Ben Harris and the others stood up. A tall, thin-faced man in a dark-colored

mackinaw shook his head from side to side.

"You're likely to kill yourselves for some painted toys for kids!" he growled.

Burt Kendrick frowned. He spoke to Buck.

"Joe Kimble was against my wiring for you," he said. "But Kimble don't think much of kids, anyway. If you can't set the plane down—you can't." Buck nodded. Kimble spoke again. His voice held a gloomy note.

"Mighty bad country you got to fly over!" he muttered. "It feels like it's comin' on to snow and—"

Ben Harris cut in. "I guess Kent realizes all that, Kimble," he said quietly. "Let's leave it up to him." Kendrick smiled at Buck. "I'd like to ride along—sort of act as Santa Claus. I got the costume—"

Buck nodded. "I'd like to have you, Burt," he said. "But Lou could be more of a help, if things go bad. Knows more about ships. He can get into that costume under his overalls. If we make it—he'll take your job."

Lou grinned. "I'm a darn good Santa, too," he said. "I'll make a hit." The lean-faced Kimble grunted. "If you don't make a hit—before you get there!" he muttered.

Buck chuckled. "Draw me a map, Burt—even though it isn't any distance. Get the toys and eats together—we'll pack 'em in the fuselage. Dig up that whisker stuff for Lou. We'll work on the plane."

Burt Kendrick was grinning cheerfully. Ben Harris nodded his head.

"It's big of you fellows—" he started, but Buck cut him off.

"We're not down on Deep Lake yet," he said. "But whether we make it or not—it's the kind of a job we like. Right, Lou?"

Lou Parrish grinned and nodded his head. He looked at the lean-faced Kimble.

"Right!" he replied. "And I'll bet Mr. Kimble a painted jack-in-the-box against a stick of peppermint that we make it."

The tall miner frowned, shaking his head. He looked out of the small, cleared spot of the frosted store window glass.

"Startin' to snow right now!" he muttered. "I ain't bettin', but if I was—I'd sure give you bigger odds!"

"THE skis were in place. Buck and Lou had had plenty of help, but the job had taken three hours. The wheel landing gear was at one end of the snow-covered field, a tarpaulin thrown over it. There were toys and candy in the plane fuselage compartment; Buck and

Lou were getting into their 'chutes. A biting wind whirled fine flakes of snow about them.

Burt Kendrick called to Buck, pointing toward the road that led from the mining town to the field". A man was running, waving his arms. Burt headed toward him.

Lou cranked the inertia starter—and Buck warmed the ship's engine up. It was growing dark—there was no sun, and the wind seemed to be increasing. When he climbed down out of the cockpit, Burt and Ben Harris were standing near the tail assembly. Burt looked serious.

"Ed Condon came over from town," he said. "A miner named Fenner just came down the trail. It took him six hours on snowshoes. He's almost all in. They had a fire at White Cliff. Most of their food's gone. Things look bad. Fenner says he's never seen the trail in such condition. We won't be able to get through for four or five days, using all the boys. We've got to get food up there."

Buck swore softly. He looked at Ben Harris.

"Just one thing to do," he said. "Get most of the toys out of the ship—load her with food. Bread and meat, anyway. If we can't land, we can drop the stuff."

The company official nodded. "It looks bad," he stated. "There're about a hundred people up there—if we don't get something through to them—"

Burt Kendrick cut in grimly. "A lot of them have food in their houses—but most of them don't stock up. With the commissary burned down—"

He broke off and shook his head. Buck spoke quietly.

"Load the ship up, Burt. Make it fast—it's getting dark. If we can't land we'll toss the stuff overboard. Lou can do that. She'll be a real Christmas crate!"

Burt Kendrick was giving orders to the men gathered about. Buck smiled grimly at Lou Parrish.

"You can stuff some of the toys in the rear cockpit, Lou—and some of the candy. We'll load the food in the fuselage compartment. It won't be much of a Christmas for the bunch up there if we don't land those eats."

Lou nodded. "We'll land the food, all right," he muttered. "And we can worry about landing ourselves—after."

THE plane was at the south end of the narrow field. Buck Kent waved a hand toward the group of miners. He saw Burt and Ben Harris wave back—and then his left hand was shoving the throttle forward—opening the engine wide.

The radial engine had power—and the snow on the field's surface was hard packed. He had picked his take-off spot carefully. The skis hissed over the snow as the ship gained speed.

A gust of wind rocked her. He kicked down on the right pedal, held her on the course. She was more than halfway down the field when he lifted the tail assembly. Almost instantly there was a bad skid.

For a second he thought she was going to get out of control, do a ground loop. But he fought her back on the course. Then he was pulling hack on the stick—she was lifting.

Snowdrifts shot under her as she nosed upward. The engine was roaring wide open, and the crate needed power. She was heavy, and the air was bad. He banked a hundred feet off the white ground, gaining altitude in a mild banked spiral. He was flying the plane with both hands on the stick, his body tense.

She rocked from side to side. Several times she dropped sickeningly. But she gained altitude. Buck had memorized the crude map Burt Kendrick had drawn. At three thousand feet he checked the banks, winging her in a mild climb toward the northeast. There was a peak to be skirted, but he was forced to wing within a half mile of the snow-covered crest in order to take advantage of a pass.

The snow bit against his few inches of unprotected face. He was forced to wipe his goggle glass clear again and again. But the bigger danger was in the snow piling up around the control wires—weighting down the controls. Visivility was had, but the snow was fine, and he could see the country below.

The wind played with the ship over the mountains. Ten air miles would mean five minutes ordinarily. But with the load the crate was carrying, combined with the wind she was bucking, crabbing into, the flight would take longer. And there was the chance that he would lose his bearings.

At eight thousand feet the visibility was very bad. He was flying by compass now, following the instructions Burt Kendrick had given. The air was rough and getting rougher. The snow beat a hissing tattoo against the taut wing and fuselage fabric. It crackled against his goggle glass, stung his face.

Twisting his head, he saw that Lou Parrish was up in the rear cockpit. The mechanic had his head turned sideways—he was staring down over the left side of the fuselage. Buck turned his head to the front again.

He leveled the plane off at nine thousand and kept a sharp search for mountain peaks on the port side.

That was where Burt Kendrick had said they would show, if he got off his course. At their altitude there was no chance of seeing the earth below—the whirling snow prevented that.

Seven minutes had passed since they had taken off. It was cold—very cold. The fingers of his gauntleted hands were growing slightly numb—the fire wall between his body and the streamlined hood prevented any heat from getting back. And a radial, air-cooled engine doesn't furnish much heat, anyway. There was no chance of the prop hurling back warm air at this altitude.

He stared toward the port side, holding the ship on even keel. There was no sign of a white peak looming through the whirling snow. The controls were beginning to act a little sluggish; he swore softly.

"Got to hit that place—in a hurry!" he muttered. "Can't fly wild in this weather!"

TWELVE minutes had passed since they had taken off. He moved the stick forward—the plane nosed downward. He banked her more to the northeastward. Her air speed was one hundred and twenty as she came down. He kept the dive fairly mild, and his fingers gripped the stick tightly. His boots were pressed against the rudder pedals, ready for an instant change of pressure.

He wiped the goggle glass clear. Lou Parrish was leaning forward across the curved fuselage fabric. His voice reached Buck faintly above the beat of the engine and the hissing drum of the wind-whirled snow.

"Looks like—town—off to the left!"

Buck turned his head in that direction. His eyes picked up the slope of a mountain. There was some solidity of white, broken by the green of trees. And there was other color, too. Dark color that might be the sides of shacks—mining shacks.

He banked the ship to the westward. He remembered that Kendrick had said there were mountain slopes on two sides. He could only see one slope.

His eyes were straining back of his goggle glass. The ship was down to four thousand feet. He leveled her off. White Cliff was located at an altitude of three thousand, seven hundred, Burt had said. He must be careful.

Lou's hoarse cry reached him even as he saw the looming mountain side. It was rushing in from the right—and there was the other slope on the left, dangerously close, too."

He banked the ship vertically, then whipped her

out of it. Shacks were below them now—less than a hundred feet. There were some on the slopes on either side. They were winging directly over the town, and the wind was screaming down the pass, fighting the ship.

She was bucking directly into it now. Wide open, she fought the wind. Her air speed was only eighty-five an hour. The wind was coming through the pass with gale force, rocking the plane.

Her action was severe, but Buck fought off each battering with swift stick and rudder action. The slopes on each side seemed to be closing in. He stared over the side, saw men waving from a snow-drifted street. And then the slope on the right was swinging away. It vanished from sight.

Buck banked the plane in that direction. There were more shacks below—people were spilling from them now. They were waving arms. He saw children below.

He banked the plane at thirty degrees—the gale wind swung her around at high speed. She came out of the bank slowly, sluggishly. Buck swore beneath the roar of the engine. He twisted his head.

"Drop some food!" he shouted. "I'll bank over this end of the pass. Get rid of all—you can!"

He saw Lou nod his head. Then he was looking for a horizon, watching the level gauge, fighting the plane. From time to time he glanced over the side. He could see bread being tossed over, streaking downward. Once he got a glimpse of a ham twisting through the air.

AGAIN and again he banked the ship over the northeast end of the tiny town in the pass. Each time he found it more difficult to straighten her out of the bank as she came into the gale wind. At intervals he caught glimpses of the miners below, waving, picking up objects.

And then Lou was shouting with all his strength.

"Can't get at—rest of the stuff—from the cockpit opening! Too far back!"

Buck nodded. The opening they had cut back from the rear cockpit was not large enough to permit Lou to crawl through. Even if he had been able, the action of the plane was too severe to let him.

Buck pulled the ship back into the wind. She had a bank of thirty degrees and she leveled off slowly. He roared her northward, nosed her down.

Ten seconds—his eyes picked up the lake. There was pine fringing it. It was circular in shape. The snow was fairly smooth. A strong wind was whipping a foam of white close to the surface.

Lou Parrish got his head close to Buck's. He shouted hoarsely:

"Can we—make it?"

Buck twisted his head and smiled. It was a grim smile. He figured the wind was blowing at a velocity close to forty miles an hour—across the lake. But the surface seemed smooth enough for the skis. And the wind would mean a slow landing. There was a chance.

He shouted at Lou. "Are you game—to try?"

Lou nodded his head, shouting back something that sounded like cuss words. But he was grinning.

Buck roared the plane over the snow and headed into the wind. If they could make a good enough landing they could keep power on, hold the tail assembly down and look over the control wires. And there was the chance of Lou Parrish getting rid of his flying overalls and playing Santa to the kids, from the ship. And there was the remainder of the food—that was important.

At the north end of Deep Lake, Buck banked at fifty degrees. There was a slope beyond, and the wind was not blowing so hard. He would have liked to set the ship down at the north end. but the snow was drifted, unevenly surfaced. The ship roared back toward the south end.

They were winging seventy-five feet above the snow now. The plane fabric was clear of the white stuff, but Buck was not so sure about the tail assembly fins. The crate was handling sluggishly.

As the ship approached the south end of the lake, Buck stared over the side and saw men struggling through the snow toward the lake's surface. He heard Lou Parrish shout.

"They're waving us off, Buck!"

The pilot banked the ship again. There was a sudden gust of wind—her nose dropped sharply. She had full power; he could only pull back on the stick and mutter a swift prayer.

She half slipped for fifty feet before he had her straightened out, skimming just above the snow toward the north end. He swore softly, wiping the goggle glass clear with his left, gauntleted hand.

Most of the food had been dropped. The air was bad, but there was a good chance that they could wing back to Somer City before the controls went bad. The landing on the lake's surface would be a tough one—there was danger of a bad crash, a nose-over. He had had very little experience in landing a plane equipped with skis.

He banked again mildly at the north end of the

lake. Higher up the slope beyond, through the whirling snow, he could see tall pines swaying in the wind. The plane came around—he leveled her off. She roared low over the snow.

Lou Parrish shouted hoarsely.

"There're the kids—out to see us land!"

Buck nodded his head. There was a group of people at the south end of the lake—a large group. He could see the children—there were more than a dozen of them. He smiled grimly. Twisting his head, he shouted at Lou.

"Afraid of the tail assembly! Got to get down—clean it off!"

He saw Lou nod, but it seemed to him that the mechanic understood. Lou knew that Buck wanted to land, wanted to get the rest of the food out on the snow and wanted to give him the chance to play Santa to the kids.

GALE wind gripped the gray-winged plane as Buck Kent pulled the stick to the right, pressing down on the right rudder pedal. He held her nose up—got her around in a sharp bank. Then he nosed her down—straight into the wind.

It seemed to come in gusts, close to the surface of the snow. The plane rose for twenty feet in a swift current bump. He tried to nose her down and fight off the drop that followed. She came down like an elevator. Her skis and tailskid skimmed the snow before the descent was checked.

She slanted her left wing high. Buck jambed the stick to the left and felt the plane shudder as the right ski ripped through the snow. For a split second he thought she was going to whirl around, ground loop across the lake's surface. He heard Lou Parrish cry out hoarsely.

And then she was back on even keel. He cut the throttle speed in half. She was winging ten feet above the surface of snow, and the wind sweeping down over the north slope had pulled her air speed down to twenty miles an hour!

Buck Kent cut the throttle speed again. She was almost motionless now. He shoved the stick forward. The plane stalled downward in shaky flight. A down current battered the right wing—there was not enough air speed for him to correct for it. It seemed as though there wasn't a chance——

She leveled off suddenly as another current of air toyed with her. And then, as he pulled back on the stick and her nose came up sluggishly, she struck!

The skis ran smoothly over the snow. The spot where she had struck was level enough, and the wind had packed down the snow pretty well. The crate rocked as she rolled forward, losing speed. Buck pulled the stick back against the material of his flying overalls, speaking softly.

“Down! We made it!”

He twisted in the cockpit, keeping the engine throttled at a speed that held her into the wind, motionless. Men were running up. He shouted at the nearest of them.

“Grab the wing tips—hang onto that tail assembly!”

The men were separating, doing as he ordered. He shoved his goggles back from his head, stood up and looked toward the rear cockpit. There was no sign of Lou Parrish.

And then Parrish’s head came up. He wore a red hood—his browned face was almost covered by white whiskers. The wind almost ripped them from his skin. He grinned at Buck, turning in the rear cockpit.

The kids were crowding around the plane, their eyes wide. The miners were staring at Lou. He held up a hand, shouting above the tattoo of snow on the fabric and the throttled down beat of the engine.

“Hello, everybody! Little early this time—got a lot of places to go. Come in close, you kids! Don’t get near that prop—here we are—what’s this?”

It was a big box of candy. Buck Kent stared at Lou, then at the kids crowding in close to the rear cockpit. He looked at the grinning miners. Then his eyes swept the gray-winged plane. He chuckled to himself, crinkling up his tanned face.

“Food and toys—not so bad!” he muttered thickly. “I’ll say she’s a regular—Christmas crate!”