



FLAMING SKIES

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

A groundling's life and an airman's code—Fate held the whip and "Buck" Kent fought for both.

T FLAMES were sweeping eastward through the foothills of the Coast Range—a thirty-mile gale was making them roar.

From the air, as "Buck" Kent winged the radial engined ship toward Chief Forester Pete Lanning's headquarters, he could see almost the whole burning area. It looked like a bad fire. There had been no rain for weeks; everything on the ground was like tinder.

Lou Parrish spoke through the connecting phone set, from the rear cockpit of the two-place plane.

"They'll need hundreds of men to stop her, Buck. Wonder what Pete wants with us?"

Buck shook his head. Pete Tanning had phoned for

them—and Pete was an old pal of Buck's. Buck and Lou had been in the air three hours, and now they were winging high over the flaming area, keeping out of the smoke as much as possible. It looked to Buck as though the chief forester's camp, at Green Flats, was directly in the path of the flames. Perhaps that was why Pete had sent out the call.

Sparks from the flaming foothills were shooting high into the air. There were little fires burning ahead of the main wall of flame. And that red wave was moving rapidly. Once, when Buck cut the throttle and glided, he could hear the terrific crackling of the flames above the whine of the wind through the ship's rigging.

A great cloud of black smoke was rising high in the sky ahead; Buck was forced to bank to the northward. He swore softly. It was his guess that the fire was within a mile of the chief forester's camp. And it looked as though the advancing wall of flame would sweep Green Flats.

He cut the throttle, gliding the radial-engined, open-cockpit plane. To the south he could see, back of Jim's Bluff, the level stretch of the Flats. It was one of the few possible landing spots in the rugged hills, and Pete Fanning had had it rolled several times. The southern portion lay under a cloud of smoke, but to the north the air was fairly clear. Buck nosed the ship down more steeply, muttering to himself.

"The fire'll sweep the camp, sure as the devil! We're making it—just in time!"

AT THREE THOUSAND FEET he could see the wooden buildings of the forestry camp. The Flats were located high in the foothills. Buck knew the country pretty well; he had visited Pete often. A lookout tower rose on High Peak, a mile from the Forestry Station. From it fires could be seen miles away. This one had not been seen soon enough, or else the wind had been too strong. Or the boys had been out fighting other fires. Pete was having a tough summer.

Buck Kent leveled the ship off at five hundred feet, winged southward across the Flats. It was late afternoon—the smoke from the fire was obscuring the light from a sun getting down.

As Buck banked over the few buildings, he recognized Pete Lanning. Lanning was moving toward the stretch used as a landing field—he was moving fast. He waved, then hurried on.

"Something's wrong!" Lou shouted through the phone wires. "Pete's running."

Buck banked around, and tried to get as much into the wind as was possible for the landing. He smiled grimly.

"There's plenty wrong!" he snapped into the mouthpiece fitted over his helmet. "You can see that—and smell it!"

"Something besides the fire!" Lou returned. "We can't put that out—"

Lou Parrish broke off as the ship skidded badly close to the earth. There were tricky air currents over the Flats, and the thirty-mile breeze wasn't helping things any.

Buck kicked the ship out of the skid, gave her the gun, then cut the throttle again. She hit low, brown

grass in a rough landing, but he held her tailskid low. She bounced along, losing speed. Buck taxied her to the right, cut the throttle, then the ignition switch.

He stood up in the cockpit, slipped over the side. Lou was already on the brown grass. Pete Lanning came up, breathing heavily. He was a big, deep-chested man, with gray eyes and a sun-browned face.

"Hell's loose!" he stated grimly. "She's jumped two fire breaks—and we can't stop her this time. The boys are taking our camp stuff northward—everything they can handle that's at all valuable. I sent for Pilot Rice, and he cracked up trying to make it. That was five hours ago. Phoned you, Buck—decide of you to come."

Buck grinned. "What do we do?" he asked. "Dump some water on the red stuff from buckets?"

Lanning didn't even grin. He cocked his head, and swore fiercely. Buck listened; there was the distant ominous sound of the flames. It was like a big wind, only higher pitched. The sky was dark, and there was a choke in the air, even with the smoke high above them.

"Burke's got his men on the down slope. They may check it there," Pete Lanning said. "We can't stop it this side of the range, that's sure. Listen, Buck: I sent for you because there're two damn fools between the camp and the crest of the range—lost."

Buck stiffened. He swore softly. The forest supervisor was speaking again. His voice was bitter.

"There were three of them. Three picture men—a camera man, his assistant—and a director. They came up two days ago, looking for locations for some picture they're to start on. You know how the timber is up there—pretty thick. They went out yesterday morning, and I warned 'em to get back by dark. This fire had started. She was swinging northward then. But I figured the wind might shift.

"This morning Blake got in. He's the assistant camera man. He was all in—they'd separated, and he'd hiked it all night. He happened to hit on the creek, and he followed it into camp. I sent him out, two hours ago. The fire'll be here by dark; she'll be tearing up the slopes after dark. She's moving fast. And those two men are up there somewhere. There's nothing I can do. It's up to you."

Buck groaned. "Even if we do spot them—what can we do?" he muttered. "Ten to one we can't land."

Pete Lanning swore again. "You may be able to get down, Buck," he said. "There's High Valley and Pine Flats. And the sand bank along Dry River. I can't let the fellows wander around without trying to reach them.

Three of the boys have been out for seven hours, since dawn. No trace of 'em, they told me when they came in. And, higher up, the smoke's pretty bad. From the air you might spot 'em."

BUCK KENT nodded. But his face was grim. Lou Parrish was staring up at the black smoke rolling above them. He shook his head slowly, but he said nothing.

"Names are Bert Foster and Harvey Lewis." Lanning was speaking swiftly. "They're traveling light—by this time they've probably let go their packs. They may have started down, then seen the fire coming along, and turned back. They'd have some climbing to do, any way. And it's thick up there. I warned 'em, but they laughed it off. We can't stop the fire—it's got a wide front. I don't think they can get around it. They won't be able to stay ahead of it. One of 'em may be hurt. If you don't get to them, Buck—"

He shrugged his shoulders. Buck Kent smiled faintly. He spoke slowly.

"We've got plenty of fuel. We'll try, Lanning. I know how you feel. But it isn't your fault."

"I'll catch hell just the same—if they burn up there," Pete stated grimly. "I'll catch hell, anyway. This is a hot fire."

Buck looked at Lou. "You coming along?" he asked. "We may mess things up, if we spot 'em and try to get down. But the crate'll lift four of us, if we can get to them."

Lou grunted. "Let's go!" he snapped. "Those poor devils are having a tough time, somewhere, right now."

Lanning spoke again. "The fire'll be here pretty quick—and when she gets up higher where there's more wind she'll move faster. Wing between Dry River and Moose Point, Buck. You know that country. They'll hear you, and signal—if they can. Go back quite a distance. And—luck!"

Buck smiled humorlessly. "You'd better get moving, yourself!" he advised. "I'll phone you at Burkhead Ranch. Is that where you're going?"

The forest supervisor nodded. "That's where we're going to try and go!" he replied. "Watch the sparks, Buck—they get altitude."

Buck Kent turned toward the front cockpit of the ship. He shifted his Russell chute a bit. Then he swung a leg over the side of the front cockpit fuselage. The distant sound of the advancing fire wall reached his ears. He nodded his head slowly.

"This Harvey Lewis—is he a husky fellow? Dark hair—dark eyes?"

Pete Lanning nodded. "Know him?" he asked.

"Not much." Buck smiled grimly. "He kicked me off a picture once—because I wouldn't crack up a crate without sand beneath it."

Lanning's eyes narrowed. "Pick him up now—and he'll star you in his next!" he snapped, and headed back toward the camp.

Buck Kent smiled again. Above the two-place ship the smoke from the fire was curling thickly. Soon there would be sparks along this stretch. Lanning would have to hustle. But the forest supervisor knew his district—every foot of it. And the two men up the slopes—they didn't.

Buck reached for the throttle. He taxied the ship around, rolling her up the stretch so that he could roar her down cross wind for the take-off. He was thinking of Harvey Lewis as he gave her the gun. Lewis and he had almost come to blows, back on the field where they were making the crash scenes. And Lewis had talked a lot.

The radial-engined ship was almost set to take the air. Buck moved the stick forward, fought off a ground skid, then pulled the stick back toward his flying jacket. Low wisps of smoke were dissipated by the whirling prop, as the plane climbed. To the westward the sky was red with fire. Buck swore softly.

"Bet Lewis isn't—talking much—right now!" he muttered beneath the roar of the engine.

FOR almost an hour the gray-winged ship had been roaring through the sky, eastward of the forestry camp. The black clouds of smoke made flight difficult—and the search for the two men had met with no success. Twice Buck Kent had skimmed the tops of giant pines, soon to fall under the red torch of the advancing fire. Once Lou Parrish had shouted hoarsely through the connecting phone wires, but it had been a false alarm.

The flames had already destroyed the wooden shacks of the camp. The wave of fire was more than a mile up the mountain slopes now, and moving faster as the stronger wind carried the red line higher. The sky was filled with sparks to the westward. The wind was beating the smoke lower and making the search steadily more difficult. And it was growing dark. The dropping sun, combined with the mask of the smoke, gave the air a strange color. Only the red glow outlined the few trails below—the gullies and valleys, the jagged boulders breaking through the pines.

Buck Kent banked the ship vertically, a hundred feet above the slope of a mountain that ran down

toward Pine Flats. He was coughing, choking. They could keep out of the main cloud of smoke from the forest fire, but from the beginning the air had tasted of wood smoke. Buck's lips were dry. He was thirsty. His wrists were tired, aching. The air was bumpy, tricky.

His eyes searched the darkening slope of the mountain side. The fire line was advancing very fast. The front was a wide one. He had doubts about Pete Lanning getting across that advancing line of red, but the chief forester would have easier going than the two lost men, for he knew the way. Even so, he would have a tough job.

Small animals were fleeing before the flames. Buck could see them breaking through the brush here and there. Certainly the lost men had heard the roar of the ship's engine, and had seen the plane circling low. Certainly they had tried to signal Lou and himself. Unless they were out of the danger area, safe.

Buck Kent swore softly. He leveled the ship off, and headed toward Pine Flats, it was the third time he had circled over the level stretch beyond the first range. He knew why he returned. On the Flats there was a chance that, if they did sight the two men, a pick-up could be made. In other spots it would be hopeless.

"Fire's coming fast!" Lou spoke hoarsely through the phone set. "Less than a mile west of the Flats. If those birds aren't out of this—"

He broke off, choking. Buck was forced to wing the plane very low, in order to keep her out of the great whirl of black, thick smoke. His eyes searched the level stretch of the Flats. Brown dry grass—it would almost explode when the first sparks dropped on it. And with the fire line less than a mile distant, and the high wind, it wouldn't be long before the first spark would drop.

He shook his head grimly. "Use your eyes, Lou!" he ordered hoarsely. "We can't stay up here much longer. The smoke'll make search impossible."

HE WAS banking the radial-engined ship at three hundred feet now, directly over the Flats. The stretch of level earth was narrow—perhaps five hundred yards long. At the north end it sloped upward. The wind was bad—there were down currents. He smiled grimly. He was almost hoping that they would not sight the two men. A landing—a take-off. It would be tough!

He was staring over the right side of the fuselage when Lou Parrish cried out.

"Buck—I see them! One of 'em, anyway! Down at the south end—"

His voice died as Buck roared the ship out of the

bank, heading her toward the south end of the Flats. He saw one figure staggering out from the jagged boulders at the south end of the level stretch. Even as he stared, the man went to his knees. Then his arms were above his head—something yellow, ragged, was being waved!

Buck banked away from the south end, shouting to Lou Parrish through the phone set.

"Wave to him, Lou! Call him out to the center of the Flats!"

It wasn't Harvey Lewis, Buck knew that. This man was slight, short. Bert Foster—this man would be. But what had happened to the director?

Buck banked the gray-winged plane over the north end of the Flats. He nosed her down; his body was tense in the cockpit. He gave her a quarter engine with the glide, and headed her toward the south end of the narrow strip. There wasn't much room for maneuvers. The mountain slopes rose on both sides of the stretch—and a hundred yards beyond the south end there was a jagged cliff rising for perhaps two hundred feet. The air was very bad.

Twenty-five feet above the surface he pulled the nose up a little. A strong down current dropped the ship sickeningly, and for a split second he thought it was the finish. If she pounded the landing gear—doing better than fifty miles an hour——

Five feet above the ground she got out of the drop. The right wing tilted—he pulled it up again. Then she was skimming the surface of the brown grass.

She struck, taking a bad bounce. Her nose swung to the left. He kicked her out of the skid a second before she struck again. This time she stayed down, rolling forward.

Her roll was too fast, and the radial-engined plane was not equipped with brakes. Buck had a flashing glimpse of a shirtless man staggering out toward the plane. He gave her left rudder, and her right wingtips cleared a low, flat-topped boulder by only a few feet. She was slowing down now. He saw that she would stop before she reached the jagged boulders at the south end. He held the stick back against his flying jacket, smiling grimly as her forward speed ceased. The slowly revolving prop was less than five feet from the nearest of the giant rocks!

LOU PARRISH was over the side. Buck stared toward the figure that had almost reached the ship. The man's face was streaked with red—his breeches were torn into strips. His khaki shirt he held in one hand. He was

muttering something as he came up—something that the low rumble of the engine drowned.

He sank down at Lou's feet. Buck shouted fiercely.

"Find out about Lewis! Make it fast!"

Above the rumbling of the engine Buck's ears could hear the crackling of wood in the distance. The smoke was a dark cloud overhead—to the westward there was a deep, red glow. The air was hot, stifling. But no sparks were falling on the dry Flats yet.

Lou was bending over the slumped figure on the ground. He straightened suddenly, and came up close to the front cockpit fuselage. His face was grim.

"He says Lewis is up there." Lou Parrish pointed up the slope to the westward, to the right of the plane. "He had a fall—his leg's hurt, probably broken. This bird carried him until he was almost all in. Then Lewis made him quit—and try to reach the Flats, to signal us. They've heard us for a half hour. Lewis is trying to crawl down!"

Buck swore fiercely. He stared up the side of the slope. It was steep. Above the rocks it was thick with growth. The glow in the sky was steadily increasing—the crackle of the line of flames was increasing in tone with each passing second. If the brown grass of the Flats caught, with the

plane on the surface——

But a man was up the slope—trying to crawl down—Harvey Lewis. The man who had kicked Buck off a flying field, and had shot after him a lot of bitter words. A man who had called him a quitter, because he wouldn't crash a ship without sand!

Buck made his decision. He smiled grimly at Lou.

"Grab the left wing—get Foster to help, if he's able. I'm getting this ship set for a take-off. Then we're going to get Lewis!"

Lou nodded. Buck Kent saw Foster stagger to his feet. But he was shaky. He would be little help.

Lou Parrish was strong. But Buck was forced to climb down from the radial-engined ship, help him lift the tail assembly, and pull the plane back. Then, inside the cockpit, he gave the ship left rudder. Lou and Foster held the left wing—she came around.

Buck taxied as fast as the two men could run, toward the north end of the stretch. Lou was able to hang on to the left wing again. The ship came around. Bert Foster was down on the ground, all in. Buck slipped over the side and got out of his 'chute pack. Lou had slipped clear of his as they came down for the landing.

"You stick with the ship, Lou!" Buck snapped. "Get

Foster in the rear cockpit. You stick outside. Keep the prop turning. If the Flats go up in flame—get off! I'm going up after Lewis!"

Lou gripped him by the arm. "She's roaring along—this fire!" he stated. "Let me go up——"

"Don't argue!" Buck smiled a little. "I'll be back—before she catches. But if I'm not—you take her off. You can do it. And I owe Lewis something!"

He saw Lou's eyes narrow. Then Buck was kneeling beside the collapsed Foster. He swung the man around so that he was facing the mountain slope.

"I'm going after Lewis!" he snapped. "How far—up there?"

The red-rimmed eyes of Bert Foster went away from the blue ones of Buck Kent. He spoke thickly.

"See that slanting pine—about five hundred feet up? I left him—there. He's trying to—crawl down. Couldn't carry him—any more. We tried to get out—the other way—fire would have cut us off——"

"Any trail up?" Buck cut in grimly. "Go'tto work fast."

"I didn't find any." Foster's voice was weak. "Lewis is—all in. It's been hours——"

"You get aboard the ship!" Buck cut in again. "I'll get Lewis down."

He straightened. Lou Parrish gripped him by the arm again.

"Let me go up with you, Buck! He'll be—dead weight."

Buck spoke grimly. "You get that crate off—if the Flats catch!" he snapped. "Get Foster aboard. Watch the wind—if you have to take off."

Then he was running toward the jagged rocks to the west of the Flats; his eyes were on the slanted, broken pine five hundred yards up. It would be a tough climb—no trail. It would be tough coming down. And if the Flats caught fire from falling sparks, and the ship winged off——

He had almost reached the boulders now. His lips were twisted into a grim smile. A man was up above, hurt, helpless. And Buck had been in tight jams before. This was just another. There was a chance. But the roar of the flames was loud now. The whole air was red in color. It would be a close go.

Two men on the Flats—two of them up the slope. Even if he did get down with Lewis, before the Flats were spurting flame, the ship would take off sluggishly under the weight of four humans. And the air would be filled with sparks. Buck Kent started the climb. His lips moved a little.

"Pete Lanning—always did—hand out tough—jobs!" he muttered hoarsely.

BUCK KENT was almost all in when he reached the side of Harvey Lewis. The director's rather pale face was twisted, cut. His lips were bleeding; most of his expensive clothes were in rags. He was lying on his stomach, but he was able to twist his head as Buck reached him.

"Kent!" he muttered weakly. "What in hell—did you—come up for? We're both done—now!"

Buck was breathing in great breaths of the heated air. He could hear the trees crashing down now—there were sparks to the westward. The sky was alight with them, up the slope. The crest of the mountain was a torch. Red color hung over everything.

"Which leg?" he asked hoarsely.

Lewis groaned. His dark eyes held a tortured expression.

"Left!" he muttered. "Busted—above the ankle. I crawled this far. Sent Bert down."

Buck was lifting him now. Their heads were close together. He spoke hoarsely.

"We're going down—together, Lewis! Put your weight on the right foot. Stay with me. If we don't get down—before the Flats burn—the ship'll be gone! Lou won't wait—the plane'll catch from the dry grass. Let's—go!"

They started. Both of Lewis' arms were around Buck's shoulders. The grade was steep. And the director was heavy. There were jagged boulders to get around. Twice Buck was forced to lower the director and let him drop over rocks, taking the weight of the fall on his right leg. The second time he thought Lewis was going to faint.

"Stick it out!" Buck gritted. "Don't quit—even if there isn't sand here for you to hit on!"

He saw by the expression in Lewis' eyes that the man understood, remembered. Lewis tried to speak, failed. But he eased his weight as Buck gripped him again. They stumbled onward, downward. It was slow going.

The air was hot now. Sparks were striking on the rocks above them. They were big sparks—bits of burning pine, pieces of glowing cone. They sizzled as they struck. Once, turning his head, Buck saw that a half dozen little flies were burning, halfway up the slope.

There were only a hundred yards to go now. Buck caught a glimpse of the plane. But he didn't see Lou. Sparks were striking near the edge of the Flats now.

They were falling thickly, back of the two men. And Buck was tiring. Lewis was a huskily built man, and he could only help himself a little.

THEY were within fifty yards of the level stretch, fighting their way around boulders and over them, when Harvey Lewis collapsed. He went to his knees, tried to save himself. His head struck the curve of a boulder. He dropped, pulling Buck down with him.

Sparks fell about them. Buck brushed one from his right jacket sleeve—another stung as it struck his left hand. And then he had Lewis in his arms—and was going on down.

At the edge of the Flats he was forced to set the director down. He stared toward the ship. The brown grass was burning in several places. The wind was making the flames run. Back of him was a raging inferno.

Bending down, he tried to lift Lewis. He got him off the ground, and staggered forward. But he couldn't go on. He went to his knees—and then a figure was at his side. Lou—Lou Parrish!

"Get back—to the ship!"

Buck's words were a hoarse whisper. Lou swore grimly. He swung Lewis up from the ground, shouting above the crackling of the flames up the slope.

"Come on—we'll make it!"

Buck followed. Lou was fresh, strong. He moved swiftly with the dead weight of Harvey Lewis in his arms. The stretch of brown grass was ablaze in a dozen spots. Black clouds of smoke were whirling down. But they were near the ship now. Buck could see Foster standing in the rear cockpit. He leaned forward. Lou was swinging the form of Lewis up to him. He was shouting above the fire's din.

"Squeeze him in—with you! Sit tight! I'll ride up front!"

Buck was breathing heavily—brushing sparks from his clothes. They were not falling near the ship yet. But if they hit the highly doped surface—

Buck was swinging into the front cockpit. Lou Parrish came up behind him. He sat on the curve of the fuselage, back of Buck's head. His legs were inside the cockpit. His body was out in the prop wash. He shouted above the rumble of the engine, the roar of the fire.

"Take her off! We'll make it!"

BUCK jerked his goggles over his eyes. He shoved the throttle forward with his left-hand fingers. The plane started to roll, slowly. The air was burning up. Eddies

of hot wind struck at the ship as she gained speed. Buck held her steady for the take-off.

Halfway down the stretch he was forced to give her left rudder to clear a burning patch of grass. The flames were licking up several feet from the earth's surface. He straightened her out again.

Fifty feet more—and he was moving the stick forward, getting her tail assembly up. She was doing better than forty now. She had power—and she needed it. There was weight in the open-cockpit ship now.

Buck Kent was chokjng. He pulled the stick back slowly. Clouds of black smoke were whirling over the flaming stretch as the ship lifted her wings from the surface. And there was a slope to be cleared—a slope beyond Pine Flats!

He leveled the ship off momentarily, as she got off. The throttle was wide open. The radial-engine roar was drowning out the crackling of flames. They were plunging into the black smoke now. As the nose of the plane went in, Buck drew a deep breath.

Then he pulled back on the stick—zoomed the ship. Her nose came up. The roar of the radial became a high-pitched dull drone. Up she winged, through the choking swirls of dark smoke.

Buck Kent, stiff in the cockpit, tried to hold his breath. He felt the first stall quiver of the plane, shoved the stick forward. Were they over the slope beyond the Flats—or would they crash? Seconds would tell.

The plane was picking up speed again. Buck sucked in a choking breath of dark air. He climbed the ship at a mild angle. There was a darkness before his eyes blacker than the smoke. He couldn't get his breath. He twisted his head, and tried to tell Lou Parrish to slip down, take the controls.

And then, suddenly, the gray-winged ship plunged

out of the black smoke. She was winging through comparatively clear air!

Buck sucked in great breaths of it. The beat of the motor was steady. The ship was winging several hundred feet above slopes that were not yet afire. To the westward a bright line of flame was running—but it had not advanced as far here as it had back near the Flats. They were through!

Buck Kent relaxed in the cockpit. Seconds later, as he winged the plane southward, he twisted his head, grinning up at Lou Parrish.

Lou grinned back. But he didn't try to shout against the beat of the gray-winged plane's engine. There was nothing to say, anyway. The job that Pete Lanning had given them—it had been done.

HARVEY LEWIS, an arm around the shoulders of Lou and Bert Foster, met Buck's gaze squarely. They were at the Metropolitan airport. The floodlights had just been extinguished.

"I had you wrong, Kent," the director said, and smiled wearily. "It's a little late—to say that. But that was a big thing you did, back there."

Buck smiled faintly. "We all make mistakes, Lewis," he replied quietly. "And the next time you want a ship crack-up for the pictures—"

"You get the job, and the sand to crack up in, Kent!" Lewis finished. "Though you don't need sand. You've got—plenty of it!"

Buck wiped a smear of oil from his face. He grinned at Lou.

"I've got to call Lanning," he said cheerfully. "He'll want to know what happened. And I'm damn glad to be able to tell him!"