



ABOVE THE LINES

by **RAOUL WHITFIELD**

Bullets meant little when his pal's life was at stake! Another sure-fire story of Buck Kent, the free-lance airman!

BUCK KENT FLEW the Ryan-engined ship with the stick gripped between his knees. With his head extended over the left side of the front cockpit he stared down at the mesquite two thousand feet below.

The plane was winging westward along the Mexican border, and Buck was shading his blue eyes with both hands. He was looking for a certain field established some months ago by the Border Patrol, Regular Army.

At the field he had a date—with Lou Parrish. He hadn't flown along the border for some time, and the emergency field was difficult to pick up.

Buck gripped the stick with his right hand and moved it forward slightly. The two-place ship dove.

With his left hand he cut down the throttle speed. Then he banked northward.

"That's the sock!" he muttered beneath the shrill of wind through the ship's struts and wires. "If Lou's there we can make Mexicali by dark." The field was small and sandy. But mesquite clumps had been cut away. The sock showed a slight wind from the northeast. Buck maneuvered so as to glide in against the wind.

He stared down and ahead, frowning suddenly. There was nobody on or near the field. Lou had not arrived.

Buck banked the ship around, and looked the country over. There were no roads in sight; off to the south was an adobe shack.

He couldn't see any border markers, but he guessed, from the position of the field, that the shack was not on the American side of the line. It was the only sign of habitation in sight.

He glided the ship again and gave her the gun as she roared over the field. And then suddenly he stiffened in the cockpit. His eyes had detected something, half mile from the field, close to a thick cluster of mesquite.

It looked like a flivver, covered with border dust. He had almost missed it—the blue-gray color of the mesquite merged with the dust on the car.

He circled the two-place ship over the mesquite cluster, his face suddenly grim. It was a flivver. It was ancient, covered with dust. The top was up; he could not see inside. But he guessed that it was the flivver in which Lou Parrish had driven down to meet him. And, that being the case, where was Lou?

Certainly he must have heard the roar of the plane's engine. And the flivver had not reached the field. It was headed southward; had been coming from the north. That was the direction from which Lou was to have come.

Buck Kent stared over the side. Something had happened—something was wrong.

The ground was level enough near the flivver. He picked out a stretch where the mesquite clusters were low and fairly scattered. He dove, cut the throttle and pulled the nose of the plane up for a pretty stall. Then, as the ship lost flying speed and was about to drop like an elevator, his left hand shoved the throttle forward for one roaring burst.

As he jerked it back the wheels and tail-skid struck. The ship rolled less than thirty feet. Buck climbed down from the front cockpit, leaving the prop turning, throttled very low.

THE flivver was about fifty yards distant. He moved toward it. If Lou were sleeping it would be a good joke. He called out sharply, as he approached :

"Hey, Lou! Snap out of——"

His voice trailed off. He sensed, rather than saw, some movement to his right. His hand went down toward the holster that held his Colt .45. It went down—but not all of the way. It never touched the weather-darkened leather of the holster.

"Lift 'em, pilot!" The voice was knife-edged. "Lift 'em up by your helmet—an' keep 'em there!"

Buck obeyed instructions. He watched the man rise to his feet from the position back of a slight rise topped by cacti and mesquite.

The man was short and round shouldered. There was a stubble of beard on his browned face. He wore a sombrero, and the stub of a homemade cigarette dangled from between dust-caked lips. In his right hand, held low, was a long-barreled gun. It looked like a .38 special.

Buck raised his hands toward his light-weight helmet. He smiled slightly.

"Always do as the man with the gun says," he stated cheerfully. "What's the big idea?"

The other man did not smile. He had dark eyes that squinted. He shifted the long-barreled weapon slightly.

"Lookin' for somebody?" he asked in a grim tone.

Buck nodded. "Old pal of mine," he returned. "Looks like his flivver—that's why I set my crate down. We're winging into Mexicali."

The other man smiled. It was a nasty smile. His eyes flickered toward the flivver—then came back to Buck's face again.

"Right!" he stated. "We're winging into Mexicali."

Buck's face was expressionless. His eyes traveled down to the gun the other one held. The grip was steady, and the handling was expert. The short man stepped toward him. He got the Colt from Buck's holster, and stepped back.

"It's this way, Kent," he said and smiled as Buck's eyes widened at the use of his name, "your pal's taking a little trip. He went across the line with a guy named Juan. Ever meet Juan?"

Buck Kent lowered his arms slowly. He grinned. The short man was playing some sort of a game—and he was enjoying it.

"Sounds like a Mexican name," Buck said sarcastically. "How come my pal went across with a Mex?"

The short man chuckled. It was a mirthless chuckle.

"He was persuaded," he stated simply. "Do you aim to have him back on this side?"

"I'm broken" Buck said in a level tone. "And Lou's almost always the same way. If it's a kidnap—you picked the wrong guys."

The other man's eyes narrowed. "Think so?" he asked slowly. "You've got five grand in the Calexico National, Kent. That ship of yours is nice and shiny—worth some coin. You figured on winging to Calexico pretty quick, then you were going across to Mexicali. An' I know why."

Buck Kent tried to keep his face expressionless. He said slowly:

"Sure—that's all right. You drove down here with Lou. He talked too much. That's a bad habit of his."

The other man nodded. He slipped Buck's Colt into his hip pocket.

"I bought his flivver," he stated. "He got to tellin' me all about you. Ever hear of 'Red' Lund? No—well, he's my brother. He was in on the White City bank job. They finished him off. You got a nice reward, and you put it in the Calexico strong box. I'm aiming to relieve you of it."

Buck Kent felt his body stiffen. He kept a faint smile on his lips. It was clear enough now. Lou Parrish had picked the wrong man to talk with—and he was in a Mexican's hands, across the line. A brother of Red Lund was after coin—and he looked as though he meant business.

The pilot spoke slowly. "Gus Miller tried to frame me on that bank stick-up, Lund," he said. "I don't know anything about your brother. I got Miller—and the coin——"

"And five grand reward money!" Lund cut in. "I want it, that's all." Buck Kent nodded. "If I don't see it that way," he stated, "it won't do you any good to fill me with lead. You can't get it—not that way."

The shorter one smiled with his eyes. It was a disagreeable smile.

"I'll have the ship," he stated harshly. "I'll have Parrish. I got a note you wrote him, and I know a guy who can copy signatures. Maybe you think I can't frame Parrish so that if there's a slip-up he rides for the bars, eh?"

Buck Kent stopped smiling. The man who held the gun on him was clever. He'd done some planning. He'd had time. A week had elapsed since Buck had put the reward money he had received from the White City Bank, in the Calexico National. He'd written Lou twice—the chances were that Lund had both letters.

"You haven't got my signature, Lund!" Buck said suddenly. "I signed those notes with my first——"

"You sent Parrish a check," the smaller one cut in. "I've got it. Got it in a poker game—and I haven't cashed it. That's when I recognized who you were."

BUCK nodded slowly. It was a tight fix and there wasn't a loophole in sight. It was like Lou Parrish. The best pal in the world, but always getting Buck in jams. And yet, Lou couldn't be completely blamed. Lund was shrewd—a clever crook.

"What's my play?" the pilot asked slowly. "You're holding the cards."

Lund chuckled in his hoarse way. "Right against my chest!" he muttered. "You fly me into Calexico. You'll

be my guest for the night. To-morrow we'll go to the bank. You draw out forty-five hundred, say. We don't want 'em to get suspicious. After that I'll tell you some more."

Buck shrugged. "How do I know Lou'll get back safely, after I've done as you want?" he asked.

The man with the gun shook his head slowly. His eyes were on Buck's.

"You don't know," he stated grimly. "But I'm tellin' you he'll get back." The pilot looked toward the ship. His eyes went to Lund's dark ones, then to the gun again. He smiled with lips tightly pressed.

"Let's get started—for Calexico," he said slowly.

He saw, momentarily, a puzzled expression in the other man's eyes. And he knew that Lund was worried. Not terribly worried—but enough to bother him. It was going too smoothly—that was the crook's thought.

Buck turned toward the ship. Lund's voice came very sharp:

"Easy! Get this, Kent—no tricks! I know what you did to Miller. I need coin. I'm making a get-away. If you don't play straight——"

Buck frowned. "I'm not risking lead in my hide—for five grand!" he interrupted. "But if that Mex acts rough with Parrish——"

The other man smiled. His eyes were narrowed to little slits.

"If it comes to that," he said slowly, "you'll be out of things. But nothin' funny, Kent. I'll use a 'chute—an' ride back——"

He broke off, stiffening. Buck's body was suddenly tense.

From the distance sounded a shot. As they both stood motionless, listening, another shot sounded. Both came from the south, from the direction of the adobe hut!

Buck Kent groaned. Lund would have seen that Lou was unarmed before the Mexican took him across the line. He was sure of that. And it meant that the Mexican had fired the shots—that Lou had tried to escape.

He stared at Lund. That individual was reacting strangely to the sound of the shots. His body was tense; he was half turned toward the south. And his gun was held low.

Buck Kent leaped. Even as his body went forward, and his right hand struck savagely at the right arm of Lund, the other man twisted to one side. But Buck did not fail completely. He battered the shorter one off balance and sent him spinning to the sand.

THE gun in Lund's grip cracked sharply. Sand spurted near him as Buck lunged from the ground toward the crook. He struck with his left fist—felt the impact of knuckles against the steel of the weapon.

He heard Lund swear hoarsely as his right fist struck over the crook's right eye. Lund was struggling to get to his knees, to get a shot at Buck.

Buck struck again, with his left fist. It caught Lund as he swayed to his knees, trying to raise his right arm. He groaned heavily and collapsed inertly on the sandy soil.

Buck reached for the gun, twisting it from Lund's grip. He got to his feet, then remembered the Colt.

Leaning over, he got it from Lund's pocket. Then he straightened and faced the adobe shack to the south.

Lund groaned again; Buck moved quickly toward the two-seater. From the rear cockpit he got a pair of steel handcuffs. As he reached Lund's side the man rolled over on his back. There was a red spot under his left ear where Buck's fist had crashed.

He was shaky as the pilot jerked his arms behind him and snapped the cuffs about his wrists.

"Listen, Lund!" Buck's voice was sharp. "Give it to me straight. Is Lou Parrish in that adobe shack?"

The crook nodded his head. His lips moved.

"He was—in there!" he muttered thickly. "Juan had orders—not to shoot."

Buck Kent hesitated. He had two small guns. If this Juan had a rifle then—

Lund was swearing shakily. Buck Kent stared down at him. He turned his eyes again toward the shack, glistening gray in the light of the low-dropping sun.

The shots had come from that direction, but no one was in sight.

And then he heard it—the drone of a plane in the sky. It sounded faint; but it was increasing rapidly.

The ship was coming toward the emergency field. He smiled grimly. It might be a Border Patrol pilot, on an inspection flight. That would mean help.

There was a slight movement on the part of Lund. Buck stared down at him again. His body stiffened.

The crook was looking toward the west, into the setting sun. A tiny trickle of red was over his right eye—but there was a faint smile playing about his thin lips. And that smile told Buck Kent that the ship in the sky was not an army plane.

He shielded his eyes with his left hand. And he saw her. She was flying low—less than three hundred feet above the sand and mesquite—and headed straight for the emergency field. She was a two-seater, and there was marking of some sort on her fuselage.

Buck Kent dropped flat on the sandy soil. He turned his head toward Lund; his voice was sharp as he snapped words at him.

"Keep down, Lund! And don't move! If you do—"

He moved his Colt slightly. Lund showed that he understood.

Buck stared up at the plane. She was diving now—diving down toward the spot where Buck had set the two-seater. And she bore the markings of an army ship!

AS SHE came down, Buck saw that there was no passenger in the rear cockpit. The plane was a P.T. type, standard pursuit equipment for the army.

Why, then, had Lund smiled? There was nothing for Buck to fear—with an officer piloting a ship down toward his plane.

The ship banked fifty feet above the mesquite. A helmeted head was extended over a side of the front cockpit fuselage. The pilot was circling the ship above Buck's plane. Evidently he was puzzled about the ship being there. That was natural. A Border Patrol pilot did not wing over many planes sitting in the mesquite with no pilot near by.

Buck got to his knees. He waved his arms. The pilot of the army ship was banking toward him—he saw the man stare down.

And then Lund was on his feet, his head tilted back. Behind him he was lifting as high as possible his handcuffed wrists!

The banking ship ceased to bank. It dove down toward the two men. Buck Kent raised his Colt.

"Get down, Lund!" he shouted the words hoarsely. "I'll shoot!"

Lund dropped to his knees. The plane in the air banked around again. She was less than twenty-five feet above the mesquite and sand now.

Lund was lying flat, his face turned toward Buck. And Buck was trying to get things clear. Lund had deliberately showed the army pilot—

As the plane dove in, her nose slanted downward, Buck Kent stopped thinking. He half raised his arms, waving—and then it sounded. The staccato beat of machine-gun fire!

Red trailed down from the prop-synchronized gun of the diving ship!

Buck Kent jerked his body to the right and fell forward. Sand spurted over a distance of fifty feet as the stream of bullets dug in—very close to him. Bits of mesquite sailed above the sand. The pilot of the diving ship had tried for a kill!

Buck was up in a flash and running toward the two-seater. He paid no attention to Lund—the man was cuffed; he would not be able to get far.

One thing was certain—the pilot of the army-marked ship was not an officer. He was a pal of Lund's. He had recognized Lund, and had tried to stream machine-gun lead down upon the man who had put cuffs on the crook.

The prop of the two-seater was idling. As Buck reached the fuselage, he heard the wire shrill of the other ship. She had banked around and was diving on him again!

He groaned and flung himself into the front cockpit. The rivetlike clatter of machine-gun fire sounded again. Buck shoved the throttle forward. The Ryan-engine ship started to roll. He caught a glimpse of dust rising—just ahead of the ship. And then abruptly the firing ceased. The other plane zoomed.

BUCK'S ship was rolling with almost sufficient speed for the take-off now. He moved the stick forward to get the tail assembly up, then pulled it back toward him.

The two-seater lifted from the earth. And almost immediately Buck Kent banked her. The left wing came down until it almost scraped a clump of mesquite. There was the shadow of the other ship, faint above his plane as he banked. He held his breath. If the other pilot squeezed lead now—

But there was no sound of machine-gun fire this time. Buck leveled the ship off and twisted his head. He saw the other ship winging to the south, and got a glimpse of the pilot's head. He was leaning forward in the front cockpit.

"Jam!" Buck muttered. "His gun jammed!"

He banked the two-seater, then zoomed as he leveled her off. The other plane was perhaps a half mile to the southward, almost over the adobe shack from which the sound of the two shots had come. She was banking around.

Buck smiled grimly. If the pilot got the gun fixed, came back at him, his chances were small. But on the ground he would have little chance. And the plane would have been at the mercy of the pilot of the other ship, even though Buck might have used Lund as protection for himself.

He glanced down over the side. Lund was on his feet. He was running wildly toward the adobe house, over which the other ship was banking. Buck muttered from between clenched teeth.

"Might have known that! But I couldn't—shoot him with his hands cuffed."

He zoomed the two-seater. The roar of her engine was steady.

With the sun sinking rapidly, he could see the other ship clearly as she roared in at his plane. Red streaked out from the barrel of her cowl-mounted gun, as Buck went over on a wing. The other pilot had fixed the jam!

The stream of lead trailed to the left of the two-seater. Buck pulled her on level keel, then roared her around to the northward.

The other ship was banking again, winging in for another gun burst. The adobe house was to the south, perhaps a quarter of a mile. They were both flying above the line between Mexico and the United States.

Buck pulled back on the stick and started to climb. He felt certain that the newly-engined and designed ship could outclimb the other plane. It was his only chance, now that the pilot of the army-type ship had fixed the jammed gun.

Both ships roared upward in the sky. The other plane was not within machine-gun range—and, though she was speedy, she failed to gain fast enough to get within range.

Head over the side of the fuselage, Buck Kent stared down toward the adobe shack. His lips moved as his eyes picked up a figure lying flat in the sand, near the side of the place. At his present altitude he could not be sure. Was it Lou Parrish's figure or that of his Mexican guard?

He glanced back toward the other ship. She was still climbing up after his plane. It might be that her engine was better adapted to a high ceiling. The Ryan had not been tested for flight at better than ten thousand. If the other ship could outclimb her—

Buck's eyes narrowed back of the goggle glass. Lund was running toward the adobe shack, down below. There had been two shots, and now a figure lying near the baked clay of the place. And the short crook had smiled when he had first seen the plane that was following Buck's two-seater up into the sky now.

He increased the angle of climb slightly, moving the throttle forward another notch. He hated to leave Lou Parrish, in spite of the fact that it was his pal's tongue which had got him into trouble. If he could get away from the pursuing plane, he would not leave him. Lund would not get out of the steel cuffs easily.

Buck glanced down and back at the other ship. His lips moved.

“It may be a steal—of an army ship!” he muttered. “She’s coming—right along. Looks like things are going to happen—right here—above the line!”

AT SIX thousand feet the two-seater had five hundred yards altitude over the army-type plane. But the other ship was winging upward steadily. Both planes were flying in circles—and staying almost directly above the adobe shack.

In the fading light Buck Kent could still distinguish the outline of the figure sprawled in the sand near the shack. He shook his head slowly.

Lou Parrish and he had been through a lot together. Lou was a fine mechanic. He was thorough. His mind didn’t work so fast as Buck’s; he was more irresponsible.

The man lying below was badly hurt, perhaps dead. And if it were Lou, Buck, in a sense, had been to blame.

He glanced at the altimeter. The two-seater had reached eight thousand feet. He noted a faint change in the roar of the engine through the curved exhausts and fed her a bit more air with the gas. She climbed steadily. And the ship below climbed after her.

At nine thousand there was a break in the beat of the engine. Buck worked desperately to get steadiness from the splutter.

She climbed to almost ten thousand—with the other ship gaining rapidly. And he failed to get power from the engine. There was only one thing to do—nose her over—lose altitude.

He shoved the stick forward. The ship came down in a screaming dive, power on, the engine still spluttering. There was the clatter of machine-gun fire again, but once more the pilot of the other ship failed to score a hit. And then both ships were wire screaming down toward the sand and mesquite.

Buck Kent muttered to himself:

“I can level off at three thousand—outwing this killer’s ship and—”

He broke off, a grim expression in his eyes. That would leave Lou down below. And Lund was down there. The pilot of the other ship would give up the chase and return to the adobe shack. Lou knew too much. If he were still alive they would finish him off.

Buck Kent held the plane in her dive. Wind shrilled through the wires and struts. Once he twisted his head. The other ship was coming down back of him. Her dive speed was not so great as that of the plane he was piloting. Either that, or the other pilot was waiting until he leveled off.

AT TWO thousand he eased the dive of the two-seater, pulled her nose up and banked to the southward.

The engine spluttered once or twice—then roared steadily. And again there was the staccato beat of machine-gun fire—from above.

Fabric ripped, near the tip of the left, upper wing. Buck shoved the stick forward again, kicking down on the right pedal.

The plane went over on a wing as he gave her right stick—and he let her scream into a spin.

At seven hundred feet he pulled out of the spin, but held her in the dive. He twisted his head. The other plane was less than a hundred yards above—slanting down in a sharp dive. It looked like the end this time—for him!

Buck Kent bent his head forward in the cockpit, shaking off the dizziness caused by the spin. The shack was almost directly below; his eyes widened as he stared down. The figure that had been sprawled in the sand—*was gone!* But, approaching the shack, bent low, was another figure. The man’s hands were held behind his back. It was Lund—cuffed with the steel!

He was staring up at the diving ships, but his body was hunched forward. The two-seater screamed down, slanting toward him. He dropped to his knees.

Buck Kent stiffened in the cockpit, jerking his head. The other plane was coming down directly behind—in the path of his ship. As he leveled off the pilot of the other ship would squeeze the stick trigger of the prop-synchronized gun.

The ground was flashing up. Buck had a final glance at Lund, on his knees, his head twisted so that he could stare at the diving plane. Then Buck pulled back on the stick.

The two-seater roared up into level flight as he shoved the throttle forward. Her under-gear passed over Lund’s form, clearing it by only a few feet.

The *rat-tat-tat* of the killer’s gun sounded in a short burst.

Buck jerked his head. Sand was dancing up—back of his plane. Dust rose from the spot where Lund had crouched. Buck’s heart was pounding. Now, if he could wing clear of the other—

Above the beat of his engine, he heard the crash. It was the boom of suddenly collapsed fabrics, of crackling struts and taut wires released in one awful sound. It was the death crash of the pursuing plane!

Buck Kent banked around and throttled down. A dust cloud was rising for perhaps a hundred yards—near the spot where Lund had dropped to his knees.

As the dust drifted clear, Buck saw the wreckage of the army-type ship. And he saw something else, too—a figure standing in the doorway of the adobe hut, waving both arms frantically. Lou Parrish!

The pilot circled back over the shack. Glancing toward the emergency field, he muttered grimly to himself. A plane was landing. She had come in low—her wheels and tail skid struck even as Buck stared in that direction.

Then he glided down for the nearest level stretch to the shack, and spoke grimly through oil-stained lips.

“Something did happen—above—the line!”

LOU PARRISH grinned at Buck Kent. It was a sort of twisted grin, but it was there—on the browned face of his pal. A piece of his shirt was around his head; he braced himself by gripping a strut of the Ryan engine two-seater.

“Hello, Buck! That Mex inside here”—he gestured within the ’dobe shack—“almost got me.” His voice was a little thick. “First time I ever knew a Mex could shoot even fairly straight. He had a Colt and a rifle. I grabbed for the Colt, and he creased me in the head—with the first shot. Then I got it—and got him. Tried to get over toward your ship—I heard you come in—and then everything went black.”

Buck Kent nodded. He moved toward the wreckage of the army-type ship, then turned away and walked toward the spot where Lund had dropped to his knees. The crook was lying on his back.

Buck leaned down and straightened again. He walked back to Lou Parrish.

“Did Lund say anything about a pal?” he asked grimly.

Lou nodded. “Said he had one who’d just grabbed off an army ship from some emergency field down this way. The pal was coming up to fly me across the line. They wanted something from you. I guess I talked to the wrong guy.”

Buck Kent smiled grimly. “Yes—and no,” he said slowly. “Lund was in a line with his pal’s gun. The pilot of the stolen ship couldn’t see him on the ground—my plane was in the way. His lead finished Lund—and he didn’t pull out of the dive in time. They’re both done.”

Lou Parrish nodded. “They wanted reward coin—so Lund said,” he told Buck. “I knew it was a tough spot for me. He talked too freely. Couldn’t let me loose, after that.”

Buck spoke slowly. His eyes were looking beyond his pal’s form, toward the figures of the two army flyers coming toward them. Both men held guns in their hands.

“Put your arms up, Lou,” the pilot ordered, his eyes grim. He raised his own hands. “You and me—we’re winging into Calexico. We’ll get that head of yours fixed up. But first we’ll tell the officers what happened—above the line!”