

# The Sky Hawk



By **GRAHAM DEANE**

*It was a big order—getting the Sky Hawk, yet these two got the order . . . got the Sky Hawk, and safe-guarded the skies throughout the West.*

**T**OM BLAIR reached across the table and picked up the dirty scrap of paper, looked at it a moment then set his jaws.

“Well he means business, alright. Says here unless the money is paid by noon he’ll send you a

warning that will make you pay.”

“That’s why I called Air Couriers Inc.,” replied the older man. “If that company can insure us safety, then that’s what we want. Go the limit to get the Sky Hawk if he starts anything.” Craig

Kent looked at the two young pilots Air Couriers, Inc. had detailed on one of the most extraordinary cases in the companies history.

“The Sky Hawk,” he resumed, “has slipped through every net set for him. You two are new. I have an idea fresh young men like you will find a loophole.—But we’ve got to be protected.”

Tom Blair handed the scrap of paper to his companion. This was his and Ralph Nesbit’s first commission since joining the company. Air Couriers, Inc. was to the aviation industry what great detective agencies are to bankers and insurance companies—a barrier against the underworld. Its pilots were the best in the country, its research engineers the brainiest in their lines for Air Couriers, Inc. believed that fast ships, clever pilots, plus the facilities of science, were the best antidote for aerial bandits.

“It’s a big order,” commented Ralph, as he handed the scrap of paper back to Craig Kent, president of the Red Arrow Company.

Tom Blair nodded and was silent while Craig Kent unfolded the most amazing story they had ever heard.

“He’s got nerve,” Kent concluded. “Sky Hawk? He is a hawk. One-hundred thousand dollars cash for protecting our planes. Protection. Nothing but plain highway robbery. High Class blackmail. We’ll never pay if we have to go out of business!”

Yes, it was a big order. Getting the Sky Hawk. It was more than an order. It meant establishing the Air Couriers, Inc., for the safety of planes against such gangsters throughout the Middle West. They must sell Air Courier service, as well as get the Sky Hawk.

**T**HE interview was at an end. Tom Blair and Ralph Nesbit returned to the warm hangar where mechanics were servicing their trim fast monoplane.

The two operatives for Air Couriers watched the mechanics complete their work. Only three hours before they had been assigned to their first adventure together, the trapping of Sky Hawk, the aerial bandit whose exploits had been making page one copy for months.

The Sky Hawk might almost be termed a super criminal for he played a lone hand. He

might have been a pilot who had gone wrong, or a gangster who had wanted adventure. At least, he was making war on the air companies of the middle west and the Red Arrow line, his latest victim, meant to fight back.

They were at lunch at the restaurant at the big field at Randolph, the headquarters for the Red Arrow line, when Craig Kent, white faced and raging, burst through the door.

“He’s done it,” he exclaimed.

“Done what!” demanded Tom and Ralph in unison.

“Wrecked the eastbound mail and looted its cargo,” shouted the Red Arrow executive.

“Where?”

“Just east of Montour.”

Tom and Ralph ran for their ship. They buckled their winter flying clothes tightly about them as they raced across the snow.

In less than an hour they were scudding to a landing on the field where the remains of the eastbound mail were only a blackened heap. It was a simple story. The country was sparsely settled. A forced landing by the mail, a pounce by the waiting Sky Hawk, a dead pilot, a flaming plane with empty mail sacks.

Gangster guns in blazing skies. Helpless pilots. Flaming death, burned their way furiously into the consciousness of the two young pilots as they looked over the heap before them.

The marks of the Sky Hawk’s plane were plainly visible in the snow, even his footprints could be seen. But that was all. There were no fingerprints, nothing more than the tracks in the snow. It looked like a hopeless quest when Ralph, poking around in the wreckage of the plane, suddenly saw something which tensed every muscle in his body. He quickly stooped and picked it up. It was a bit of metal—copper; corroded, strangely so. He put it in his pocket and said nothing.

“**F**IND out anything?” demanded Kent, who was waiting for them when they landed at Randolph.

“Not much,” replied Ralph, “but I’m going to ride the westbound plane tomorrow morning. Maybe we’ll know more then.”

“What’s your own pet theory about the Sky

Hawk, Ralph?" asked Tom when they were in their hotel room together.

"I haven't any," admitted Ralph, "a hunch maybe, but not a theory. Look at this."

He pulled out of his pocket the piece of metal he had found in the wreckage. For a moment he held it in the palm of his hand while Tom bent over and looked at it.

"Take a good look," said Ralph, placing the piece in Tom's hand, "then tell me what it is."

Tom examined the piece of metal carefully, then his eyes sparkled, and his mouth formed a grin. "It's nothing to get excited about, old top. It's one of the cabin fittings. Funny you didn't recognize it. But what of it, anyway?"

"Nothing much," laughed Ralph, "except it holds the secret of the Sky Hawk's power."

"What! You're crazy."

"No, I'm not crazy. It's as plain as day. You wait and see."

"I'll wait all right," agreed Tom, "but either you're awfully bright or I'm awfully dumb."

"Both," laughed Ralph and ducked just in time to escape a heavy pillow which Tom fired at him.

Then they settled down to planning.

"I'm going on the West mail," commented Ralph. "You follow in the Monoplane. Fly high and keep well behind us. If anything goes wrong with our ship, cut your motor, listen for the hum of another plane, but don't try to follow it. Beat it for the ground and pull what's left of us clear of the machine."

"And don't," he added as an afterthought, "dive through any queer looking clouds which may be near our plane if we're struck down."

"Guess college did do something for your scientific brain," laughed Tom. "You're all set when you can figure out some knotty problem, aren't you? Pretty good team, you and me, don't you think?" Tom finished and threw out his chest in mock esteem.

"You'll think so when we get the Sky Hawk," said Ralph calmly, "and get him we are."

**N**EXT morning found Ralph and Tom at the field, ready for the departure of the Westbound mail. Craig Kent was there too. He was anxious, worried. Every mail plane the Sky

Hawk destroyed meant a loss of \$25,000 and he could see a year's profits gone in a week unless the special agents from Air Couriers lived up to the reputation of the organization.

Ralph hurried into the cockpit of the waiting mail ship and crowded in beside the pilot. Tom was warming up his monoplane.

"Don't forget my instructions," called Ralph, and Tom nodded his head.

Both planes were in the air, winging their way into the west, the motors barking in the cold winter air.

For hours the trip was uneventful, nothing happened, and the planes roared down on the snow covered field of Lytton the western terminal of that division of the air mail.

"Thought we were going to get the Sky Hawk. Thought your plan was so good," mocked Tom, good naturedly slapping Ralph on the back.

"Too clear. We need clouds to catch the Sky Hawk." He looked up into the sky. "Tomorrow, if it is cloudy, we'll get plenty of action. Wait and see."

**T**HE next morning the two operators of the Air Couriers were waked out of a sound sleep by the telephone.

"This is Kent," came an excited voice over the wire. "I've received another demand from the Sky Hawk." For a moment Ralph took down details and then rung off.

Without a word he went to the window and looked out. The winter sky was studded with scurrying windswept clouds. "Same stunt as yesterday, Tom, and we're going to get him sure this time. Within a few hours, perhaps minutes, the Sky Hawk will strike. Just where and how we can only guess, but you follow the mail plane. Keep behind and fly high. If anything goes wrong with our plane, cut your motor, listen for the hum of another plane, but don't try to follow it—"

"Beat it for the ground," continued Tom, taking the words out of Ralph's mouth, "and pull what's left of you clear of the machine—" He laughed a bit.

"Yes," nodded Ralph, "and don't dive through any queer looking clouds that may be near our plane if we're struck down."

The two pilots were ready for their adventure

before they spoke again. Then it was Ralph. "It's a case of pitting our nerve and brains against the craft of a master crook. Game?"

"With you," assured Tom as Ralph crowded into the cockpit of the mail plane. Then the two ships whirled over the snow and into the air.

An hour, two hours elapsed and the planes were speeding over the desolate Rock river country.

Tom, above and behind the mail, suddenly saw the Red Arrow plane wobble unsteadily and then drop away in a sickening dive. He cut the motor of his own craft instantly, and glided noiselessly through the broken clouds. He thought he heard the faint hum of a motor—a higher pitched note than that of the mail plane's engine. It was gone in a second and he turned his attention to the mail plane, fluttering helplessly to the ground.

With the motor on full, Tom crashed downward through the clouds in a screaming power dive. Every wire and strut on his monoplane shrilled its protest but he held the nose down. He must reach the ground with the mail; must be able to help Ralph and the Red Arrow pilot if they needed his assistance.

The mail was limping toward a small clearing. Tom was under it now. He leveled off and made a fast landing. A ground loop killed his speed and he was running toward the mail plane when it banged down into the snow. Its landing gear crumpled as the pilot made a clumsy attempt to land. The mail ship flipped over on its nose and a figure was thrown clear of the wreckage.

Tom reached the limp form on the snow. It was Ralph! But there was no time to stop now. There was a sizzling flash, a roar, and the motor of the mail was enveloped in a mass of flame.

Tom plunged on and under the overturned fuselage. There, still strapped in his seat, was the mail flyer, unconscious. With anxious hands Tom unfastened the safety belt and dragged the man away from the flaming craft.

When he returned to Ralph he was gasping for air, but otherwise unhurt. Together they worked to bring the mail pilot back to consciousness.

"What happened?" demanded Tom.

"The Sky Hawk almost got us," said Ralph,

his voice husky and unnatural. "Another ten seconds and our goose would have been cooked. Here, let's get this chap in your plane. We've got to get him to a doctor quick. I'll tell you all about it on the way to Randolph."

When they were safely on their way to the home field of the Red Arrow Company, Ralph explained what had happened.

"He gassed us," he said simply. "That's the secret of his power to send planes and pilots to their destruction. He only strikes on cloudy days when he can hide in the clouds. Just before his intended victim comes along, he releases the gas in the clouds. The unsuspecting pilot runs right into the gas and pouf! That's all there is to it. Simple isn't it?"

Tom was speechless with the horror of the Sky Hawk's method.

"Simple, yes," he managed to say, "but terrible."

"I'll admit that," said Ralph, firmly, "but tomorrow, if the weather's cloudy, there won't be any more Sky Hawk."

"What do you mean?"

"That we'll get him. We know his methods now and we have the upper hand. This terror of the skies is about at the end of his string."

"But even if it is cloudy, he may not come out. Two in succession—"

"If it's cloudy, he'll come out. Wait until I've had a talk with Kent. We'll bait the hook with such alluring bait that he'd almost come out if it wasn't cloudy."

**W**HEN they landed at Randolph a doctor quickly brought the mail pilot back to consciousness. Then they rushed him to the hospital for treatment to check the ravages of the gas which he had breathed. Ralph had been lucky and the slight whiff he had breathed had only knocked him out temporarily and with no lasting danger.

That night Tom and Ralph reported to Kent. The stern faced head of the Red Arrow Company listened attentively to their story. Then he called a number and obtained the weather forecast for the next day.

"It's a good day," commented to Ralph. "He'll be out, plenty of clouds. Now, get the

managing editor of your morning paper over here at once. Or better still, I'll outline my plan and you go to see him personally."

Kent nodded. He was not used to taking orders but somehow he could not help but obey this young operative of the Air Courier, Inc.

"You explain what has happened. Then let him put in a front news item about one of your planes making a dash with a great deal of money. He'll know how to fix it up. They all do."

Kent nodded and the conference ended.

**T**HE next morning the papers carried a carefully worded story how a special plane was to leave Randolph that morning on a dash across the plains with a heavy shipment of specie needed by a bank at Lytton, the western terminal of the division. "The \$1,000,000 plane," the newspapers called it.

When Tom and Ralph wheeled their ship from the hangar that morning, a truck was coming through the main gate with uniformed policemen on the running boards. It was the work of only a minute to transfer the two dummy specie chests, heavy iron-bound boxes, from the truck to the cabin of the monoplane.

Tom admired Ralph's ingenuity. He was leaving no loophole in his plan. The Sky Hawk might have accomplices on the field.

After a word with Craig Kent, Tom gunned the motor of the monoplane and they raced across the field and into the air in quest of the Sky Hawk. Both boys were concentrating on the task ahead. It was their first big case for Air Couriers. They had to make good.

When they neared the Rock river country, Ralph nudged Tom.

"Better put on the gas masks," he warned. "The clouds are heavy ahead of us; just the place for the Sky Hawk."

They donned the gas protectors, ready for the Sky Hawk to strike. Ahead of them loomed a cloud, grayish-green in color.

Ralph signed for Tom to cut the motor. They soared silently. To their right and ahead of them they could hear the sound of another plane. Tom turned on his motor and ruddered hard to the right. All around them were the grayish-green clouds of gas. The Sky Hawk had lain a careful trap for the

specie plane.

Suddenly they broke through the clouds. Just ahead of them a sleek, black biplane was loafing in the sky. Its pilot, startled at the sudden appearance of the monoplane, was caught unawares, and they were almost on him before he could rev up his motor.

As they roared down on the biplane, they caught a glimpse of the pilot, his face covered with a hideous mask to protect him from the gas clouds which he scattered through the sky.

It was the Sky Hawk, the terror of the airways.

With quickening pulse, Tom set himself to the task of riding the Sky Hawk to earth. He knew his plane was faster than that of the aerial bandit, but could he match his skill with the enemy and force him to earth?

There was a puff of smoke under the fuselage of the Sky Hawk's plane and another of the gray-green clouds took form. But Tom and Ralph were protected from the gas and they drove through the cloud in a burst of speed.

The Sky Hawk looked around. He was alarmed. He had believed their first appearance pure luck but their escape this time was no such thing and the sky bandit realized that he was cornered. He could fight or run and either way the odds were against him for the fast monoplane of the Air Courier agents was too speedy for his craft. The tables were turned on the Sky Hawk. For the first time he found the odds against him and he chose to run.

On and on they roared, first zigzagging to the right, then to the left, up, then down, always on the tail of the Sky Hawk, driving him nearer and nearer the ground.

Desperate, the masked bandit in the black plane turned on them and bullet after bullet ripped through the air as he blazed away at Tom and Ralph with a sub-machine gun. It was dangerous work now, but Tom handled the plane in masterful fashion. Relentlessly he teased the Sky Hawk into shooting when they had him at a disadvantage.

**F**INALLY the Sky Hawk threw away his gun, his ammunition exhausted. Tom saw the gesture and steeled himself for the end. Whatever

its outcome it would come quickly.

The Sky Hawk threw his biplane into a crazy, twisting climb that threatened to pull the motor out of the ship. Tom outguessed him and climbed two feet to the bandit's one. Two, three, four, five thousand feet they clawed their way into the sky, the Sky Hawk trying frantically to escape his pursuers for in the grim-faced young men from Air Couriers he could read his finish unless escape came soon.

Ralph had put together the tangled web which put them on the Sky Hawk's trail. Now it was up to Tom to bring about the end of the career of the gangster of the airways.

The monoplane dropped down on the Sky Hawk's ship like an avenging eagle. It swooped low, ready for the kill.

Closer and closer came the motor-maddened planes, each pilot intent on the destruction of the other. Then, too late to escape, the Sky Hawk guessed Tom's plan. Before he could move or

throw his black plane into a spin, there was a crash of wood and the scream of wires.

Half of the upper wing of the biplane crumpled as Tom raked his landing gear through it. The propeller shivered into a thousand pieces and the motor raced madly.

Tom and Ralph, peering from the cabin of their plane, saw the black craft pause in mid-air for a moment. In that fleeting second they saw the Sky Hawk half rise in his cockpit and salute them in a final bit of bravado. Then the bandit's craft fell away in a tight spin. A thousand feet above the ground the wings collapsed and the Sky Hawk crashed to his death.

The tire on one of the wheels of the monoplane on their landing gear had been cut to ribbons in the collision, but Tom knew he could land his ship safely, and they turned back for Randolph, their first case in the service of Air Couriers, completed.