

The Free Press' Short Story

CROSSED WIRES

BY SAM SAINT

STAN MALCOLM, recently promoted from a copilot's berth to the position of relief pilot on the Southern Air Line, was a good flyer. But he enjoyed making an impression and never overlooked an opportunity to display his knowledge.

One day during the lunch hour Stan was showing a friend, Charlie Wyngate, through the instrument shop. He explained all he knew about one of the directional radio beam receivers that lay dismantled on a bench. Then he opened a closet and took out a small black box with a number of dials and binding posts on it. "This," he said, "is the test set they use to check the beam receivers. They are tested before every flight. No chance of a slip-up." He glanced around. None of the men had returned, so he got a battery. "See here, I'll show you how it works."

He hooked wires to the battery and touched them to the binding posts on the test outfit. As the charged wire came in contact with one of the terminals there was a faint phasit. Stan's heart sank. "What had he done?" "Guess I got the terminals reversed," he said unsteadily, as he changed them and tried again. It seemed to work all right this time. He spun the rheostat and showed Charlie how the dials registered.

Stan's assurance returned when he saw the needle of the potentiometer swinging as he thought it should when the rheostat was turned. He was glad, however, that no one else had seen him handle the test box.

He took Charlie on to the motor department and finally bid him goodbye. Then Stan walked to the lunch room and ordered soup and crackers. He sat alone as he always did. Sometimes he wondered why he had had more friends at the field.

Conscience spoke to him again and again about the test box. There was not a thing wrong with it, he was sure, so why should he not forget it? Still it bothered him. He decided to tell Doc Hansen, Foreman of Instruments, about it.

Having so decided he finished his lunch and started for the hangar, but the closer he came to the instrument shop the more his resolve wavered. Still he knew this would bother him until he told Doc what had happened. No doubt Doc would smile and say, "Oh, it always does that," or, "That couldn't hurt anything. I sometimes hook it up backwards myself."

As Stan Malcolm opened the door of the shop he met Doc Hansen coming out. The foreman was carrying the little black test box.

"Malcolm," Doc said, "you're just the man I want to see."

Stan's face reddened slightly. Doc had discovered him already? Why had he not gone right away and confessed?

"Buck tells me," Doc was saying impatiently, "that he told you to report that tachometer that was out of order yesterday."

"I forgot," Stan stammered, ashamed to have been caught in an oversight.

"If you'd spend more time thinking and less talking maybe you wouldn't forget," Doc said pointedly. Still carrying the test box he strode across the hangar floor to the operations manager's private Lockheed.

Stan suddenly realized that he had said nothing about his experience with the test box. On top of his other offense he had not now the courage to mention it. And besides, Doc was in no humor to be approached on such a subject.

Still smarting inwardly at the remark the instrument foreman had made, Stan moved to the hangar door and stood just outside, waiting to see whether Doc would have any trouble when he used the test outfit. If anything was wrong with it, certainly it would not give a satisfactory test.

The weather was bad. A damp, stormy wind was blowing, chasing before it ragged grey clouds.

He heard the lid of Doc's test box slam. Doc climbed down from the plane's cabin and went back to the shop, taking tools and test set with him. Evidently the thing had worked all right. However, Stan Malcolm might have thought differently could he have seen the hesitation of Doc's pencil and the frown on his brow as he made out his report. A rather serious correction had been necessary on the Lockheed's beam receiver.

An hour later Stan sat in the operations office reading a magazine. The life of a relief pilot was easy, an average of two trips a week on the short southern run and the rest of the time to do with as he pleased.

Buck Gattin came into the office and addressed himself to Chandler, the operations manager. Gattin was a big man with a dark mop of defiant

hair. "What's this special Jing called me for?"

"Party of business men going South to a convention", Chandler said. "You're flying them in my Lockheed."

"Don't I do enough flying for one man?" Buck growled. "How about getting somebody else for the convention special? I have a date."

"Isn't anybody on this end, except Malcolm?"

"Buck granted. "If that's the best you can do, I'd better go."

Stan, who had been listening, flared at Buck's implied insult. "What's the matter with my flying?" he demanded.

Buck looked around. "Take a look at the weather, pilot. You can't talk your way through clouds like that."

"I've done my share of bad-weather flying," Stan returned. "How about the time I brought Seventeen in through the snowstorm?"

"Yeah," said Buck. "You're a good pilot, but you give me an earache." He turned his back on Stan and said to Chandler, "Get me permission to climb up through these clouds and fly through on top."

Stan Malcolm saw fit to ignore the words of Buck Gattin. No one seemed to appreciate him. Again he wondered, and there again his reasoning process stopped. He thought again of the test box, but time had dulled the voice of conscience, and he took up his magazine.

He finished one story and started another before Buck took off with the Lockheed. The speeding ship circled and flashed away to the southward, climbing rapidly into the clouds. Once out of sight of the ground-Buck would follow the guiding beam of the directional radio range beacon.

Buck's conversation with the radio operator on his first radio check was heard in the loud-speaker in the operations office.

"Gattin in southbound special to Clayton," came the voice from the distant plane. "On top of solid overcast at seven thousand feet. Flying on the south leg of range beam. Estimated position, vicinity of Plattsburg."

Twenty minutes later Buck's voice was again in the speaker. "Southbound special to Clayton, off schedule. There's something wrong with this beam receiver. It doesn't check closely enough with the compass course."

The voice of Clayton, the radio operator, asked: "Did it just go haywire, or has it been off since you left here?"

"Been this way since I left. I didn't notice it at first. It isn't off much. Think I'll go down and have a look at the countryside under these clouds."

Stan Malcolm listened, his face grown pale and serious. He knew he should tell what he knew about the test box, but the thought of the scorn that would fall on him made him hold his tongue. Better to wait and see if Buck found that he was really off his course. He well knew that a few degrees difference in course could carry the swift Lockheed for out of the airway in an hour's flying. But that wouldn't matter, he argued with himself, for Buck would know where he was as soon as he saw the terrain under the clouds.

Again Buck's voice was in the speaker. "I'm down to a thousand feet," he said. "No sight of the ground yet." The faint, quivering drumming of the Lockheed's big motor was in the speaker. Suddenly came one sharp word: "Trees!" A ripping crash! Silence.

Chandler leaped from his desk, stunned. Stan Malcolm stared at the loud-speaker, the last sign of color gone from his face.

Frantically the radio operator called. Silence. Awful silence. Quickly the shock spread through the office, leaving in its wake faces set and grim.

Chandler whipped out orders. Planes for a search. All available pilots from the other air lines. "Buck saw the trees before he hit," Chandler snapped. "That means they'll still be alive." He called the weather bureau. "Find out where, within fifty miles of the course, the hills are poking up into the overcast," he demanded.

"Jing," he barked, "go get Doc Hansen and bring him here."

Stan was stabbed by those words. Doc would get all the blame. "But it wasn't Buck's fault! It was your fault!" cried a voice within him. Still he sat silent, his mind filled with the picture of a torn and broken ship lying among the trees on a lonely hill. He could almost see the battered forms of men trapped in the wreckage.

Suddenly he found himself leaning "I'll find them! Let me go!"

he demanded in a feverish voice. "I'll find them! Let me go!"

Chandler looked at him coldly. "What are you trembling for? You're not hurt. Sit down."

Stan sat, his mind in knots. Chandler got maps. He calculated wind speed and direction, the speed of the ship, the number of minutes it had been in the air. He drew an arc that swung across the course south of Plattsburg. "We'll search along this line," he said to Jackson, a transcontinental pilot who had just come in.

Doc Hansen entered the operations office, flight-flipped and nervous. "You checked the beam receiver on the Lockheed?" Chandler asked.

"Yes, sir."

Chandler drove straight to the point. "A moment before Buck crashed he reported that the beam didn't check with the compass course. It's evident he was off his course when he went down, or he never would have run into a hill at a thousand feet. There are no elevations like that within thirty miles of the course on either side. Doc, are you sure you checked that instrument thoroughly?"

"Yes, sir," in a firm voice. "Have anything to say that might throw light on the subject?"

Doc dejectedly. "There was a considerable correction necessary on that instrument," he said slowly. "Don't hardly see yet how it could have been so far out of tune."

"What do you mean?" Chandler snapped. "You must have read something wrong."

"No, sir," Doc said quietly. "That couldn't have been."

Stan Malcolm sat on the edge of his seat, white-knuckled hands gripping the arms. Chandler, nervous on edge, used bitter words. "Hansen, this looks like carelessness. Slip-and methods can't be excused in this business, not even the first time."

"But, Mr. Chandler, sir," through Chandler cut in, "you're through!"

Stan Malcolm was gripping Chandler's arm. "It's my fault," he said. "I did it."

"What are you talking about?" Chandler asked impatiently. "What did you do?"

"I must have burned out something in the test set today at noon. I meant to tell, but I didn't. I didn't think."

"You didn't think?" Chandler blazed. Abruptly he became cool. "We'll talk about that later," he said, turning to the two pilots who were ready to start the search for the missing ship, he spoke earnestly. "We'll leave immediately and talk things over by radio on the way."

The three men hurried out to the ships waiting on the line. Wearily Stan watched the three ships plunge into the drizzling rain to the south.

Doc Hansen stood at his elbow.

"You sure saved my neck," he said. "Thanks."

"It's a foot," Stan said dejectedly. "What did you do to that thing anyway?" Doc asked.

"Got the battery wires reversed." "No wonder," Doc said. "That would be sure to burn something and throw the set out of balance. You should have told me." There was neither rebuke nor anger in his voice.

"I know," Stan said and sat down in wait.

Whispered speculation ran through the office. A passenger, before boarding the westbound transcontinental, overheard the story and canceled out. Stan Malcolm and Doc sat one on either side of the radio speaker and listened, intently as Chandler, in the air speeding south, allotted each of the other concrete a territory to cover.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," Stan muttered. "If we could only do something." His mind worked conscientiously with the problem. For the first time in his life Stan was thinking of some one besides himself.

The weather bureau reported lifting ceilings south of Plattsburg. That would be of untold value to the searchers.

Suddenly Stan stood up. "I've got an idea," he said. Quickly he outlined his plan to Doc. Doc agreed that it sounded good and immediately went to the shop.

Stan raced upstairs to the radio room and put through a call to Chandler. Finally he got the operations manager's permission to try his scheme. Down to the instrument shop he ran. "Okeh!" he called to Doc; then ran back to the office for maps.

Doc took the test box and went to the beam receiver on one of the mail ships. Stan came back.

"The test set hasn't been checked," he said, "so if we make the same corrections on this receiver that you made on the Lockheed it might throw it out of balance in the same direction and to the same degree. That should lead us right to the spot where Buck crashed up."

"It's worth trying," Doc granted enthusiastically as he worked with the set.

Two minutes later the mail plane was gassed in the air. Stan pushed his goggles up on his helmet and settled himself to follow the signal of the beam. At the same time he figured the difference in speed of the Lockheed and his craft and calculated the precise minute that he should be on the scene.

The clouds hung close to the earth. The mail plane was flicking through rough shreds of the thump vapor as it hurtled southward. Excitedly Stan saw that already the beam signal was leading him away from the airway. Soon he was in hilly country. He passed Plattsburg forty miles to the westward. Hills came up to meet the underside of the clouds that

prossed close above. Stan roared over a ridge, his wheels not far over the treetops and his upper wing skimming the clouds. With set jaw he drove on.

Time was almost up. He pulled down his goggles and studied the lonely stretches of tree-clad hills. The wreck would be on the north side of one of the ridges. Time was up. Would it be this ridge or the next one? He marked the spot carefully and began an ever widening circle.

Daylight was fading. The radio brought him the conversation of Chandler and the other two searching planes. All were discouraged. Chandler called Stan to ask where the redoubted beam receiver had led him. Stan answered briefly.

"Try farther south," Chandler suggested. "Buck has a way of pushing a motor pretty hard when he's not in good humor."

On the next ridge, to the south and a little to the left, Stan finally picked up the missing ship. His heart sank when he saw the rocks and trees among which it lay. "Complete washout," he growled. Then he saw something new.

Excitedly he radioed Chandler, but the other ships were miles away and it was getting dark.

In the valley below he spotted a barren stretch of rocky earth. With skilful touch on the controls he dropped the plane over the trees and

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CANADA CALLS

Canada has reason to count her blessings in these days of trial.

Canada is three thousand miles away from the sound of guns which are devastating Europe.

The broad Atlantic Ocean rolls between us and the ruthless savagery of the German Armies.

The strongest fleets in the world—British, American and Canadian—patrol the sea between us and the enemy.

We have a great friendly nation, probably the richest and most powerful in the world, at our side.

CANADA CAN AFFORD HER SACRIFICES

This war is a mechanized war.

We have the nickel... copper... lead... zinc and other metals the war industries need. We have access to the iron. We can make the steel.

We have the organized industries to fabricate these metals and make the trucks, and tanks, and guns, and planes, and the ships.

We have skilled workers and the plants for mass production. Canada has the wheat and the food supplies.

Let us count our blessings, and tighten our belts.

Canada is rich—one of the richest countries per head of population in the world. Let us lend our strength to the utmost of our power. Our national future depends upon Victory.

We must win to live.

THERE WILL BE FURTHER CALLS

There have been many calls upon the people of this country for money since Canada entered the war at the side of Great Britain.

There will be further calls.

Let us face the future unafraid.

Canada can carry the load.

But every Canadian must shoulder his and her share.

This is the most critical hour in our history. Let the future historians say of Canada, as they will say of our Mother Country: "This was their finest hour."

Get under your load...and LIFT

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE, CANADA