

# THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

## Pitch Notes

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[PLEASE NOTE: This is not a transcript of every word spoken. It is a set of notes from on which the pitch was based.]

In the clouds. Sound of machine gun fire. Whine of airplane engines. A World War I era bi-plane flies directly at us. The cockpit is empty. The pilot, BEN MOONEY, is out on the wing, makes some sort of adjustment to his aileron. Tinkering. His face is in the wind. He's having the time of his life.

Off Ben's wing flies his best friend TONY.

Ben finishes his adjustment and climbs back into the cockpit and he and Tony roar into battle. They take out two enemy planes. But then German ace HEINRICH GRUNFELT leads an entire group of fighters in an attack on Ben and Tony. It results in an incredible dogfight and we get to see how good these two really are. Tony chases Grunfelt in a power dive toward the ground. The German pulls up sharply. Tony tries to follow -- and the wings on his plane simply fold up and he flies straight into the ground going over 200 miles per hour. And now all of the German planes turns on Ben, who fights like the great natural flyer he is, anguished at his friend's death. He's badly outnumbered when his popular squadron commander, CAPTAIN RICKY POWERS joins the battle, engine screaming. It's too late. Ben takes a bullet in the neck.

His plane spirals toward the mountainous terrain below. Ben fights for consciousness. Pulls out of the spin and looks for a place to land.

Losing blood fast, he follows a mountain stream that becomes a river -- and sees before him the vast green lawn of a riverfront chateau.

On the lawn of that chateau, a group of teenaged French girls is having a party, not troubled by the air war raging only a few miles away. Ben's plane roars in low over the grounds, out of kilter, and sets down hard. It skids sideways and flips upside down into the river where it sinks. The girls sit frozen. All but one. 14-year-old NATALIE BOUCHARD. She dives in the river, disappears under the water and emerges with the unconscious aviator.

In a nearby field hospital, Natalie and her father visit Ben, who's recovering from his wounds. He's in the middle of a poker game with Captain Powers and other men from his squadron. Ben is betting too aggressively -- as he always does -- and losing all his money. Captain Powers thanks Natalie for saving his man -- and tells Natalie of the time

Ben saved Powers' life with a daring mid-air rescue.

Natalie brashly informs Ben that the only way he can repay his great debt to her is to get well and give her a ride in an airplane. Her father objects. Airplanes are for grown men. Not for girls. Certainly not his girl.

Ben recovers and give Natalie that plane ride. He treats her as an equal -- something her father would never understand in a million years -- and even allows her to take the stick and try flying for herself. Natalie falls in love with flying and a wonderful friendship blossoms with Ben. She's the little sister Ben never had. And Ben becomes fixed in Natalie's heart as the perfect big brother she'll never have. And far more than that. As the man who allowed her to dream, he becomes the object of her undying love.

The night the war ends, Captain Powers, Ben and the rest of the squadron celebrate. Powers is falling-down drunk and a French flyer is arguing with him as all of them leave a bar. A fight ensues and Powers shoots the Frenchman dead -- in front of Ben and the others.

Two days later, Natalie is awakened by the sound of Ben's plane landing outside. He's come to say goodbye. And to tell her not to believe any of the terrible things she's going to hear about him.

As military police arrive with Captain Powers, Ben takes off, leaving the heartbroken girl behind. Natalie asks the MPs what's going on. Powers tells her Ben has deserted his unit. After killing a Frenchman in a bar fight. She watches until Ben's plane disappears over the horizon.

It's 1926. Seven years have passed. Natalie, now grown into a beautiful woman and an accomplished aviator in her own right, arrives in New York by boat and is met by JUAN ROBINSON, her dashing American suitor.

In many ways, Juan is everything the modest and plain-spoken Ben was not. A child of wealth, a suave Princeton senior, an ambitious businessman. But he shares Ben's passion for flying -- and like Ben he accepts Natalie as an equal.

Juan and Natalie met a year earlier at a European air meet, and she has now come to America at Juan's invitation to participate in the greatest air race in history -- an air mail run from New York to Santiago, Chile. The first team to get three planes to Santiago will win the lucrative contract to fly mail along that route for the Postal Service.

Juan and Natalie clearly love one another -- but we detect reserve in Natalie, as if she's unable to give her heart completely to Juan.

She slips away for a secret meeting with a private detective. Over the years she's spent thousands of francs of her father's money looking for Ben. He's finally been found. The detective takes Natalie to a Long Island churchyard. And shows her the headstone of

Ben Mooney, 1898-1919. Ben died in a plane crash, the detective has learned, only weeks after his return from France as a fugitive.

Even though Natalie only knew Ben for only a few months, she has dreamed of him for a lifetime. She dreamed because he taught her to dream. And now she grieves because he's gone forever.

Or is he? In upstate New York, a plane flies low over a farm field. Cropdusting. Piloted by none other than Ben Mooney. Living under the alias Benjamin Masters. Ben is lying low, still a fugitive from an Army that wants to shoot him for desertion. He's trying to scrape together enough money to finish a new plane he's designed using all of his combat experience. Faster, stronger -- and safer. If Tony had been flying this plane, he might still be alive.

But right now Ben needs \$1000 for a state-of-the-art engine. He has less than a quarter of that. But he's desperate to finish the plane and test his design so he gathers every last cent and heads out to play poker.

He has a great night and he gets close to his \$1000. But then he bets too aggressively -- as he always does -- and loses it all.

That's when the two strangers move in. They've heard that Ben is the best pilot around and they've got an easy job for him: land a plane on the Niagara River and pick up a friend of theirs. It pays \$1500. Ben can't believe the money -- and he can't resist. He takes the job. But as Ben taxis the float plane up to the dock, the "friend" dashes out and leaps aboard as dozens of federal agents appear on shore and open fire. The man shoves out his hand. "Nice to see ya, kid. Al Capone." Ben is forced by the heavy fire to turn the plane downstream -- directly toward the falls. But they aren't going fast enough to lift off when they go over the edge and disappear -- only to emerge from the mist in flight. Stunned tourists snap pictures of the amazing feat.

The Yale-Princeton football game. Natalie sits with RITA ROBINSON, Juan's sister, at the 50 yard line, front row. Juan's seat is empty and Natalie's irritated. Juan made a huge deal out of inviting her to this game. And now it's half-time and he hasn't shown.

Then she hears an airplane. It swoops in low over the field and unfurls a banner: "MARRY ME, NATALIE." It lands and taxis right up to Natalie. Juan hops out and drops to one knee, his arms extended toward her. The crowd roars its approval. As security rushes toward the plane, Natalie leaps onto the field, joins Juan in the plane and they take off together.

Some time later, Ben is inside his workshop installing the engine bought with Al Capone's money when a car pulls up outside. A stranger walks in. It's Juan. He immediately infuriates Ben by scoffing at his airplane design. Then tells Ben he's putting together a team to compete in the New York to Santiago Air Mail Race. Flying some *real* planes. He's looking for a third pilot, someone with the skill and the guts to

do this -- and he throws down a newspaper with a picture of Ben flying out of the mists of Niagara Falls. Ben sizes up Juan. "You a friend of Al Capone?" No, says Juan. But some people suspect my father is.

Juan said he was looking for a "third" pilot. If Juan is the first, Ben wants to know who's second.

Juan leads Ben outside. Pulls open his car door. Out steps Natalie.

Meet my new wife, says Juan. Natalie Bouchard Robinson.

Natalie sees Ben. Ben sees Natalie. And suddenly everyone's world gets very complicated.

### Act Two

Ben tells Juan he'll fly with him. But he has two conditions: the planes they fly will be Ben's, and Natalie will not be one of the pilots. This is the toughest route in the world. They'll traverse a mountain range that soars higher than their planes can fly. They need pilots with skills and experience Natalie can't possibly have.

Natalie storms out. And takes to the air in Ben's new plane. Her flying skill amazes Ben. And the performance of Ben's revolutionary little monoplane amazes Juan.

A deal is struck. Ben will build two more of his planes. And he, Juan and Natalie will fly them to Santiago.

While they race to build the planes, Natalie tells Ben that she has searched for him for years. Natalie doesn't know what to feel. She won't say it, but it's clear her romantic interest in Ben is alive and well.

Ben has no intentions of getting involved with a married woman. But he wants her to understand what happened back in France. He tells her about the night of the murder. Captain Powers was the real killer. His squadron made a drunken pact never to tell. But the next morning, Ben couldn't live with that. He tried to persuade Powers to turn himself in. When that failed, he reluctantly went to Power's commander to tell what he knew. Only to find Powers there first along with the rest of the squadron -- all of them testifying that Ben was the killer. Why he didn't stay and fight the charges Ben refuses to say.

But he's been in hiding ever since. Watching the Army and Navy keep flying the same old planes while the rest of the world races ahead. Watching those same old planes keep crashing and pilots keep dying. That's why he built this new plane. But guess who's in charge of acquiring new air technology for the Army? Colonel Ricky Powers. This race is Ben's chance to show what his plane can do.

The rest of the story, in broad strokes:

Ben finishes the planes and the trio flies them into a big air meet on Long Island where the race to Santiago will begin. Ben tries to stay out of sight, when he sees two planes collide in a race. One crashes. The other is badly damaged. Ben takes off and performs a mid-air rescue, saving the pilot.

In Washington, Colonel Powers gets a call describing the rescue. Exactly like the rescue Powers told about all those years ago in France. Ben is back.

The air race to Santiago is ready to begin. The pilots climb into the planes. Only then does Ben learn who's leading the other team: Heinrich Grunfelt, the old German ace Ben's friend Tony died chasing.

Ben, Juan and Natalie are unable to start their engines. Grunfelt siphoned out the fuel.

Grunfelt's team takes off, Ben, Juan and Natalie scramble to refuel -- and a convoy of military vehicles approaches. Ben gets off the ground just ahead of the authorities and finally the race is on.

As the planes race south --

Ben has to avoid airfields where he might be arrested.

They fly over deserts and jungles and through storms.

And when they land to refuel in a Mexican village, they discover that Grunfelt has arranged for the villagers to attack their planes. They have to fight their way back into the air.

One of the planes crash-lands in a storm and has to be rebuilt.

And through it all, Ben is growing to appreciate Natalie for the woman she's become. He drinks in the companionship of the one person who knows his secret. Despite his best intentions, he's falling in love.

Then the planes get caught in a clear blue windstorm. DESCRIBE HOW JUAN SAVES THEM.

Finally they head for Sao Paulo, the final checkpoint before crossing the Andes to Santiago.

But the instant Ben lands in Sao Paulo, US troops surround him. He tries to get his plane back into the air, but Grunfelt taxis in front of him and cuts off the last route of escape. There's no way out. Ben is arrested. He's out of the race.

Act Three

BEN CONFRONTS OFFICER FROM HIS OLD SQUADRON. HE UNDERSTANDS LOYALTY. LET ME FINISH THIS RACE -- AND GET YOU THE KIND OF PLANES YOU NEED.

CRASH ON THE ICE SHELF/NATALIE HAS DECIDED SHE WANTS BEN/BEN TURNS HER DOWN.

They climb as high as their planes will fly and head through a snowy pass. Ben's plane springs an oil leak. There's nowhere to put down and make a repair, but if he keeps flying the engine could seize up. Juan becomes separated from Ben and Natalie in the clouds. With no other choice, Ben puts down on a small ice shelf on the mountainside. It's a harrowing landing and Ben's plane ends up at the edge of a terrifying drop-off. Natalie circles. Ben waves her off. It's cold, there's no way to get a plane off this mountain, and there's no way to climb down. Natalie lands anyway, her plane skidding to a stop beside Ben's.

Grunfelt's planes pass on their way through the mountains as Ben plugs his oil leak. It will be dark soon and they'll freeze to death if they stay here. There's only one chance. To push the planes off the cliff and hope they begin flying before they hit bottom.

For Natalie it's the moment of truth. She loves Juan. But if she gets out of this place alive, she wants to spend her life with Ben. But Ben has already made a more noble choice. He tells her that if gets out of here alive -- he'll climb right back in an airplane and do it all again. Natalie understands. And it breaks her heart. But she knows he's right.

They push Natalie's plane as far back from the edge as they can, then she revs the engine and Ben pushes her toward the cliff. As she goes over the edge, her landing gear strikes a boulder and is knocked almost completely off. His plane dives through clear air. And finally picks up enough speed to fly.

DOGFIGHT WITH GRUNFELT.

As Ben and Natalie come out of the mountains above Santiago, they overtake Grunfelt's plane. Grunfelt salutes Ben as he passes, a good sport. Waves Ben in close, seems to want to say something to him. Ben flies closer. And Grunfelt pulls out a pistol and fires.

Ben takes evasive action and Grunfelt pursues, a rematch of their WWI dogfight. And even though Ben's unarmed, he's the better pilot with the better plane and he manages to maneuver in behind Grunfelt. As Grunfelt fires back at Ben, Ben's uses his prop to chew up the tail section of Grunfelt's plane.

Grunfelt makes a crash landing in the valley below. It looks good until the last second when Grunfelt cracks up and his plane slams over, upside down.

Ben circles the wreck. There's no sign of life.

#### LANDING IN SANTIAGO.

Santiago airport. Juan lands first. Followed by two of the German planes. Finally Natalie approaches. She could ditch the plane and parachute to safety, but her team would be disqualified. They have to get all three planes to the airport. So she nurses her plane in for a landing, skids on one wheel, spins in a shower of sparks, and comes to a stop. Alive and well. She climbs from her wrecked plane and lets Juan take her in his arms.

Each team has two planes home safe. Now they wait. An airplane engine is heard. A plane comes into view. Ben's plane. MPs are waiting as the plane lands. Out climbs Grunfelt. Injured. Followed by Ben, covering him with the pistol.

Ben turns over the mail pouch that signifies victory in the race -- and is immediately arrested -- and his plane is seized for shipment back to Washington on orders of the Secretary of War.

MPs hold Juan and Natalie back as Ben inside a dark hangar.

#### Postscript

Natalie never saw Ben Masters again.

But at the National Air Races in Cleveland one year later, a plane dubbed the Mystery Air Ship competed and so dramatically outperformed the Army and Navy's planes that they were at last forced to scrap their old technology and order new plane's inspired by Ben Mooney's design.

Eighteen year's later, the Air Force that grew out of that action led America to victory in World War II.

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