



Beneath Haunted Waters

By Peter Stekel

Some places are haunted. Not by spirits or ghosts or by poltergeists. They are haunted in the truest sense of the word; haunted by the living who visit a place over and over because there is a story that draws them in. Here is such a story.

During the early morning hours of Dec. 6, 1943, a B-24 Liberator bomber with a crew of six was lost somewhere over the Sierra Nevada mountains. They were returning to their base at Hammer Field in Fresno, California, after a day and night training mission to Phoenix, Arizona.

Later that morning a second B-24 fell from the sky over the western Sierra while searching for the first. Of that crew of eight, the co-pilot and radio operator managed to bail out. In 1955 their Liberator was found when the reservoir constituting Huntington Lake was drained so a utility company could perform repairs to the dam's spillway.

Adding to the tragedy of losing one aircraft and crew while searching for another is the ironic story of Clint Hester.



Lt. Robert Hester

Co-pilot of the first airplane was Clint Hester's 24-year-old son, Lt. Robert Hester. The elder Hester spent the next 16 years looking for his son. Clint hiked all over the Sierra, centering his search around the Mount Whitney area in Sequoia National Park. In February 1959, Clint Hester suffered a fatal heart attack. Then, on July 29, 1960, two USGS geologists and Leroy Brock, a backcountry ranger with Kings Canyon National Park, chanced upon the crash site of Lt. Hester and his crewmates in an isolated and unnamed lake at 11,255 feet. They were about 40 air miles north of Mount Whitney and the search zone of Clint Hester. The lake was later renamed Hester honoring the father and the son he never succeeded in finding.

On Aug. 4, 1960, the army sent a detachment of soldiers via helicopter to Hester Lake to support a diving operation. Two hard hat divers were tasked with recovering the crew from the sunken Liberator. Due to the terrain and high elevation the helicopter was unable to set down anywhere near the lake. As the chopper hovered over an area 700 yards below the lake basin, equipment was pushed out the door. The soldiers followed, jumping from a height of eight feet. It took three hours to carry all the diving and camping equipment about a quarter

▲ This panorama of Hester Lake was photographed in August 2011. To the right is the cliff where the 1960 Army recovery team believed the B-24 crashed. Black Giant and Black Divide are in the background.

Photos courtesy of Peter Stekel

▼ August 1960: An Army diver prepares to enter Hester Lake to search for the crew that crashed here on Dec. 6, 1943.



mile up slope.

After eight days of diving, on Aug. 11, the search for remains was concluded. The water was too deep and cold, the elevation too high, and the diving technology of the 1960s too rudimentary for the divers to stay in the



This dog tag helped identify the only positively known crew member from the Hester Lake crash.

lake for very long. However, some crew remains were recovered from water 35 feet deep. Sgt. Robert Bursey was the only one who could be identified and he was sent home to Rutland, Vermont, to be buried. The rest of the remains were consolidated and interred Oct. 3, 1960, at Arlington National Cemetery. Some airplane wreckage was brought up from the lake and taken home as souvenirs.

The Hester Lake B-24 has excited and intrigued istorians, aircraft aficionados, Sierra Nevada hikers and climbers, and divers ever since its disappearance. I first began hiking in Sequoia and Kings Canyon in the 1960s. During those years and well into the '70s, people in the backcountry were still talking about Clint Hester's search for his son.

Several parties have attempted to scuba dive Hester Lake in order to examine the wreckage that lies at the bottom of the 100-foot-deep lake. A 1989 expedition was successful; all others have failed. The reason is simple. Hester Lake is remote and difficult to reach, requiring a 13-mile hike from South Lake (9,755 feet),

over Bishop Pass (11,972 feet) into LeConte Canyon (8,800 feet). Then, the real work begins of reaching Hester Lake.

Divers haul their gear in by packstock. Then they must ford the middle fork of the Kings River and carry their tanks and other equipment on their backs, climbing 2,500 vertical feet in one mile, straight up the western wall of LeConte Canyon. The climb includes a 350-foot, class 3 pitch through a narrow notch full of vegetation, loose rock and the outlet stream for Hester Lake. The trip is arduous, strenuous and not for the faint of heart or inexperienced. Invariably, divers make a reconnaissance hike to the lake and are so discouraged by the difficulty in getting there and their fear of being injured, that they never return.

Despite the difficulty of reaching Hester Lake, people do succeed in reaching it. A few people with a direct historical connection to Hester Lake have attempted to visit the lake. Lt. Hester's daughter, a babe in arms when her father disappeared in 1943, has made the trip. The nephew of Robert Bursey, flight engineer of the lost B-24, tried in 2003 but was unable to reach the lake.

Most of what can be taken away of the B-24 has been removed from the lake. Journalist accounts from 1960 mention lots of wreckage around and in Hester Lake. They also mention removing parts of the airplane—mostly engine components and instruments—for display and souvenirs. LeConte Canyon ranger Randy Morgenson gathered up several sacks of airplane debris and arranged for them to be flown out in 1987 and 1988. In the course of researching this story I've even met a few people who actually have pieces of the airplane.

My interest in Hester Lake is a direct outgrowth from the research I did for my previous book, *Final Flight—The Mystery of a WWII Plane Crash and*



Hester Lake, center, is separated from the Black Divide by a ridge and two other lakes. Some people think the B-24 struck the pyramidal peak at the top-center of the photograph. This image was taken August 2011 looking south from approximately 15,000 feet.

the Frozen Airmen in the High Sierra. On Nov. 18, 1942, a Beech 18 AT-7 Navigator from Mather Field (east of Sacramento, California) with four crew members disappeared while on a training mission.

Wreckage from the plane was found on Mendel Glacier in northern Kings Canyon during the summer of 1947. No crew members were found until 2005 when two climbers came across human remains melting out of the ice.

I found the remains of a second crew member while exploring Mendel Glacier in 2007. Trying to understand why the AT-7 crashed, I reviewed all the other airplane crashes in the region and was reacquainted with the Hester Lake story.

I spent three days at Hester Lake during the middle of August 2011. The purpose was to search for airplane wreckage and chart a debris field (if one existed) that might be helpful in constructing a crash scenario. The Army recovery team from 1960 believed the B-24 crashed into a rock cliff at the edge of the lake and exploded, scattering the airplane and crew across the ice-covered lake.

A newspaper reporter who visited the lake before the Army in 1960 postulated the B-24 had struck the Black Divide, east of Hester Lake, and that wreckage had slid down the mountainside and onto the lake's frozen surface. The following spring, when the lake thawed, the airplane sank to the bottom.

Another reporter claimed the plane hit a lone peak south of Hester Lake. He felt the B-24 had lost an entire wing and cartwheeled through the sky before falling to earth. Each reporter's evidence was that they had spotted wreckage high above Hester Lake. But they



The crew of a U.S. Army Air Forces B-24 that crashed into Hester Lake on Dec. 6, 1943. Kneeling, left to right, are Lt. William Cronin, navigator; Lt. Charles Turvey, pilot; Lt. Ellis Fish, bombardier; Lt. Robert Hester, co-pilot. Standing is Sgt. Robert Bursey, flight engineer. The other three are unknown.

didn't say where or what.

I got in touch with the only scuba diver to successfully dive in Hester Lake and he sent me a short video he shot.

The Liberator lies at the bottom of the lake, twisted and distorted. Other than two engines and a few propeller blades it's unrecognizable to me as an airplane. The lake bottom is covered with a deep layer of silt. There is no way of knowing what is buried there.

A college student who became interested in the story made a trip to Hester Lake in 1994, exploring with a wetsuit and snorkel. He described to me finding one of the bomber's four engines in about 15 feet of water. The propellers were "feathered," which means they weren't turning (i.e. the engine was shut down) when the plane entered the water. This suggests that engine failure could have been responsible for the plane crash because the B-24 was difficult to handle when running on anything but all four engines. During my visit to the lake I did not see this engine.

During my exploration I was assisted by my longtime hiking partner, Michele Hinatsu, and by the current LeConte Canyon ranger, Rick Sanger.

On both a personal and professional level, I was glad Sanger chose to accompany us to Hester Lake. He and I have known each other for about 15 years, and he's a great conversationalist and storyteller. Not only that, Sanger is knowledgeable about the wilderness area of Sequoia and Kings Canyon and previously has visited Hester Lake. Having an extra set of eyes to search around Hester Lake and the rest of the lake basin was fantastic.

I believe that government's responsibility is to serve the people and not the other way around. I also believe that citizens have a responsibility to assist their government whenever possible so agencies can effectively and efficiently deliver their mandate to provide services to the people. Not only that, I collaborate with the NPS because I trust the agency and the people working within it.

That trust dates back to my introduction to wilderness via an organizational camp in a western national park. In 1939 the long-serving superintendent of this park recognized the value of encouraging youth groups to visit the park's wilderness area. With a handshake and promise of support, a summer camp program in California was established.

During its 72-year operating history, the camp had a hugely positive impact on tens of thousands of boys. Many of the boys, like me, who worked on the camp's staff went on to careers in business, finance, politics,

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medicine, law, academia, education, military service and even with the NPS. Exposure to wilderness and the park service ideal were important contributors to our success. Through ever-changing park administrations the camp always worked to maintain a constructive and contributive relationship with the NPS. Finally, a superintendent arrived who was interested in neither and the camp was forced to close.

Despite my disappointment with the camp's ignominious end, I still retain trust in the NPS institution and its people. This is why I was happy having Sanger at Hester Lake in his professional capacity. Given that I hoped to find historic artifacts, I appreciated being accompanied by an official NPS observer. And finally, if the one reporter from 1960 was correct in his belief that the B-24 had broken apart in the sky above Hester Lake, there was some possibility of finding human remains. Should this occur, Sanger's presence would facilitate organizing a recovery team quickly.

During our three-day visit we looked around Hester Lake and the other lakes nearby but were unsuccessful in finding debris or any trace of the B-24 crew. Sanger climbed the lower haunches of the peak south of Hester Lake. One reporter from 1960 thought the B-24 hit this peak in 1943 and then tumbled into the lake. No evidence of the plane was seen. Of course, because we found neither evidence of the crew nor debris doesn't mean this evidence doesn't exist but it does make me wonder. So many previous visitors said they had seen so much wreckage. Why didn't we?


Using our Thermarest pads and some swim goggles, we paddled around the shoreline of Hester Lake and peered into its waters. We were unsuccessful in locating any significant pieces of wreckage. This included the engines spotted

by earlier visitors. Once again I wonder. Why were we unable to see what previous visitors had seen?

To amuse myself, I walked around the lake with copies of photos taken by the 1960 Army recovery team and did my best to locate the position where the image was taken. Then, I attempted to take a photograph of the same scene.

In the evenings, we ate dinner and gazed across the lake, discussing what might have happened here during the early morning of Dec. 6, 1943. The B-24 Liberator had no business being over these mountains; they were supposed to fly up the western side of the Sierra, not the eastern side. Had they been blown off course or were they terribly bewildered? What role might engine failure have to do with the aircraft's loss?

All is quiet, serene and still in Hester Lake today. And, that is how it should be. One of the great advantages of Kings Canyon is that it's possible to stand in the footsteps of past visitors, even historical visitors, and experience the same scene. It's a wonderful fulfillment of the NPS ideal when you are able to see the landscape with your historical mind's eye; when you can study the documents and photographs and actually put together all the pieces to construct a story.

On our last day at Hester Lake I stood in the quiet morning as the sun rose. Looking southward along the spine of the Sierra Nevada, in the light of a new day, I could almost see Lt. Robert Hester's B-24 coming in below the peaks. 

*Seattle-based Peter Stekel is the author of **Final Flight: The Mystery of a WWII Plane Crash and the Frozen Airmen in the High Sierra**. He has contributed to *Ranger* several times. If you have any information about the Hester and Huntington Lake B-24 airplane crashes, please contact him at peter@FinalFlightTheBook.com.*



The remains of only one crew member from the Hester Lake B-24 crash could be identified. The other five were buried together at Arlington National Cemetery on Oct. 3, 1960, in Lot 24, Section 15.