



the Tragic Tale of the Lake Hester Liberator

Hungary, Greece, Austria and Rumania. Within a period of three months, it was twice awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation.

But it was during the unit's state-side training missions that, within a period of two weeks, it was plagued with the tragic loss of four Liberators, with many of the crew members killed, missing, or injured.

The first of bomb group's Consolidated B-24 accidents, crashed near Tonopah, Nevada on 22 December, killing the copilot 2nd Lt. Edward J. Drucker, and injuring the pilot and two enlisted crew members. The story of the second Liberator, which crashed during the night of 4-5 December, and the discovery of the wreckage during mid-1969, was recounted by writer R. W. Koch in the February 1978 issue (Vol. 14, No. 2) of *Air Classics*. On 5 December, 13 days after the loss of the first B-24, another of the twin-tailed, four-engined bombers from Hammer Field, piloted by 2nd Lt. Charles W. Turvey, disappeared after encountering severe turbulence and heavy snow. The following day, the fourth B-24, piloted by Captain William H. Darden, also disappeared. Its discovery was related by this writer in the September 1976 (Vol. 12, No. 9) issue of *Air Classics*.

So far our story has covered old ground; both writers having recounted the details of the four crashes before. From this point on, what follows is actually two stories. One is an account of the disappearance and the eventual discovery of the ill-fated B-24 which disappeared on



During the bleak, cold winter of 1943, tragedy struck the 461st Bombardment Group four times in 14 days. In December 1943, during the unit's last month of its accelerated training program in the States, the group flew day and night missions from its home-base at Hammer Field, Fresno, California. In one month's time, Colonel Frederic E. Glantzberg and his unit were scheduled to depart for the Mediterranean Theater of Operations to begin combat operations with the Fifteenth Air Force. The air echelon was to fly its B-24 Liberators via South America, stopping in North Africa before joining the ground echelon in Italy.

Once the 461st arrived in the combat zone, it distinguished itself time and again, successfully striking targets deep inside Italy, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia,



Seven crew members from the 461st Bombardment Group head for their B-24 Liberator to fly a training mission. Can any reader identify the airmen in this photograph, taken during December of 1943 at Hammer Field, Fresno, California?

5 December. The second is the story of a father's love and his indomitable will.

On Sunday evening, 5 December 1943, flight personnel and ground crews readied B-24E 41-2846 for another mission. To the Liberator crew at Hammer Field, this day's mission was to be yet another training flight in night celestial navigation.

As their B-24 waited its turn on the taxiway, 2nd Lt. Turvey of Reesville, Ohio, ran over the pre-takeoff checklist with his co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Hester. Aboard the aircraft and busy at their stations were the four other members of the bomber crew: 2nd Lt. William T. Cronin, navigator, of Olean, New York; 2nd Lt. Ellis H. Fish, bombardier, Minneapolis; Sgt. Howard A. Wandpke, radio operator, Toledo, Ohio, and Staff Sgt. Robert O. Bursey, flight engineer, from Rutland, Vermont.

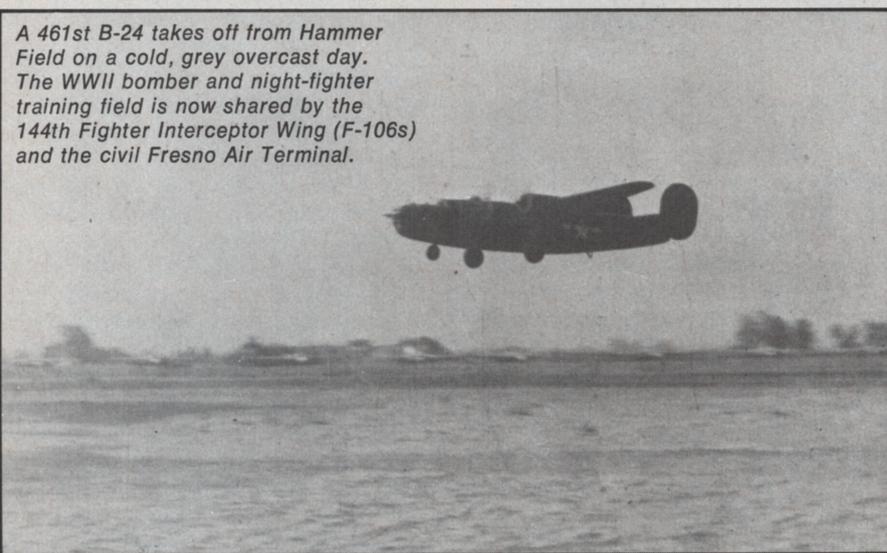
When the crew was ready, Turvey released the brakes and swung the B-24 onto the runway. The bomber functioned faultlessly. With a "cleared for takeoff" from the tower, Turvey opened the throttles and the Liberator began its take-off roll down the 7,200 ft runway. The B-24 lumbered off the ground and began a steady climb. Turvey gently banked the aircraft over Fresno. He turned left again and set his course for Tucson, Arizona.

On the return leg of the training flight from Tucson Army Air Base, the B-24 flew on a flight path which would reverse the outbound course. During the last leg of the flight, the bomber disappeared.

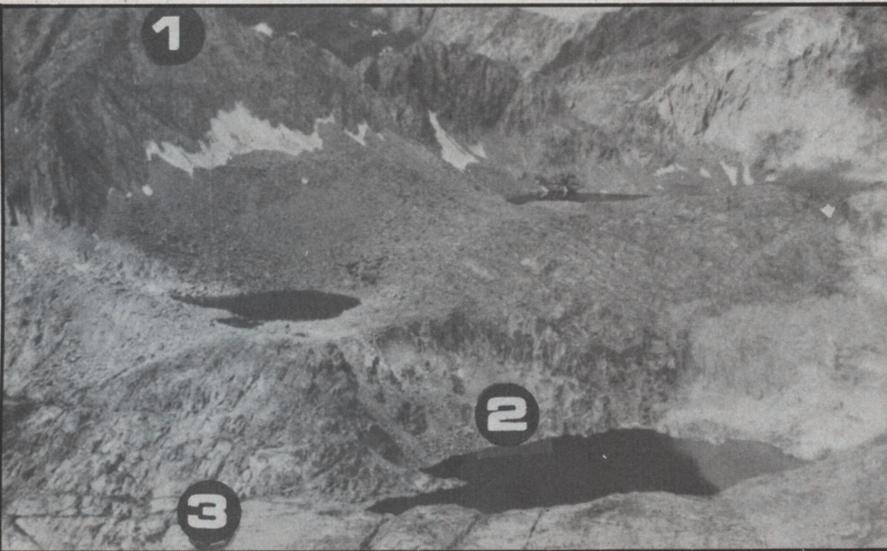
At Hammer Field, authorities grew apprehensive when Turvey's plane was reported overdue. Finally, even the most optimistic were convinced that the bomber had already exhausted its fuel supply. With the hopes that Turvey had landed at an alternate field because of weather conditions, or possibly due to mechanical problems, the base began to contact airfields within the B-24's range.

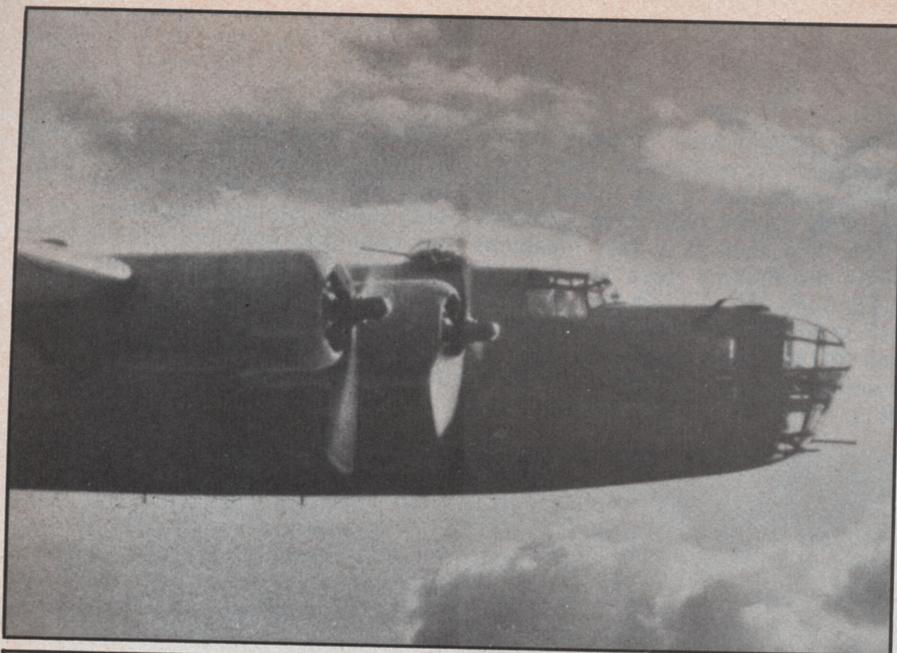
As Hammer Field prepared to

Hopelessly lost in a blinding snow storm, one of Hammer Field's B-24s exploded as it rammed into a 12,500 ft. peak (1) of the Sierra Nevada. Parts of the bomber's wreckage slid down into the 11,400 ft. unnamed lake (2). Pieces of the B-24 were also found along a ridge (3).

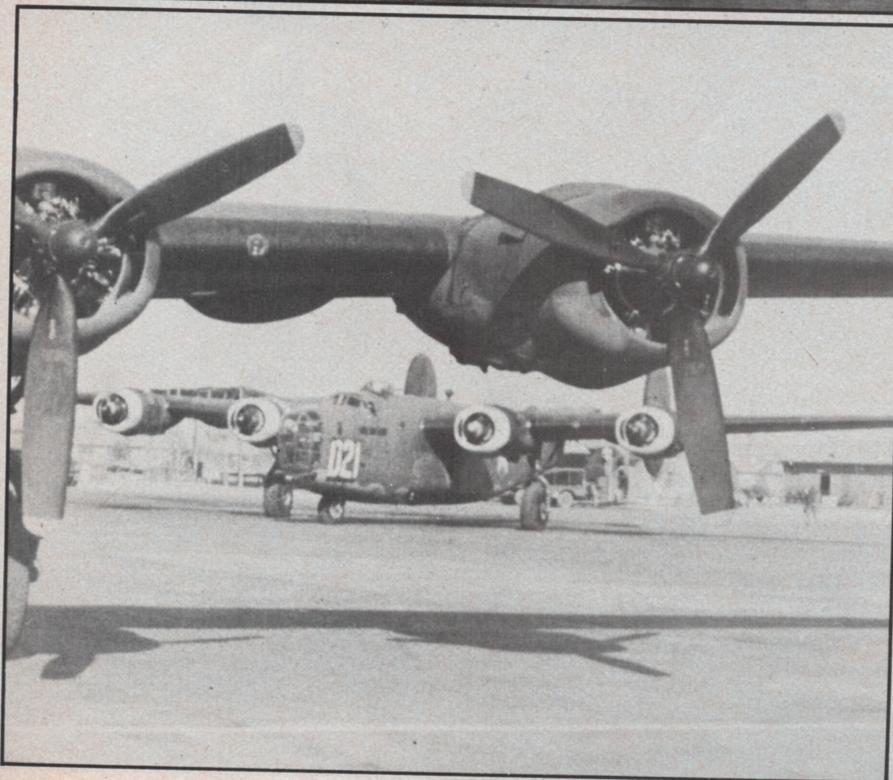


A 461st B-24 takes off from Hammer Field on a cold, grey overcast day. The WWII bomber and night-fighter training field is now shared by the 144th Fighter Interceptor Wing (F-106s) and the civil Fresno Air Terminal.





Well-worn Consolidated B-24E of the type used by the 461st in their training missions from Hammer Field. The large codes on the nose of the aircraft were common to machines used in the State-side training role. The diverse camouflage scheme is noteworthy.



Sometimes death rode in the cockpit for men who not only died in combat but also on training missions. The 461st Bombardment Group lost four of the big, deep-bellied B-24s within 14 days while flying training missions out of Hammer Field.

launch a search for Turvey and his crew, tragedy struck the 461st Bombardment Group a fourth time, when Captain Darden's Liberator was reported missing.

The bomb group's training program now ground to a virtual halt, as almost every available plane was pressed into the search.

Combined military and civilian air and land searches were conducted for the two bombers and their crews. Time and again, snow storms, high winds, towering clouds, and severe turbulence forced postponements in the search for the B-24s.

Intensive searches by Army Air Force planes from Hammer, Muroc (now Edwards Air Force Base), and March Field repeatedly failed to turn up any trace of either Turvey's or Darden's missing Liberators.

Finally after weeks of rigorous and exhaustive efforts, the Air Force was forced to halt the searches because of the failure to find any trace of either the planes or the crew members.

Since Turvey's bomber was last reported in the area between Las Vegas and Independence, California, at the foot of the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, planes from Muroc and March Fields concentrated all their efforts in that area.

But one man was certain that Turvey's B-24 had landed in the high country of Kings Canyon National Park. He was Clinton Hester of West Los Angeles, the father of Lt. Hester, the 24-year-old co-pilot aboard the Liberator.

The elder Hester was convinced from the beginning that his young son was somewhere in the high country of the park, and that his son needed his help. No one seems to know why he was so certain that his son was somewhere in Kings Canyon National Park, when the aircraft had last reported its position somewhere between Las Vegas and Independence.

As soon as the first snows melted, Hester headed for the high country. All through spring, summer, and into late fall he trekked through the mountains, ravines and valleys. He

(Continued on page 95)

Framed by the unique elliptical cowled engines of another B-24, a Liberator taxis out for take off from Hammer Field.

Liberator

(Continued from page 59)

followed the streams and rivers that lace through the park. As the weather turned cold again, and the first snows began to drape the towering Sierra peaks, Hester was forced to abandon his search. His body was exhausted, his hands and face weather-beaten, his back and shoulders rounded from the heavy back-pack he had borne, but his will had not been shaken.

In the spring of 1945, Hester again left the comfort of his Southern California home, and headed north toward the park. He was prepared to spend months in his lonely quest in the rugged high Sierra. He too, must have felt certain that his son could not have survived the freezing, bitter cold of the high elevations. But Hester was still determined to find his son, and return the body home to its final resting place.

Three times within a period of four years, the elder Hester suffered the loss of a loved one. His first wife died shortly before World War Two. The second Mrs. Hester died less than two years after the tragic loss of his son.

Grief stricken, but more determined than ever, he continued his search for his son. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Hester remained indomitable in his belief that his son was somewhere in the mountains of the park.

For more than 14 years he trekked through the national park in a relentless search.

Finally, the day arrived when he was forced to abandon his search for the last time, because of a severe heart ailment. In 1959, Hester, whose heart, had held such great love for his son, and had suffered through so much grief, died.

One year later, in the last week of July 1960, the wreckage of the bomber was found. It was accidentally discovered by a national park ranger and two government geologists while on a geological survey into an almost inaccessible area, rarely visited by man.

The site is near Lake Le Conte in the northeast end of Kings Canyon National Park. The finding of the wreckage helped to lift some of the mystery of the missing bomber.

The Liberator had lain undiscovered since it crashed in 1943 into a remote Sierra mountain, about 70 air miles east of Fresno.

The B-24 had rammed into a 12,500 ft peak of the Black Divide Range

during a severe snow storm. The plane had apparently exploded after impacting against the mountain ridge. The aircraft wreckage was scattered over a wide area. Pieces from the bomber had slid down into one of the small lakes below. Some of it lay along a small 11,400 ft high unnamed lake. Parts of the aircraft were partially submerged in the lake. The remainder was scattered 2,000 to 3,000 feet up to the peak of a nearby mountain.

The bodies of the crew members had been tossed around the mountains. Wild animals had likely carried away bodies and scattered the remains. At first it was believed that the icy temperatures of the water had preserved any bodies which may have been in the lake.

Shortly after the wreckage of the B-24 was discovered, the Sixth Army Headquarters at the Presidio of San Francisco dispatched an Army team led by Major John Thayer. The team also included two skin divers and deep sea diving equipment to probe the wreckage for possible bodies.

The military recovery team spent two weeks making a systematic search to locate all the remains of the bomber's crew. They were able to only recover small portions of the bodies. Their findings helped confirm that the human remains were from the missing B-24E s/n 41-2846.

The Army examiners were able to make positive identification of one man. The remains of Staff Sgt. Bursley, the flight engineer aboard the ill-fated Liberator, were identified from his I.D. (identification) tags. His wallet, containing further identifica-

tion, was found nearby.

An Army Air Force handbook bearing the name of 2nd Lt. Cronin, the navigator, was salvaged from the wreckage, along with bones, fragments of bones, and incomplete human remains.

Bursley's remains were buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery in his home town of Rutland, Vermont. On 3 October 1960, the five other airmen were interred in Arlington National Cemetery. Their incomplete remains were buried in a single casket.

Three months later, following the discovery of Bursley's B-24, the Fresno Chapter of the Air Force Association and Maury Webster, general manager of radio station KCBS in San Francisco, simultaneously initiated action to have the small unnamed lake, the scene of the bomber crash, named in honor of Lt. Hester. Hester was the only Californian aboard when the bomber crashed.

The Fresno unit of the Air Force Association and Webster petitioned President Eisenhower, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton, California's governor, and the state's congressmen and U.S. senators.

Then in December 1960, almost to the day the bomber had crashed 17 years earlier, the Secretary of Interior designated the lake, Lake Hester, to commemorate the father and son.

This story ends with a rather ironic note, in that the elder Hester had come to within less than ten miles of find the missing bomber, and had died less than a year before the discovery of his son's plane.

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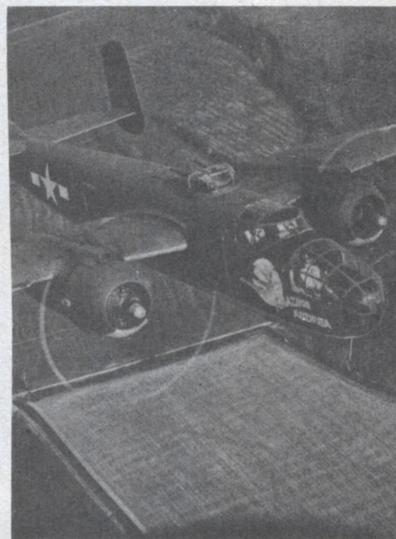
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