

Students join search in Sierra for WWII airmen's remains

By Cathy Locke

The Sacramento Bee

Nearly 70 years after four young World War II aviators disappeared in the central Sierra during a training flight, a contingent of students and teachers from an El Dorado County high school will join in the search for the remains of two of the airmen.

John Daniels, a retired science teacher from Golden Sierra High School in Garden Valley, said he was inspired by his friend Peter Stekel, author of "Final Flight."

The book explores the mystery of the 1942 crash of a U.S. Army AT-7 Navigator training plane and the discovery in the past decade of the frozen remains of two of the airmen. It was Stekel who in 2007 discovered the second body in the Mendel Glacier in Kings Canyon National Park.

Today, Daniels, Golden Sierra teacher Mark Hendrix and Hendrix's wife, retired teacher Patricia Graybill, will head to the high Sierra with four Golden Sierra students and a physician trained in wilderness medicine. They plan to hike to the Mendel Glacier to meet up with Stekel and a team from History Flight, a nonprofit that works to locate the remains of American service members missing in action from World War II.

Stekel and the History Flight team, including dogs trained for cadaver

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searches, are scheduled to helicopter to the site.

"He and I go back about 50 years," Daniels said of his friendship with Stekel, who lives in the Seattle area.

They first met at a Boy Scout camp in Sequoia National Park, leading kids on hikes in the Sierra. They met again at a camp staff reunion a few years ago, and Daniels invited Stekel to visit El Dorado County this past spring for what he described as a mini book tour. Stekel talked about "Final Flight" in appearances at Golden Sierra High, local libraries and civic club meetings.

When the opportunity arose for students to participate in the September search, Daniels set it up with school district approval.

"We can only take experienced kids. They have to have done a lot of backpacking," Daniels said. "This isn't a training hike."

During the seven-day expedition, they will trek to the 13,000-foot elevation. The terrain, above timberline, is barren.

The Golden Sierra student body will have an op-



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portunity to be involved in the expedition through a satellite phone feed from the search site.

The students who make the trek will take video and turn over the footage to the high school's videography class to produce a documentary about the expedition, Daniels said. A radio broadcast also is planned over KFOK Community Radio, FM 95.1, in Georgetown.

The AT-7 Navigator left

Mather Field east of Sacramento at 7:11 a.m. Nov. 18, 1942, for a five-hour flight. Aboard for the training exercise was the pilot, 2nd Lt. William Gamber, 23, and three aviation cadets, John Mortenson, 25, Ernest Glenn Munn, 23, and Leo Mustonen, 22. The plane never returned.

In 1947, four college students discovered the wreckage of the aircraft at more than 12,000 feet, strewn across Mendel Glacier in northern Kings Canyon National Park. The wreckage was embedded in ice. Two expeditions in the late 1940s failed to locate the crew's remains.

In 2005, two hikers came upon a man in a wool sweater and a canvas flight suit hunched over a rock. The figure was encased in ice. The mummified body was identified as that of Mustonen. In 2007, Stekel found Munn's remains.

Working with History Flight, the Golden Sierra group will search for the bodies of Gamber and Mortenson.

Daniels said he expects the cost for the Golden Sierra team, including pay for a substitute teacher during Hendrix's absence, to total about \$2,500. Donations are being accepted.

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