

Airman grounds tale in reality

Writer recounts his
discovery of WWII
aviator in Sierra.

By Marc Benjamin
The Fresno Bee

At first, writer Peter Stekel thought he was looking at a dying tree.

But it couldn't have been. He was above the tree line — about 12,300 feet up on the Mount Mendel glacier in Kings Canyon National Park.

He took a closer look. It was a body.

Stekel's research trip to the Sierra — a hunt for relics from a 1942 plane crash — gave him a story to tell even before he finishes his book about the ill-fated military training flight. The body he found was one of the lost airmen.

"I looked at him, and I thought of my father," Stekel said. "I was choking back the tears a little bit."

Stekel's father — who was a young man during World War II — passed away last year.

Stekel's discovery Aug. 15 is the latest chapter in the history of the crash site first discovered by college students hiking on the glacier in 1947.

An AT-7 training flight from Mather Field in Sacramento had strayed 200 miles off course on Nov. 18, 1942.

A blizzard is believed to have caused the crash.

In 2005, ice climbers discovered the body of Leo Mustonen, 22, of Brainerd, Minn., an airman.

The other crew members were 2nd Lt. William Gamber,

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Airman: Body initially looked like fallen tree

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23, of Fayette, Ohio; John Mortensen, 25, of Moscow, Idaho; and Ernest Glenn Munn, 23, of Saint Clairsville, Ohio. Until now, no other bodies had been found.

Stekel — who lives in Seattle but grew up in California — traces his interest in the crash to a magazine article he wrote after Mustonen's body was found.

The story intrigued him, he said, because it was about everyday people doing their part in a war effort at a time when the nation was on edge.

"It struck me that this is real history," he said. "It's a more personal history, and because it's personal history it deserves more attention. That was why I tried to go beyond a magazine assignment."

His trip to the Sierra was part of his research for "The Final Flight," a book intended to chronicle the training flight.

Stekel wanted to go to the site in July 2006, but overflowing creeks, rivers and lakes made getting to the glacier extremely difficult.

He delayed the trip until October 2006, but then his father died.

This month, his opportunity arrived.

Stekel and his hiking partner, Michele Hinatsu, set out with Global Positioning System coordinates for the site where Mustonen's body was found.

The two had a permit to go to areas outside of those ordinarily designated for visitors, said Deb Schweizer, a National Park Service spokeswoman.

They knew bodies could be out there, Stekel said, but they were focused on searching for bits of wreckage.

"We discovered the exhaust manifold from one of the engines of the airplane, and 100 to 200 feet from there I found the body of this other aviator," Stekel said.

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— Peter Stekel,

writer who discovered the body of a World War II airman

boulder. A parachute was found near the body, and officials have said it did not appear that the airman had tried to open it.

After spending the night at their base camp, Stekel and Hinatsu returned to the site the next day to search for the remains of the other two airmen.

"In fairness to the rest of the crew, we wanted to see if anyone else was there," he said. But they didn't find any more bodies.

On Aug. 17, they hiked to the McClure Meadows Ranger Station to report their discovery. Park rangers climbed to the site Aug. 18 and 19. On Monday, the body was transported to the Fresno County Coroner's Office.

Coroner's officials and an examiner from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii determined the airman died from injuries consistent with a plane crash. The body was flown to Hawaii on Friday. Officials there have DNA from relatives of the three missing aviators. It's expected to take a few weeks to confirm the flyer's identity.

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"Starting from where the wreckage was, I started walking toward where Leo Mustonen was found in 2005. I thought I was looking at a tree that died, and that's when I realized I stumbled across one of the other aviators."

The mummified body was clothed similarly to Mustonen — in a sweater and woolen shirt. It was resting against a

open it.

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Stekel said he felt humbled by the discovery of the airman's body, because it's an important piece of the history he has been focused on for two years.

"It was definitely worth the wait," he said.

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