

In Print

Final Flight, Peter Stekel, Wilderness Press, September 2010, ISBN: 978-0899974750, 256 pages, paperback, \$15.95

Reviewed by Rick Smith

On Nov. 18, 1942, a Beech 18 AT-7 took off from Mather Field near Sacramento, Calif., on a routine training mission. Aboard were the pilot, 2nd Lt. William Gamber, and John Mortenson, Ernest Munn and Leo Mustenson, aviation cadets. The flight never returned to Mather Field. The Air Force flew search missions for several weeks but were unsuccessful in finding the plane or its occupants.

The wreckage wasn't discovered until Sept. 24, 1947, when two college students found an accident site on the Mendel Glacier in Sequoia. They found a name tag that read John M. Montenson, some shoes, two Pratt & Whitney engines and pieces of frozen flesh. Later in '47, one of the students guided a team of Air Service Rescue captains back to the site. They additionally recovered a tag from one of the engines.

In 1948, another team from the Army returned to the site. Press reports confirm that the team brought out the remains of the four crewmen, dug out of 14 feet of ice. The remains were buried with full military honors at the Golden Gate National Cemetery at San Bruno, Calif. It seemed as if the mystery of the Beech 18 AT-7 was solved.

On Oct. 15, 2005, two climbers slowly made their way up Mendel Glacier in Sequoia. At an elevation of 12,600 feet, one of them noticed something fluttering in the wind. Upon closer examination, he discovered that it was a parachute. In the ice was a buried man. They poked around the parachute and found "US Army" in one of the folds and the numbers AC41-1984 stenciled on it. They marked the spot with their GPS and headed back down to report their find. A soldier was about to come home.

Subsequent investigation proved that the frozen airman was Aviation Cadet Leo Mustenson. Intrigued by the mysteries of why it took so long to find a body from the accident and why the Army reported that all four personnel had been found and given military burials, author Peter Stekel set out to learn as much as he could about the incident.

In *Final Flight* he compares weather reports from Nov. 18, 1942, speculates about potential flight routes, investigates the airworthiness of the Beech aircraft, and examines the training and experience of the pilot.

As one who has hiked in the Sierras all his life, Stekel finally decides that he must go to the site to draw his own conclusions. Unbelievably, Stekel and his hiking companion find a second body.

He writes, "I want to stand on the spot where the Frozen Airman was found and think about the person who died there on Nov. 18, 1942. Holding my GPS like a divining rod, I traverse west. I'm not paying close attention to anything except where to put my feet.

Raising my eyes to check out my bearing, I'm surprised to see a short tree, bent over and blackened, killed by the frost. Something shines in the sun; a ring hanging on a tiny branch. I stop to think about that. It couldn't be a tree. There are no trees up here. It is a man."

It turns out that it is Aviation Cadet Ernest Munn.

This is a good story told with the kind of detail that satisfies almost anyone's curiosity.

ANPR life member Butch Farabee, in a back cover comment, says it is "... a read you cannot put down."

Stekel doesn't come down hard on the Army for fabricating the story of the burials. As he points out, the armed services faced the logistical and political challenge of bringing 400,000 soldiers killed in action from Europe and Asia.

He says, "At best, I suspect the Army was trying to provide closure to the families of the no-longer missing AT-7. Telling them there were comingled and partial remains was probably better than telling them that there were none at all." □

Rick Smith, a life member of ANPR, retired from the NPS and lives in New Mexico and Arizona.

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Dear ANPR,

Thank you very much for awarding me one of the 2010 Supernaugh Scholarships to attend the Ranger Rendezvous. I enjoyed the opportunity to attend this year's Rendezvous in Bend, meet members, participate in such informative sessions about NPS initiatives and volunteer at Pilot Butte.

Thank you for supporting such scholarships to help new members/people attend the Rendezvous.

All the best,
Nancy Patterson