

# New book, presentation take on mystery on mummified airmen

Author Peter Stekel to discuss local discoveries 60 years in the making

By Mike Bodine  
Register Staff

The Sierra Nevada has no problem keeping a secret.

One such secret – the answer to a decades' old mystery – surfaced, literally, after being missing in action for more than 60 years.

In 2005, the first of four airmen from a crashed U.S. Airforce Beech 18 AT-7 was found nearly fully encrusted in ice in the Mendel Glacier in the Kings Sequoia National Park, west of North Lake. The plane and crew went down in 1942.

A hiker who found one of the frozen airmen was so intrigued by the search he has penned a book about the mysterious crash, "Final Flight – The Mystery of a WWII Plane Crash and the Frozen Airman in the High Sierra." Author Peter Stekel will be at Spellbinder Books from 6-8 p.m. today for a book signing and presentation.

Stekel found one of the mummified airman, Ernest Munn, two years after the first body was discovered. These airmen are the first mummies ever found in the lower 48 states.

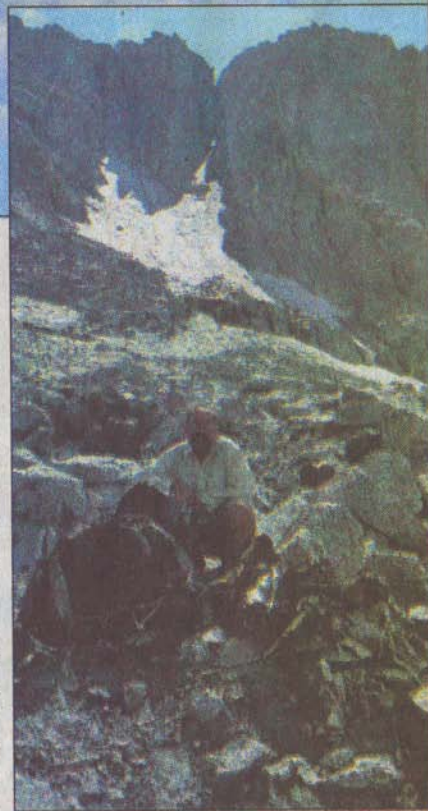
Stekel said the book will answer some of the questions about why the plane went missing more than 150 miles from its original destination, and why it has taken six decades to discover the bodies in a relatively popular area of the



The remains of Army Air Force cadet Leo M. Mustonen (above) were found on the Mendel Glacier in 2005, after the Beech 18 AT-7 he and three other servicemen were aboard crashed in 1942. The story of the crash and relative recent discovery of remains is documented in the book, "Final Flight" by Peter Stekel (right). Stekel is seen here with the wreckage on Mendel Glacier, west of North Lake. Top photo courtesy of National Park Service, other courtesy Peter Stekel

forest. According to local guidebooks, Mount Mendel has some of the finest and most coveted ice climbs in all of the Sierra.

The plane, flown by 2nd Lieutenant William A Gamber, 23, of Fayette, Ohio  
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**AIRMEN**

Continued from front page and carrying cadets Munn, 23, of St. Clairsville, Ohio; John Mortenson, 25, of Moscow, Idaho; and Leo M. Mustonen, 22, of Brainerd, Minn., left for a routine training mission on Nov. 18, 1942. According to an Army Human Resources Command press release from March 2006, the AT-7 left Mather Airfield in Sacramento, with about five hours of fuel. When the plane was unaccounted for, an exhaustive search began, but the four crewmen were presumed dead on Dec. 14.

The wreckage of the AT-7 was found in November 1947, by passing hikers crossing the glacier. Some human remains were recovered but could not be "conclusively matched to specific individuals," said the release.

However, Stekel explained that one of the biggest biffs in the search was the mistaken identification of the location of the initial finds. In the 1940s, Mendel Glacier was known as Little Darwin Glacier. Little Darwin was mistaken for Darwin Glacier, which lies less than a mile south of Mendel. According to Stekel, this semantic error threw a red herring into the search effort.

In October 2005, the remains of Mustonen were found by two ice climbers on the Mendel Glacier. According to a 2005 article in the *Sacramento Bee*, a search and rescue crew spent 10 hours in 15-degree weather to extract and lift a 400-pound black



The remains of a sweater worn by cadet Ernest Munn in 1942 found by author Peter Stekel in 2007. Photo courtesy Peter Stekel

When rock glaciers melt, they melt in place, becoming thinner until any debris hidden under layers of snowfall and ice is eventually exposed. The bodies discovered were reportedly in excellent mummified condition with hair and skin still intact. Stekel said wire services referred to Mustonen as "a mummified human time capsule" with his Sheaffer fountain pen and a 1942 coin in his pocket.

The remains of Gamber and Mortenson have yet to be positively discovered.

Stekel had already begun working on the book in August 2007 when he took a visit to the Darwin/Mendel area for research. Approximately 100 feet from the site of where Mustonen was found, Stekel saw a second body, later identified as Munn. As he later reported, "As I got closer and closer, I noticed what turned

that when Munn left for the service, he "told his mother never to cut her long hair. His mother lived to be 102, never cut her hair and died awaiting word on his fate."

The book also addresses the extreme lengths the U.S. military goes to in finding and honoring its own Missing in Action.

But there are some questions that remain to be answered. Stekel said Friday that he has yet to make another journey to the Mendel Glacier area to find exactly where the plane crashed. Stekel said he suspects it was just below the summit of Mt. Mendel on its north face, as the remains and wreckage were deposited on the north-facing glacier below.

Stekel has taken the mystery to heart, saying he has made promises to the families of Gamber and Mortenson to find answers and closure for them as well. In 2008, Stekel took three nephews of Munn to the Mendel Glacier.

The local mountains are notorious for swallowing up planes and others in the many folds and hidden corners of the vast landscape. The remains of hiker Fred Claassen, missing since 2002, were found last month, and multi-millionaire Steve Fossett was missing for two years

before his plane and body were discovered near Mammoth Lakes. The wreckage of numerous, previously unreported aircraft crashes were discovered during the lengthy, thorough air search for the missing adventurer.

There are still planes missing in the backyard hills, as evidenced by photos of wreckage that hikers and climbers post online and report on every year.

According to author Tony Mireles, who is currently working on a book tracking stateside Army Air Force fatalities during World War II, he estimates more than 2,000 airmen perished during just a few years of the early 1940s. California, especially the hard-to-navigate Sierra Nevada mountain range, was a major training ground for military aircraft and crews.

Stekel is also the author of "Best Hikes Near Seattle" and the novel "The Flower Lover."



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In October 2005, the remains of Mustonen were found by two ice climbers on the Mendel Glacier. According to a 2005 article in the *Sacramento Bee*, a search and rescue crew spent 10 hours in 15-degree weather to extract and airlift a 400-pound block of ice containing Mustonen's body of to Fresno.

A receding glacier, possibly caused by global warming, is what made bodies partially surface. The Mendel Glacier is a rock glacier, Stekel explained, meaning it is a conglomeration of rocks and ice.

the Darwin/Mendel area for research. Approximately 100 feet from the site of where Mustonen was found, Stekel saw a second body, later identified as Munn. As he later reported, "As I got closer and closer, I noticed what turned out to be a gold ring on his left ring finger."

Through extensive U.S. Army genetic testing, the bodies were confirmed to be that of the missing crew members.

In February 2008, the family of Munn was told he had been found. CNN reported

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