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# THE DEADLY STORM

**How three B-24s were affected by a storm over the Western United States during 1943**

By R. W. Koch

World War Two has given us many strange stories about missing aircraft which have in later years, through unusual circumstances, been found in remote regions. A number of these incidents were directly attributable to combat operations but there were also many that occurred during state-side training missions. Possibly one of the strangest and most interesting incidents happened in California during December 1943 when intensified B-24 training missions were flown by the U.S. Army Air Corps out of Hammer Field, Fresno, California. The basic story surrounding this incident, now well publicized, was about a long-missing B-24 bomber found in an unnamed lake in California's High Sierras on 17 July 1960 by a Park Service ranger leading a survey party. This particular B-24E, serial number 41-28463, carrying a crew of six departed Hammer Field, Fresno, California at 0850 on 5 December 1943 and headed east on a routine training mission. It was piloted by 2nd. Lt. Charles W. Turvey. Later that same day the aircraft reported by radio that it thought its position was near Independence, California. No further word was heard from the aircraft.

Here it should be mentioned that during the period of 3 to 6 December 1943 a very large high pressure air mass of 1032 millibars was forming over Evanston, Wyoming, and was pushing across Nevada and into the High Sierra mountain range of California. This high pressure weather system was causing high winds, severe turbulence and extremely unsettled weather conditions along the entire mountain range. Definitely not good flying weather for slow, heavy bomber type aircraft.

By late evening it was assumed Turvey's B-24 was down, either in the

mountains just east of the base or possibly in the desert. The next morning as daylight broke, now 6 December, Captain William H. Darden and his crew of seven, also in a B-24, took off from Hammer Field on a search mission, hoping to locate the missing B-24 piloted by Lt. Turvey. Winter storm clouds were thick over the Sierras and there were many scattered snow showers in the region of the search. Captain Darden flew his heavy B-24 around the peaks and ridges while his crew strained to see any possible signs of wreckage.

The search continued and Darden's B-24 droned on through the overcast winter sky. Then, without warning, the hydraulic pressure began to fail and the turbulence started to increase. The B-24 was now being buffeted by a large snow storm near the area of Huntington Lake. Evidently things were going from bad to worse onboard the B-24 as Captain Darden elected to land on what appeared to be a high, open mountain meadow. He gave his crewmembers the choice of staying with the aircraft or bailing out before the B-24 headed on final for an emergency landing. The copilot, 2nd. Lt. Marion Settle and the radio operator, Sgt. George Barulic elected to bail out. Both men landed in the forest some distance from the snow covered lake. That was the last they saw of their ailing B-24.

What became of their aircraft and what was the fate of the other crewmembers? A concentrated search by civil and military authorities in the nearby area of Huntington Lake failed to locate the aircraft. Even Huntington Lake was searched by dragline but this proved fruitless. After many weeks of searching, the hunt for the missing bomber was called off. Time passed. World War Two ended. More years passed. Still no clue to the missing

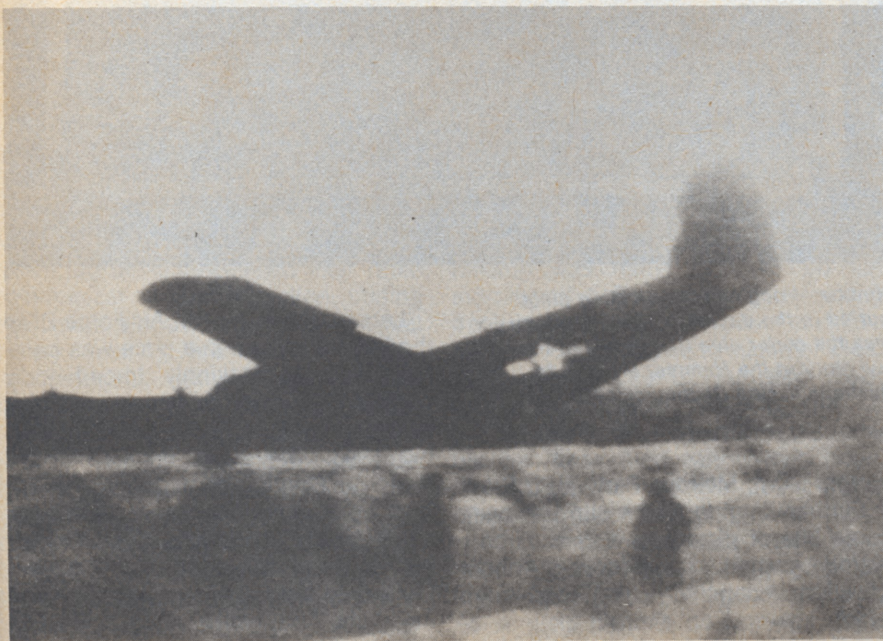
B-24s flown by Capt. Darden and Lt. Turvey. Then, in August 1955, the water level was lowered in Huntington Lake to allow repair work to start on the local dam. There, among the rotted tree stumps previously underwater rested the remains of Captain Darden's B-24. Military salvage operations commenced immediately and at least four bodies were recovered from the wreckage which had been underwater since 6 December 1943. Up to this point in our story all of the information you have just read it not new or revealing to any degree because it had been written about in many newspapers and magazines (see *Air Classics* Vol. 12, No. 9). But here is where our story changes.

We now move up in time to late February 1969. A Navy TA-4F Skyhawk trainer is reported overdue and missing from Lemoore Naval Air Station which is located southwest of Fresno, California. A search, under Air Force coordination, is launched and a Navy A-1E from Lemoore takes off to assist in locating the missing TA-4F. The A-1E flies along the ridges and canyons on a preselected search pattern, strictly routine. Suddenly, the A-1E begins to lose power. The air-speed drops to 90 knots, not enough to keep the heavy Navy aircraft airborne. Finally, the engine fails completely and the pilot has no choice but to "ditch" the aircraft into a large snowdrift at an altitude of approximately 12,000 feet. Miraculously the aircraft comes to a stop, intact, and the two Navy flyers are alive but painfully bruised. To keep this part of the story short we will just that they were rescued by an Air Force Para-Medic Master Sergeant Guy Roberts from Edwards Air Force Base and all were later evacuated to safety by an Air Force helicopter.

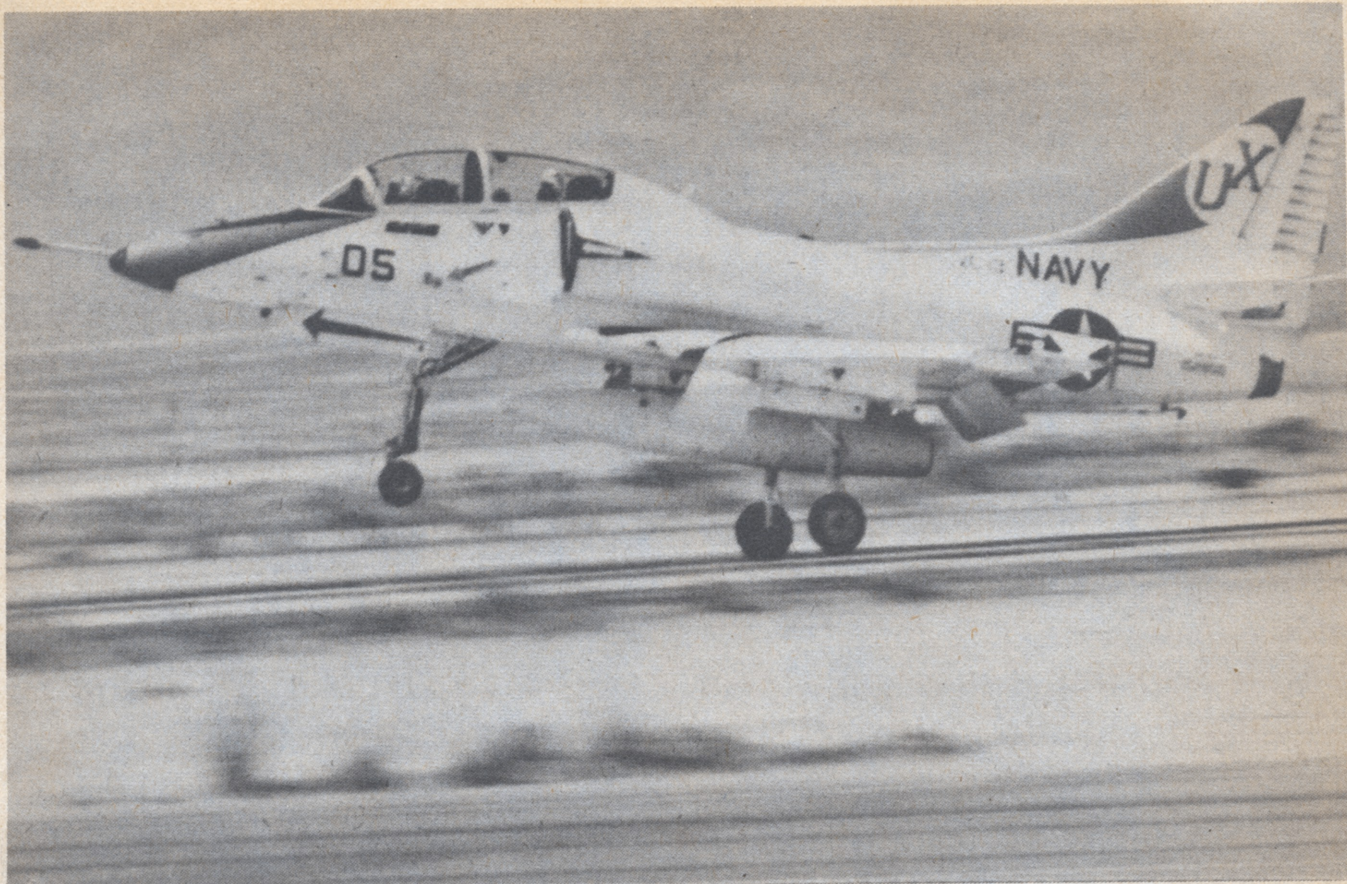
Again we move up in time to the



*USAF rescue and recovery team carrying salvaged equipment from the downed Navy A-1E search aircraft at the 12,000 ft. level of Mt. Kaweah in the High Sierras. This recovery operation led indirectly to the clues that were instrumental in adding the final chapter to the WWII B-24 mishaps that plagued Hammer Field, Fresno, California, during December 1943.*



*The only known photographs of B-24 41-29169 after it came to rest at the end of the Manzanar air field in the early morning hours of 5 December 1943. When this photograph was taken, Lt. Turvey was already in the air, flying towards his date with destiny in the High Sierras. (USAAF)*



A Navy TA-4F Skyhawk of the type which disappeared from Lemoore Naval Air Station and started the chain of events that eventually led to the complete story of the Hammer Field B-24 mishaps. (USN)

summer of 1969 when a U.S. Air Force Search and Rescue team from Norton Air Force Base, San Bernardino, California, is directed to go into the Sierras and remove all of the emergency radios and other vital equipment from the downed A-1E. The rescue team establishes their base of operations at the north end of the abandoned Manzanar air field located 10 miles north of the city of Lone Pine just off of highway 395. The team is then flown to the A-1E by helicopter. One rescuer stays behind to maintain radio contact with the base.

It is during this time that new clues relating to the Hammer Field B-24 incidents are unearthed. The rescuer who stayed at base camp at the Manzanar air field noticed a small metal object on the ground partly covered by the desert sand. He picks up the metal object and carefully removes the dirt and sand from it. It turns out to be a metal aircraft engine identification plate about two inches square. The raised metal letters spell out, "Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Twin Wasp- R-1830-43, Aviation Engine Plant-Buick Motor Div. General

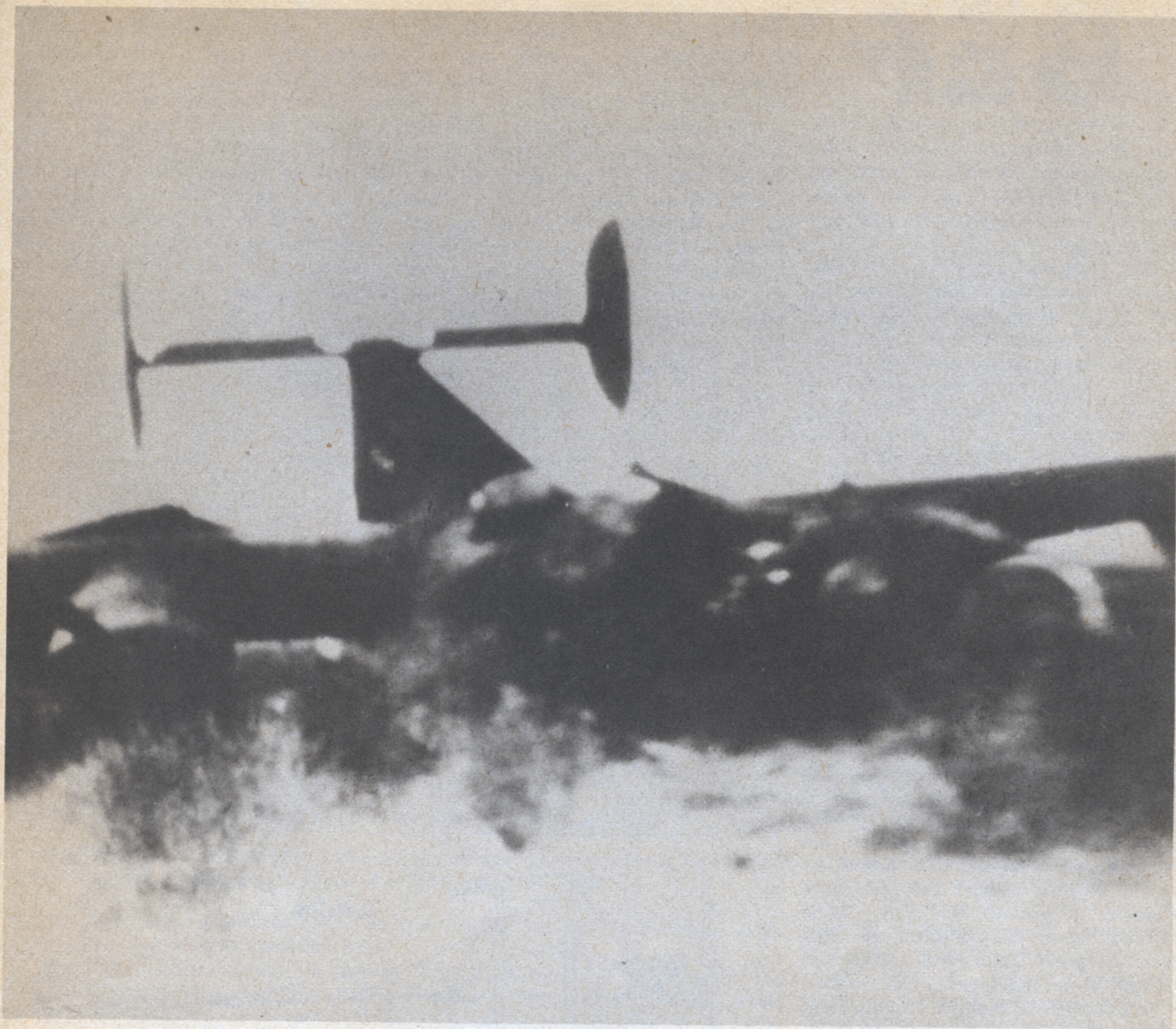


Number 4 engine identification plate buried in the desert sands for 26 years was the major clue that revealed the full story of the Hammer Field B-24 mishaps during December 1943.

Motors Corp, Melrose Park, Ill. U.S.A."

Further digging at the site uncovers some bits of plexiglass and a chrome plated navigator's dividers. Without question, something happened here which involved an aircraft!

Later, back at Norton Air Force Base the identification name plate was carefully and painstakingly traced to a certain B-24 bomber which was also assigned to Hammer Field, Fresno during 1943. The story, detailed in old Army Air Corps records, begins to unfold. It seems that on 4 December 1943, 2nd Lt. William H. Zumsteg and his crew of five departed Hammer Field on a long range navigation training flight. They were flying a B-24 of



*Front view of Lt. Zumsteg's broken B-24. Though the entire front section of the aircraft was twisted off, all of the crewmembers survived with only minor bruises. Several months later they would not be so lucky. (USAAF)*

the 767th Bomb Squadron, serial number 41-29169. Their departure time was 2100 hours. About seven hours later over Dagget, California, on the return leg to Hammer Field their radio communication and direction finding equipment started to fail. With the fuel supply running low and in severe turbulence Lt. Zumsteg decided not to fly through the violent storm conditions covering the Sierras, but instead chose to fly low looking for possible known landmarks. Suddenly runway lights were seen just in front of the aircraft so Zumsteg turned on his final approach to the runway. Unable to determine the groundwinds in the area (weather reports showed ground winds

of 45 knots at the time of landing) Zumsteg landed the troubled B-24, downwind, and with the push of the fast tailwinds over-ran the end of the runway and came to a crashing halt 500 feet beyond, completely destroying the B-24.

Despite cuts and some bruises, the crewmembers were finally able to extricate themselves from the bent and broken B-24 and were immediately taken to the nearby Manzanar hospital for a physical checkup. Zumsteg's landing was made at 0445 on the morning of 5 December. Now looking back in time, only four hours and five minutes would elapse at Hammer Field between the time Lt. Zumsteg crash lands at Manzanar air field and Lt. Turvey takes off and vanishes in the Sierras. Less than twenty-four hours later, Captain Darden's B-24 would disappear into Huntington Lake.

All three B-24s and their crews from Hammer Field were touched by that deadly December storm in 1943. As a result, all of Lt. Turvey's crew

were killed when their B-24 hit a mountain and dropped into that small lake in the High Sierras, now listed on most maps as Hester Lake, named after Lt. Robert Hester from Los Angeles, California, Lt. Turvey's copilot on that fateful flight. All but two of Captain Darden's crew perished in Huntington Lake. And whatever became of Lt. Zumsteg and his B-24 crew? Were they to survive? As fate would have it, on 2 April 1944 Lt. Zumsteg and his crew were killed in a mid-air collision over Bihac, Yugoslavia, while returning from a combat bombing mission.

So now you know the full story of Hammer Field's losses during that fateful forty-eight hour period in December 1943 when three B-24s and their crews were all touched by that "Deadly Storm." It is indeed strange that the complete story of the three downed B-24s would eventually be brought to light by a missing Navy trainer 26 years later. Strange indeed. . . .