

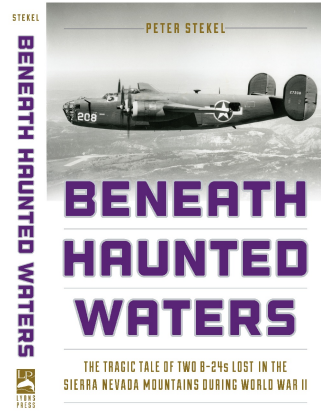
Beneath Haunted Waters: The Tragic Tale of Two B-24s Lost in the Sierra Nevada Mountains During World War II

POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (with answers) - PETER STEKEL



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1. How did you come to write *Beneath Haunted Waters*?

Beneath Haunted Waters is a direct outgrowth of my previous book, *Final Flight - the Mystery of a World War II Plane Crash and the Frozen Airmen in the High Sierra*. In 2007 I was exploring Mendel Glacier in Kings Canyon National Park, searching for airplane wreckage from an Army Air Forces plane that had disappeared November 18, 1942. This was to be for a magazine article I was asked to write. In 2005 some climbers had discovered the remains of a crewman from the missing flight; he was entombed within the ice of the glacier. But much of what was written about the crash, the glacier, and the national park was fuzzy or of dubious quality. I wanted to clear up all the inconsistencies, one of which was, "Where was the frozen airman's airplane?" Well, not only did I find plenty of evidence of an airplane, I found the remains on another crewman.

2. Really?

Yes. Unlike the previous discovery, the airman I found had completely melted out of the glacier.

3. How many other people are still missing?

The airplane was a Beech 18, AT (advanced trainer) Navigator with a pilot and three navigation trainees or cadets. We've found two, there are still two others somewhere in the glacier.

4. And how did this discovery lead you to write *Beneath Haunted Waters*?

While conducting research for *Final Flight* I was startled to learn that the US Army Air Forces lost more pilots and crew to aviation accidents within our own borders than in combat against the Japanese in the South Pacific. This was on a ratio of about 3:1. As I looked deeper and deeper into the causes I became fascinated by the subject. It isn't something you learn in school or read in history books or see in World War II documentaries.

5. Can you tell us about some of the causes?

There were lots of reasons. First, picture the typical profile of a combat pilot in those days. He was between around 19 and 25 years old, most likely had never driven a car before much less flown an airplane. Now, after about nine months of training he's flying high performance aircraft at hundreds of miles per hour!

Next, consider that the people working to maintain these high performance machines had, themselves, never worked on an aircraft engine - or any part of an airplane for that matter - until about the same time the pilots had begun to fly them. And the people building or assembling the aircraft also were working with a new or limited skill set.

As top-of-the-line as these World War II aircraft were for their time, they were still temperamental machines. The technology of the time was top-notch but, today, we would consider them quaint and hardly reliable. Remember, airplanes were still very new in the 1940s. Finally, I should add, it wasn't just airplanes and airplane engines that were new. Navigation and radio equipment was also very new and not always reliable. Today, we wouldn't even consider this technology good enough for back-up.

Top that all off with the great need to get aircrews and ground crews trained as quickly as possible and... well, let's just say, "Mistakes were made." As one US Air Force accident investigator once told me, "You're only allowed one fatal accident."

6. Tell us about the story of *Beneath Haunted Waters*.

In early December, 1943 a B-24 Liberator bomber was returning to its base in Fresno, California with a crew of six. This was a night time navigation training flight. It never reached its destination.

The following day a squadron of ten Liberators was sent to find the missing B-24. One of those ten, called *Exterminator*, developed some kind of engine malfunction and was forced to ditch, or crash land in the reservoir formed by Huntington Lake. This is on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, south of Yosemite National Park.

7. Were there any survivors?

Miraculously, there were. Of the crew of eight, the radio operator and co-pilot were able to bail out a few hundred feet above the ground. The pilot attempted to land, or ditch, on the surface of the reservoir. Due to the design of the B-24, the aircraft broke in two - snapped like a matchstick - when it hit the reservoir surface and sank to the bottom.

8. Was either bomber ever found?

Yes. *Exterminator* was discovered in 1955 when the Huntington Lake reservoir level was lowered so that repairs could be made on one of the dams. People were plenty surprised at the time. Pretty much the only people who remembered the "Plane in the Lake" were the families of the boys who perished.

9. Boys?

Yes. In the 1930s through the mid-1940s or so, young teens and young men were called "boys." When you watch movies from that era, you hear that all the time. In letters I've read from parents of the boys, you see it there too in black and white. Memoirs also use that term. With all that, I elected to refer in *Beneath Haunted Waters* to these young men as "boys." Of course, they were anything but boys - facing what they were about to face in combat. You know, the only branch of service on either side of the war that higher casualty rates than the air service were sub-mariners. And most submarine casualties were killed-in-action.

10. What about the B-24 that *Exterminator* was searching for?

That Liberator was found in 1960 by two geologists and a park ranger. It was at the bottom of a lake at over 12,000 feet in Kings Canyon National Park.

There is a lot of tragedy involved in the stories I tell in this book. I've already mentioned one; the loss of one aircraft and crew while looking for another.

Another tragedy involves the B-24 found in 1960. The co-pilot's name was Robert Hester. His father, Clint, was a physical trainer and did a lot of work in Hollywood with all of the top actors and actresses. He essentially retired from all that and dedicated the rest of his life to looking for his son. He centered his search area around the Mt. Whitney area of Sequoia National Park. He hiked into the high country in summer and rode his Harley-Davidson in the foothills when he couldn't get into the high country. For a number of years he was very well-known by local residents in the towns east of the Sierra Nevada and was equally well-known by anglers, hunters, and hikers in the mountains. In fact, in 1965, when I made my first backpacking trip in Sequoia National Park, it was still possible to meet hikers who had met Clint Hester during his search. Anyway, Clint died in 1959, a year before his son's Liberator was found.

11. Was he close?

In a way. The crash site at Hester Lake...

12. Hester Lake?

Yes. It was later named to honor Clint Hester and his search. Anyway, Hester Lake is about 40 air miles, as the crow flies, from Mt. Whitney.

13. Why do you say, "In a way?"

There are a lot of lakes, canyons, valleys, and thick forests between Hester Lake and Mt. Whitney. As big an airplane as the B-24 was, the territory it crashed into was immense. I dislike having to sink to cliché, but it really was like looking for a needle in a haystack. A very small needle in a very large haystack.

14. Peter Stekel, thank you for telling us the story of *Beneath Haunted Waters*.

You're welcome.

May I add one last thing? I don't want anyone to get the impression it was only boys, or young men, who were lost during training during the war. There were plenty of girls (sounds strange doesn't it!) or young women too. These women flew in air transport - moving aircraft from point-to-point within the US but also flying airplanes overseas for delivery to combat theaters. They had to learn to fly too. And many of these girls were killed during training. I'm hoping that historians and writers will be inspired by my work to delve deeply into the stories of women pilots during World War II and document their contributions and loss.

While memoirs by those who served during the war, histories of military and political leaders, and books about combat are common, very little has been written about the terrible toll of aviation training accidents during the war. I would like to see more attention given to these people who gave their lives for our country even though it was not in battle, was not overseas, but was right here within the United States.