

# The Inyo Register

www.inyoregister.com

50¢

VOL. 141, ISSUE 105

THURSDAY

SEPTEMBER 1, 2011



A U.S. Army hard hat diving team in 1960 searching for crew remains of a B-24 bomber that went down in Hester Lake in Le Conte Canyon, west of Bishop Pass. Author Peter Stekel is researching the story for an upcoming book and is welcoming any information about the search or the Hesters. Photo courtesy Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park



# Hester Lake saga to be subject of new book

'Final Flight' author researching a father's heartbreaking search for his son in local backcountry

**By Mike Bodine**

Register Staff

Following the success of his last book about plane crashes in the Sierra Nevada, Peter Stekel, author of "Final Flight," is in the area researching another story of a lost airship.

This latest account, Stekel said, has all the makings of a classic Greek tragedy.

Stekel is in the area hoping to rake up stories, witness accounts and anything related to Hester Lake and its contents.

The basic story is as follows: A Consolidated B-24 Liberator, a four-engine heavy bomber and six crew members went missing over the mountains between Muroc Field, now modern-day Edwards Air Force Base, and Hammer Field in Fresno during a training mission on Dec. 6, 1943. A father of one of the airmen would move his life to the Eastside and spend the next 15 years searching for his son only to die of a heart attack a year before the plane was found. The plane went down in what is now known as Hester Lake in a rugged remote location above Le Conte Canyon west of Bishop Pass. The lake is named after the father, Clint Hester.

The working title for the new book is "Haunted by Waters."

The story of Hester Lake and what it holds is not a new one, Stekel said. In fact, he said, as a young trail-bopper in the 1960s, the tale of Clint Hester and the search for his son, Robert Hester, was legendary in the Sierra. Hester even earned the nickname "Phantom Rider" for his ventures to trailheads and the mouths of canyons on a small motorcycle. Stekel said Hester would ride to inlets into the mountains and hike and search for his missing son and the plane.

The search for this plane was not neces-

sarily a priority when it went down, Stekel explained. The training mission was one of many during the height of World War II in 1943. As crews trained at Hammer and circulated into combat, the memory of the downed plane grew dimmer and dimmer, Stekel said.

Hester did not let the memory of his son die so quickly, Stekel said. Hester's second wife would die about the same time as his son's plane went down. Hester quit his job and left his home in Southern California and moved to Lone Pine to devote his time to searching. Stekel said Hester's home had a huge flag pole and accommodated as large an American flag waving toward the mountains.

"It was his beacon to the mountains," Stekel said, a sign to his son that the search would continue.

Hester died of a heart attack in February 1959. The plane was found by a U.S. Geological Society team of Jim Moore and Frank Dodge, assisted by Kings Canyon Park Ranger Leroy Block, in July 1960. The lake is nestled between the Citadel and Mount Langille at a lofty elevation of 11,450 feet. In August 1960, U.S. Army hard-hat divers recovered most of crewman Robert Bursey and the remains of the remaining crew. Bursey was buried in his home state of Vermont while what remained of the rest of the crew were buried in a mass grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

Stekel explained that while the lake is only 70 feet deep, it is snow fed and incredibly cold. He added that scuba diving at high altitude, with the mixture of differing pressures on the human body, can be dangerous at best.

Stekel added that he has received "consistently positive" response and sales from his last book and thinks there is a market for lost airplane stories.

Stekel will be in the area until Saturday but is anxious to speak with anyone with information about Hester, the crash and the search for the plane. He can be reached at [peter@finalflightthebook.com](mailto:peter@finalflightthebook.com).