Chapter 1
How I Came To Know About the Story

I thought I was going to die. My boy scout troop had halted for water and a snack beside a swift stream in a meadow. I flopped down in wet grass and didn't care about the mosquitos. It was my first backpacking trip and I just knew my feet were one solid blister from heel to toes. The air was thin and I could not breathe. I thought I was going to die.

The march began again. The trail climbed steeply. Straining under my load I knew I would die. My pack felt absurdly heavy. Everything I needed for three days in the wilderness was rolled up in my slumber party sleeping bag, wrapped in a green canvas tarp, and lashed with rope to my World War II army surplus wooden pack frame. If it rained, as it did our first night out, I had a tube tent to share with the biggest kid in our troop. That made sense, I guess, because I was one of the smallest. The original 99 pound weakling, minus a few pounds.

I wanted to die. I had been miserable before but never *this* miserable. Within a few minutes of leaving the stream, all the other kids were way ahead of me. I'd been deserted by everybody; my friends, my not-friends, our adult leader, and the summer camp counselor assigned to us. I plodded up the trail. One step after another.

Ahead, at the blessed top of a rise, through a thinning forest, I could see the edge of something; blue sky, rafts of clouds, and bare rock. Lots of kids scrambled around, jumping and playing and making noise. Nobody wore a backpack. I tried to quicken my step, tripped and fell. With bleeding knees I went back to plodding. I'd get there. If it was the last thing I ever did, I'd get there.

In the clearing where everyone was playing I stopped and dropped to the ground, green carapace and all. I stared at the ground for a long time, breathing deeply. I could have cried if I'd had the strength. Nobody came to my aid. They were having too good a time. I was ignored.

At last, at long last, I lifted my eyes from the ground in front of me to the empty space extending away from me. For a moment I caught my breath. Not because of the thin air at 9000 feet but because of what I saw. For a moment I actually believed I *had* died. I thought I had died and gone to heaven because I had never seen anything so beautiful. The Sierra Nevada mountains - the High Sierra - spread out from around me and away from me forever and ever.

Our counselor called the clearing where I lay "The Watchtower"

and I could see why. It was a platform, maybe 40 feet square, and on one side of it was a sharp cliff that dropped 2000 feet straight down. Across from me were other cliffs comprising the Tokapah Valley. The valley rose, step-like, from my left to my right to basins, waterfalls, and more cliffs. All the rock was cut with grooves or broken by cracks, and built into crags that all rose from the cliffs to the sky. The sky itself was an amazing shade of blue. An amazing shade that a boy from smoggy Los Angeles had never seen. A line of clouds hovered over the highest of the high ridges. My heart raced and my throat tightened. It was so *beautiful!*

World and national events were remote in 1965 for a 12 year old. I came back to Los Angeles from summer camp in Sequoia National Park to a city in complete lock down. The streets were deserted when they should have been humming. Stores were closed and dark. The city was eerie and dead. Only the day before the people in Watts had rioted. I didn't care. All I wanted was to go back to the mountains. For the remainder of her life my mother was fond of saying that I went away to summer camp in 1965 and I never came home.

Forty-five years after my first summer in the Sierra Nevada I broke my ankle in the Mt. Whitney country and almost *did* die.

Well, that's a bit of an overstatement. But the circumstances would have been grim had I been alone. As it was, I hadn't chosen the most convenient place to be injured. We were at the top of a seldom used knapsack pass at mid-afternoon, three days from a trailhead and seven crosscountry miles, over difficult talus and scree, to a backcountry ranger station.

One of my companions made that hike, reaching the ranger station at Crabtree Meadow late in the afternoon. A medivac by helicopter was arranged and rangers from Sequoia National Park arrived at my spot below Crabtree Pass too late in the day to safely carry me out. Sending the helicopter away until the next day, a park medic and her assistant remained by my side that night should my medical condition worsen. Later that evening my friend returned with the Crabtree Meadow ranger so I had plenty of company. I wasn't very comfortable, sleeping on a steep slope on the only ground not occupied by rocks and boulders, and I could have taken pain medication but I felt the need to not deaden my brain function. Pain, even a little bit of it, has the quality of sharpening experience in much the same manner as hunger sharpens appetite. I felt fortunate that in the remote place where I was injured it was possible to be flown out to a hospital because I knew it wasn't always so easy.

Even today the Sierra Nevada is remote and dangerous though many hikers who stick to the trails feel as if thousands of other people crawl over every inch of the mountains during the summer. The Sierra has always been remote. During the 19th century it was also a formidable barrier to east-west travel. The first road to cross the Sierra was by rail in 1868 at Donner Summit near Lake Tahoe. The first paved highway across the Sierra, the Lincoln Highway (US Route 40), did poke through until 19xx. Between Tioga Pass in Yosemite National Park and Walker Pass to the south there are 200 miles of Sierra Nevada without a way to cross the mountains except by trail.

The first Anglo explorers in the Sierra followed Indian trails and game trails. Building the first trails was not an easy task nor was it without danger. On August 25, 1930, four young men - they called them “boys” in that era - in a trail crew building the John Muir Trail over Forester Pass, between Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, were injured when a dynamite blast caused a slide in the talus field where they were sheltered. Donald “Buck” Downs was seriously injured. His arm was pinned between two boulders and after being freed it was obvious to all that he would lose it.

Medical aid for the injured boys took three days in arriving.

First, it was a 16-18 hour ride to the nearest telephone (at Crabtree Meadow Ranger Station) to call for help. A pack train from Park headquarters required another 48 hours to carry in a doctor and nurse. When the doctor arrived, his assessment was that Downs had gangrene in his arm and that it needed amputation immediately and on the spot. After the surgery, Downs was relocated to Baxter's Cabin at Tyndall Creek. He died two days later from gangrene.

The Sierra is a big place. If you choose to stay away from trails and find your own route, it's big enough that you can hike for a week without ever coming across another person. And the Sierra is big enough to lose something we normally think of as being large. Like an airplane. In fact, along its length and width the Sierra Nevada has swallowed up over 400 airplanes and some of them have still not been found. Many of the ones we do know about took years, or decades, before they were located - mostly by chance.

During my first backpack trip in 1965 I heard the story of one of those missing airplanes. On December 6, 1943, some time after midnight, a B-24 Liberator on a night training mission between Tucson and its base at Hammer Field in Fresno disappeared. It was thought the bomber strayed over the Sierra with its crew of six

and crashed somewhere in the high mountains.

At dawn that same day a squadron of ten B-24s from Hammer Field took to the skies to look for their fallen comrades, hoping they might find and rescue survivors - if there were any survivors. It was assumed the missing crew flew into a mountain, in the darkness of a moonless early morning with a storm coming on.

In full daylight, with not a trace of bad weather, one of the rescue squadron Liberators developed engine trouble and was forced to crash land - ditch - into Huntington Lake, a reservoir on the western slope of the Sierra. Tragically, only two of the eight-man crew managed to bail out. The other six went down with their ship. The search for the first airplane was aborted and that was that.

Shipwreck and disappearing airplane stories contain all the drama a kid could ever wish for. Those of us in our High Sierra camp gathered around our counselor and hung on his every word. We saw adventure, not tragedy in the loss of two airplanes and 12 lives. It thrilled us to visualize big airplanes flying low over these mountains and more than one boy’s mind thought of bombs dropping and exploding in the rocks near our lakeside camp. World War II represented movies with all the popular actors where nobody was

injured and only the enemy was killed. Or, if one of "our" guys was killed, it was always spectacularly - like throwing himself on a hand grenade or crashing his fighter into the enemies's aircraft carrier - in order to save the lives of others. What our counselor told us was not of this imagined world. Its essential realness bordered on the uncomprehendingly unreal because it was so different than our own lives, experience, and the world we thought existed from movies or books.

Once we were sucked in with the basics of the story, it got even better. After being missing for 17 years the first airplane was eventually found in 1960 - only five years ago! A couple of researchers and a backcountry ranger found it in a lake in an area of Kings Canyon National Park that nobody had probably ever visited before. The co-pilot of the Liberator, 2nd Lt. Robert Hester, grew up in West Los Angeles, which is where all of us in my boy scout troop were from. Hester's father, Clint, spent every summer, after his son disappeared, looking for him. Then, Clint Hester died of heart failure in 1959. He was so close! The lake with the airplane was unnamed but it quickly became known as Hester Lake on account of the father and the son he tried so hard to find. As a 12 year old I didn't know anything about irony or heartbreak but I could deeply feel this story in a way I couldn't express. I think that's why it stayed with me.

That second airplane was eventually found - but not before it had been completely forgotten. In 1955, the power company operating the reservoir at Huntington Lake drained the lake so repairs to the dam could be made. There at the bottom, in the deepest part of the lake, right below the dam, was the remains of a B-24. The sight of the broken up airplane was a surprise for everyone, from the people with summer homes at the reservoir, to the tourists and anglers who frequented the place, to the power company and its employees, and the US Army too! A recovery mission retrieved the remains of four crewmembers but, adding to the lost Liberator's tragic end, two of the other boys could not be found.

I returned to the boy scout camp in 1966 and 1967, getting stronger with age and experience, and wondered how I could have ever felt so convinced I would die on the trail to The Watchtower. Eventually I was old enough to work at the camp and then old enough to expand my backpacking explorations beyond the one trail I'd come to know and love. I continued farther afield, hiking and climbing in some amazing places in Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks but my first view of the Sierra Nevada remained my favorite. I always continued to see it with the eyes of a 12 year old.

I also never forgot the story of Hester Lake and Huntington Lake.

Those two airplanes were wrapped up in my first, most amazing, trip into the Sierra Nevada wilderness. I suppose I could have focused on how hard it rained my first night out, how my tube tent helped channel the rainwater in the dry creek bed where we had strung it up, or how my larger tent mate used me as a sleeping pad to remain high and dry through it all.

Exploring further and further afield during the 1970s and 1980s I met people on the trail, or on cross-country routes, who knew the Hester Lake story. They helped fill in, or reinforce, what I'd learned in the past though I suspected some of the stories were apocryphal. As the 1960 discovery fell deeper into memory, many details became vague. People often confused Hester and Huntington Lakes and the two missing airplanes and their crews became one and the same.

Better than hearing and rehashing the missing Liberator stories with hikers in the backcountry was occasionally meeting somebody who said they had encountered Clint Hester during his 1940s and 1950s rambles. I enjoyed being in active contact with a small piece of history. Meeting those other hikers kept the Hester Lake story alive for me for many years. Eventually the particulars faded and became confused in my memory. Over twenty years after I first heard the story it was easy to let it go.

Then I met Jim Moore.

I was visiting at the boy scout camp in Sequoia National Park where my interest in the Sierra Nevada began. Jim Moore, a researcher with the United States Geological Survey (USGS), was acquainted with the camp director and was camping there between extended backcountry wilderness trips where he was mapping the park's rock types. The camp director was Rich Stowell, the same counselor who had taken me on my first backpack trip in 1965. We were sitting around the campfire one night and the topic of Hester Lake came up. It turned out that Jim Moore was one of the three people who first discovered the B-24 Liberator in Hester Lake.

I'd taken it on faith, from all the trail stories I'd been told, and believed the Hester B-24 existed as one piece. I imagined the Liberator as poking out of the shallow end of the lake. Jim disabused me of that right away. When the stories said the airplane was in the lake, they really did mean it was *in* the lake. As in buried beneath so much water the bottom of the lake and the airplane could not be seen. Bits and pieces of unidentifiable metal along the shallow and narrow northeast shore was all you could see indicting the tragedy. As for getting there, Hester Lake wasn't just remote; there was no trail and the

only route up included climbing a heavily vegetated wide Class 3 chimney with loose rock and a stream in it.

Instantly apparent to me was that facts are moving targets when the source is not known. Faith and belief aside, when something is important to you it isn't safe to rely on what you're told, especially if what you're told reinforces what you want to hear. I'd always glossed over what probably happened December 6, 1943 because I wanted to hear about the glorious sacrifice of the B-24 crews. What I'd accepted as history wasn't history at all but something close to what we today call "urban myth." Except this was "mountain myth."

When we hear something from someone who says they know, or read about it in a newspaper, what assurance is there that it's accurate? Does the telling make it truth? Is the only history we can trust the history written in books or taught in school and is all other history stories among stories? Through years of hiking in the Sierra Nevada I'd met people who told me different parts of the Hester Lake and Huntington Lake stories. I thought I knew all the important bits. As a child of twelve I knew that an airplane with six men, half a generation older than me, disappeared two days after my birthday, nine years before I was born. As a young man, in my twenties, older than the boys who

died in 1943 I knew I had the facts. They hit a mountain in a storm. They died. It was glorious to die for your country.

Then, I met Jim Moore and what was abstract became real. What I thought I knew, I didn't know at all. Jim had been there. He'd seen the pieces of aluminum belonging to a four-engine bomber along the shoreline of Hester Lake. The B-24 at the bottom of Hester Lake wasn't a story anymore. It wasn't even history. It was something that transcended fact, and certainly wasn't fiction, because it was something that happened. It really happened. Jim had seen the evidence.

Here then are the facts about Hester Lake and Huntington Lake as I've learned them since that chance meeting with Jim Moore nearly 30 years ago. I've spoken to Jim since then, along with his two companions from the discovery day. I've interviewed divers, successful and not, who desired to see the sunken B-24 of Hester Lake and listened to their theories of what happened the night the plane crashed. I've spoken to the relatives of both crews as well as the one living survivor from the Huntington Lake B-24. I've read books by World War II veterans reminiscing about their own pilot training. I've also waded through internet websites and discussion forums and poured over official documents and reports, newspapers, and magazine articles about the crash. It seems that

every ten years somebody trips over the Hester and Huntington crashes and wants to run with it. I'm the latest.

In the rocks around the lake Jim Moore found a briefcase with a name on it: William Cronin, navigator on a B-24, number 41-28463. Piloted by 2nd Lt. Charles W. Turvey Jr. and co-pilot 2nd Lt. Robert M. Hester. Because evidence had to be retrieved, and because Moore felt the responsibility to recover it, he waded into the lake and retrieved a shoe he saw in the water. Inside the shoe was a foot - flesh and bone preserved from the cold water. While Jim made one discovery, his companions made another. They pulled a parachute from the lake's frigid waters and hauled it on shore. It was connected to no one.

The ranger had his work to do so he parted company with the two geologists who continued their research work to the north. The ranger returned to his station in LeConte Canyon to radio in his report to civilization of what had been found in an unnamed, and probably never before visited, lake in the High Sierra.

Before the army could get there and probe the lake for remains, one, then a second, team of reporters and photographers from San Francisco radio and newspaper outlets managed to find a guide to take them to the crash site. It was an awful journey for the city

men, riding horses all day and then fording a river before climbing 3000 vertical feet up a canyon wall and through a heinous crack of rock 400 feet high, choked with loose rock, vegetation, and a flowing stream.

Because he was the person who directed the media and the army to the crash site, Leroy Brock, the ranger, got all the credit for the discovery in what was temporarily identified as "LeConte Lake." The alternative, "an unnamed lake high on the west wall of LeConte Canyon in Northern Kings Canyon National Park," was probably deemed unnecessarily cumbersome. Of course, pinning a name on the lake didn't mean anybody knew what had happened up there but it was a convenient handle for communication.

The reporters returned home and while their dramatic accounts of an airplane lost in the High Sierra were being printed and broadcast, a team of Army divers were ferried via helicopter to "LeConte Lake" where Turvey and Hester's B-24 had come to rest. The divers and their support staff spent a week at the deep and frigid lake, looking for the crew. The diving technology of 1960 defeated them despite their desire for success. The divers found most of one body, and pieces of the rest. Yet, it was enough for six families to experience closure. Their boys were found, and properly buried, at last.

The boys in the *Exterminator*, the other airplane lost that morning in 1943, were found five years before the Hester Lake B-24. When Southern California Edison needed to lower the reservoir constituting Huntington Lake so repairs could be made to the dam, the broken carcass of a B-24 Liberator bomber was found at the bottom in what would have been the deepest part of the lake. The wreckage was first spotted by a 13 year old boy when he found a waterlogged life vest in the receding lake.

At first there was a bit of head scratching as to how the airplane got down there. Some old timers were called upon to recount Huntington Lake's history and they remembered all about the plane with a crew of eight that ditched in the reservoir 12 years previously. The plane, they told interviewers, was called the "Exterminator."

The news was front page material in Fresno for several days in late September, 1955. Hammer Field, in Fresno, is where the plane and crew were stationed. The Army was called, which resulted in more head-scratching because records showed a month-long search by dragging the bottom of the lake in 1943 hadn't turned up anything. To the Army that meant the plane had gone down somewhere else and searching Huntington Lake was abandoned.

With the reservoir drained nearly all the way to the mud it was easy to spy the airplane and understand how fruitless dragging operations would have been in 1943. The *Exterminator* had ended its life at the bottom of the reservoir pinned in among trees and stumps of trees where a drag cable would never have made contact.

A salvage team including four divers from 6th Army Headquarters in San Francisco probed the waters of the lowered reservoir and succeeded in finding the remains of four of the six boys on board *Exterminator*. The commingled remains of two boys from the mid section of the Liberator were recovered and later buried together. From the nose the salvagers recovered the pilot and from the tail came the gunner. Of the remaining two nobody knows. Perhaps they lay somewhere within the six feet of mud at the reservoir's bottom. They were never found.

Since their discovery as burial sites Hester Lake and Huntington Lake have become the haunt of different sorts of people. I wonder if it has to do with how difficult it is to reach Hester and how easy access is to Huntington?

Huntington Lake is a reservoir with a dam, ski resorts, youth camps, campgrounds, lakeside homes, the small community of Big Creek minutes away, accessed by a good four season, two-lane

asphalt road. Intrigued by her story, the *Exterminator* has been preyed upon by those who would salvage her, either to enrich themselves or provide for museums. A B-24 today is worth a lot more than it was during World War II. Though 18,482 B-24s were manufactured between 1940-1945, there are only Y left intact including Z that actually still fly. Spare parts for reconditioning the extant B-24s are in short supply. That means somebody can make a tidy bundle of cash by supplying the parts - if only they can be found.

One expedition in 1980 saw the *Exterminator* as a road to riches but the underfinanced salvage venture sank into an ignominious end. The promoter planned to raise the wreck from 150 feet of water, restore the airplane to its former glory, and sell admission tickets to recoup his investment. Except that none of the up-front money was his. The project ended in financial ruin with recriminations, lawsuits, and pieces of the B-24 scattered over the lake bed.

In 1991, Castle Air Museum from nearby Atwater, California, sponsored a salvage operation to lift the *Exterminator* from the reservoir’s bottom. They were interested in spare parts for their own B-24 on display. The museum’s success wasn’t any better than the 1980 effort. At least there were no hard feelings.

A local volunteer historical group now protects the *Exterminator* as best they can. They operate a tiny museum, housed in an old forest service ranger cabin, beside Huntington Lake. In a small room are some pieces of wreckage, faded newspaper articles, photographs from the 1980 fiasco, and a crudely produced video telling the story of the lost airplane and crew. They actively discourage investigations around the wreck. Visitors to their museum aren't even allowed to take photos of the exhibit. The defilement of the *Exterminator* is the reason for this, along with amateurish zeal that they can control what other people want to, or can, do.

The one bright spot in the *Exterminator* story revolves around a class of fourth graders from the nearby community of Big Creek. This is the company town for the reservoir's operator, Southern California Edison Company. In 1990, with the guiding hand of their teacher, the students contacted as many of the families from the two lost B-24s as they could. Not only did they produce a little book, documenting their research, but the raised funds for a brass commemorative plaque.

In contrast to the *Exterminator*, Hester Lake's B-24 has lead a quiet life. After its discovery in 1960 Hester Lake has been mostly undisturbed. Two sets of undaunted SCUBA divers have

hauled their gear to the lake and probed its waters. Only one team actually reached the wreck. Many others have tried and failed, defeated by distance, topography, and mountaineering inexpereince. Day hikers from LeConte Canyon occasionally reach the lake, look around, and return disappointed by how little there is to see. Beginning with the newspaper reporters in 1960, souvenir hunters have claimed any significant wreckage including parts of the Liberator's instrument panel. A backcountry ranger in 1987 gathered up several sacks of debris from the lake shore and surrounding area and arranged to fly them out for disposal. People still reach the lake, including the daughter of Robert Hester in September, 1990.

These are the facts. Beneath the facts lies the story.