

MAD DIVER

A photograph of a man in a cowboy hat riding a dark horse on a rocky, forested trail. He is leading a pack train of several mules or horses carrying large white packs. The scene is set in a wooded area with large rocks and trees. The title 'MAD DIVER' is overlaid at the top in a stylized, orange, glowing font.

PART ONE

The Jackass Expedition

By Paul Sweinhagen



Climbing the wrong drainage and overshooting the lake by 500 feet was appropriate. Diminished by the difference in elevation, the lake appeared below me as a sapphire in a bowl of granite. My first view of Hester Lake was an all encompassing one, like that of a bird. Or say a plane, which is what brought me here in the first place.

Hester Lake sits at 11,255 feet, draining a cirque of peaks pushing 13,000 feet, has a surface area of approximately 600 by 400 yards, has a reported depth of 50 feet, and contains zero fish, zero frogs, zero plants, but one B-24E Liberator.

December 4, 1943 Aircraft #41-28463 of the 461st Bomb Group, lifts off from Hammer Field near Fresno, California at 8:50 p.m. The mission was a simple roundtrip training flight to Tucson, Arizona. Second Lieutenant Charles Turvey piloted the craft, while Second Lieutenant Robert Hester had the co-pilot command; Second Lieutenant William Cronin, navigator, Second Lt. Ellis Fish, bombardier, Staff Sergeant Howard Wandpke, radio operator, and Staff Sergeant Robert Bursey, engineer, rounded out the flight crew. The flight proceeded first to Bakersfield, then on to Arizona without incident. The plane departed Tucson on the final leg of the mission and at 2:10 a.m. on December 5, the radio operator reported their position as 50 miles east of Muroc Army Airfield (now Edwards Air Force Base) on a heading of 280° at an altitude of 18,500 feet. The plane was not heard from again.

According to the last report, the flight was going as planned, placing it between Las Vegas and Independence, California at the foot of the eastern Sierra Nevadas. Despite extensive military and civilian air and ground searches, no trace of the B-24 could be found. The Air Corps investigation concluded the "airplane and all members of the crew are missing... In the absence of knowledge concerning the location of the crash or landing, insufficient evidence is available to determine whether navigational or other personnel errors were the primary cause of the accident. The cause is therefore undetermined."

For Clinton Hester, father of the co-pilot, the conclusion, not the evidence, was insufficient. Hester obsessed with finding the plane and his son, believing the flight went down in the eastern Sierra Nevadas in Kings Canyon National Park. For fourteen years, he traversed the mountainous terrain of the park by foot, but never found his s

Less than a year after his death, in the last week of July 1960, a park ranger working in Kings Canyon spotted an object floating on the surface of Le Conte Lake. Further inspection identified the item as one of the low-pressure oxygen cylinders from an aircraft. Two Army divers equipped with Aqua Lungs found the B-24's twisted fuselage and recovered the remains of the crew. The investigation concluded that the plane was heading in a northeasterly direction when the starboard wing tip struck one of the 12,500-foot peaks of the Black Divide Range. Slamming onto the shore of Le Conte Lake, the heavy bomber exploded, slid into the water and settled on the bottom where it remained undisturbed for seventeen years. The name of the lake was changed in December 1960 to Hester, in commemoration of Second Lieutenant Robert Hester and the determination of his father.

The idea of diving on a B-24 in an extremely remote lake sitting above 11,000 feet had the ring of childhood adventure, but on a much grander scale. First, the lake sits 15 miles from the nearest road. Second, the trail begins at 9,000 feet, tops



Opposite: Team tackles the steep ascent toward Bishop Pass. Top: After seven hours of hiking, the first view of Hester Lake. Bottom: Looking back on Dusy Basin. Left: Elevated view of Hester Lake.





out on Bishop Pass at 11,900 feet, then descends through Dusy Basin to Kings River at 8,800 feet. From there, a trailless 2,500-foot climb through two granite bowls above the treeline to the lake awaits. The team knew from the start merely getting to Hester Lake would be difficult, especially since we didn't know exactly how difficult the climb would be. Furthermore since other obligations limited the expedition to six days, this meant that after driving days, in order to squeeze in two days of diving, time allowed only one day each for the 15 miles in and out.

At the trailhead, the team was optimistic. Rainbow Outfitters supplied the pack mules to haul the equipment necessary to dive a 41° lake at 11,255 feet: tanks, rebreathers, drysuits, and all the little stuff, plus carne asada for burritos, a hibachi, and boxed wine. Charlie, the mule handler, displayed a firm grasp of patience as he loaded our oversized cargo. Our 15-mile hike in began enthusiastically at 9:00 a.m., grew tiresome by early afternoon, and ended painfully with the group seriously strung out and this author bringing up the rear at 6:30. Unfortunately, we were only at the Kings River. The lake seemed a mythical entity half a mile above.

We headed out early the next morning, but from the onset struggled like fish out of water. With the team's non-mountaineer physical condition, combined with our time

restraints and the difficulty of the climb, diving was out of the question. Even without all the gear, the half-mile up was nearly impossible, but I had some climbing experience, so I volunteered to scout the lake for a return trip when we could arrange a helicopter.

So on the day diving was to begin, I sat alone above the alpine lake, its shoreline glimmering with small metallic pieces. After negotiating my way back down the drainage, I walked the lake's circumference and found debris strewn for nearly 200 yards along the northeast edge – small pieces of aluminum, bits of wiring, and a snap attached to a shred of fabric. These tiny pieces were all too random to really reveal what happened there 59 years ago, but then I spotted a parachute. The sun had done its best to destroy the canopy but it sat largely intact. Why would a deployed parachute detached from its harness be sitting next to a lake with a plane in it? The obvious answer was disconcerting.

I had certainly not expected to find a parachute; none of the information about the incident we found, including the Army investigation, mentions a parachute. Imagining the events of that fateful night, I think of Clinton Hester and how the exploration of the lake belongs to him. And maybe, in his obsession to find the downed plane, he knew something no one else did. *To Be Continued...*