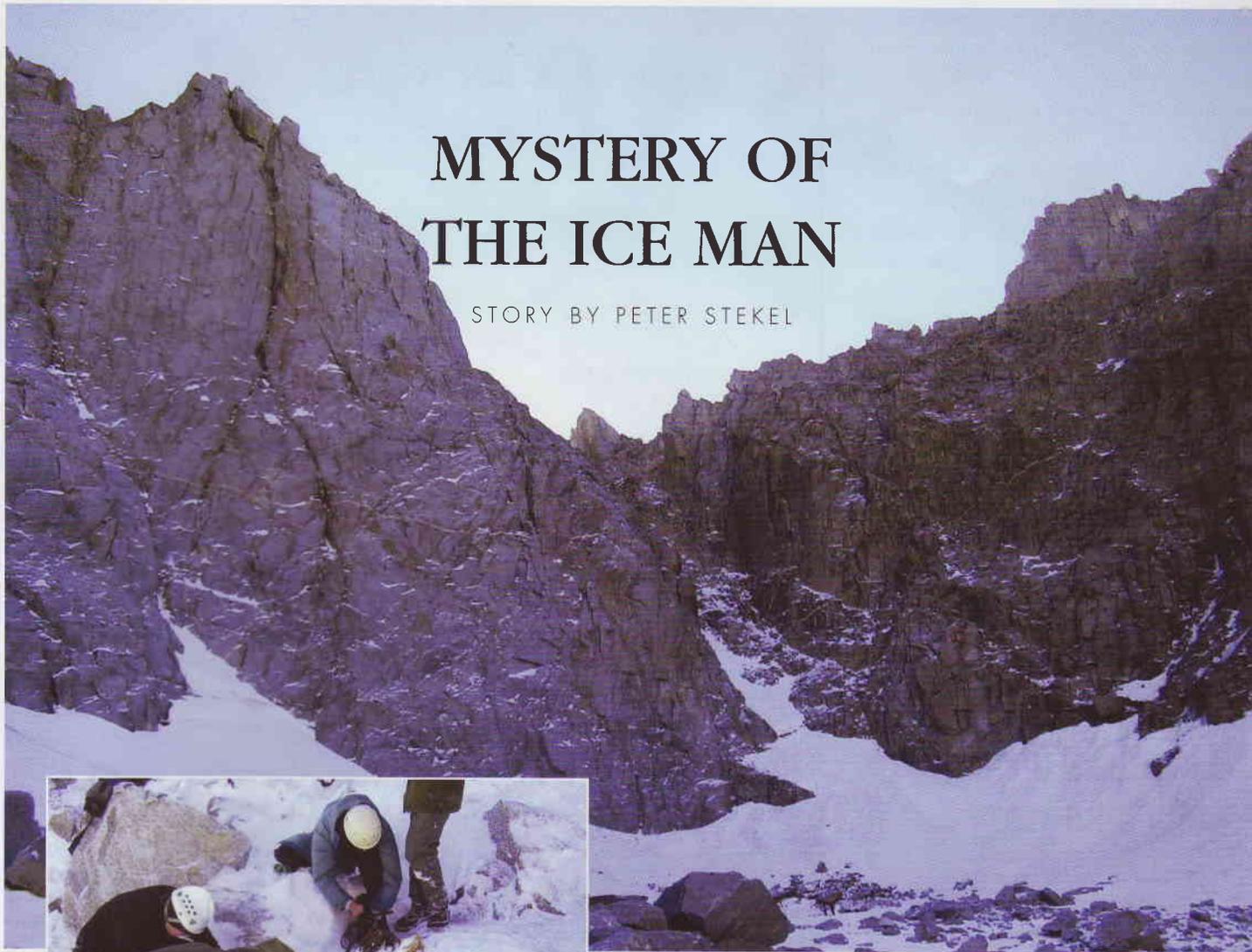


MYSTERY OF THE ICE MAN

STORY BY PETER STEKEL



(Above) A view of the upper reaches of Mendel Glacier (inset) Working respectfully, NPS and JPAC cultural anthropologists carefully chip away ice surrounding the body photos courtesy of the National Park Service

In October 2005, the body of a World War II Army Air Corpsman was discovered embedded in the ice of the Mendel Glacier in Kings Canyon National Park. Who was this man? Where did he come from? How did he get there? The mysterious *Ice Man* captured the nation's imagination. Excitement by local media was exceeded by such national outlets as CNN and ABC television's Nightline and continued when the remains were

finally identified by JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) in February of this year.

Military records showed that aircraft wreckage on the nearby Darwin Glacier had been discovered in 1947 by two UC Berkeley students. Engine numbers recovered by the Air Rescue Squadron from Hamilton Field identified the plane as a twin-engine Beech AT-7 Navigator piloted by Second Lt. William Gamber. The aircraft had been

missing since November 18, 1942 while on a training flight from Mather Field in Sacramento. Along with Lt. Gamber that day were Aviation Cadets John Mortenson, Ernest Munn and Leo Mustonen.

Authorities suspected the Ice Man on the Mendel Glacier came from the 1942 airplane crash reported from the Darwin Glacier. But how did he get from one glacier to the other — almost a mile distant over a tall and jagged ridge? He couldn't have parachuted before the crash and hiked to where he was eventually found. Fresno County coroner Lorelee Cervantes said his parachute was unopened.

It would be four months until the Ice Man's identity was positively known and the mystery solved.

Airplane crashes are not unusual in the Sierra. Bill Tweed, Chief of Interpretation for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, says, "Between 1932 and 1970, the U.S. military lost at least 13 planes over the Parks." One of the aircraft has yet to be found. The Sierra presents a significant challenge for air travel. "The range is high, produces its own unique winds and weather and offers little range for pilot error."

Lt. Gamber didn't need to worry about Sierra Nevada weather. His planned route from Mather Field, south to Los Banos, then north to Roseville and Corning before returning to base shouldn't have taken him anywhere near the mountains. But he may not have accounted for an approaching weather front.

Using weather maps from November, 1942, Laura Edwards with the Western Regional Climate Center re-created the day's weather. "It's possible the plane was ahead of a front for a time and attempted to cross the Sierra Nevada," Edwards says. Surface winds of 20-25 knots existed but weren't exceptionally strong, "But with the apparent quick S/SE movement of the central low from November 18-19, we think it likely there were strong upper level winds." Gamber's plane could have been pushed eastward.

Edwards says there was also poor visibility that day. "On the November 18th map, precipitation is falling ahead of the front and it's mostly cloudy to overcast in Fresno and Reno," with partly cloudy skies further east. Cold air followed the front, with Reno reporting temperatures just above freezing the next day. "The cloud level shown in the maps indicates the cloud base to be at about 7,000-8,000' above ground leading up to the frontal passage."

Carried by strong easterly winds, Lt. Gamber probably flew below the clouds to avoid wing icing. Edwards

points out that in bad weather, Alaskan bush pilots fly within sight of the ground, which leads to low flying in river canyons during inclement weather. She feels, "The pilot may have had trouble if he was attempting this technique in unfamiliar territory."

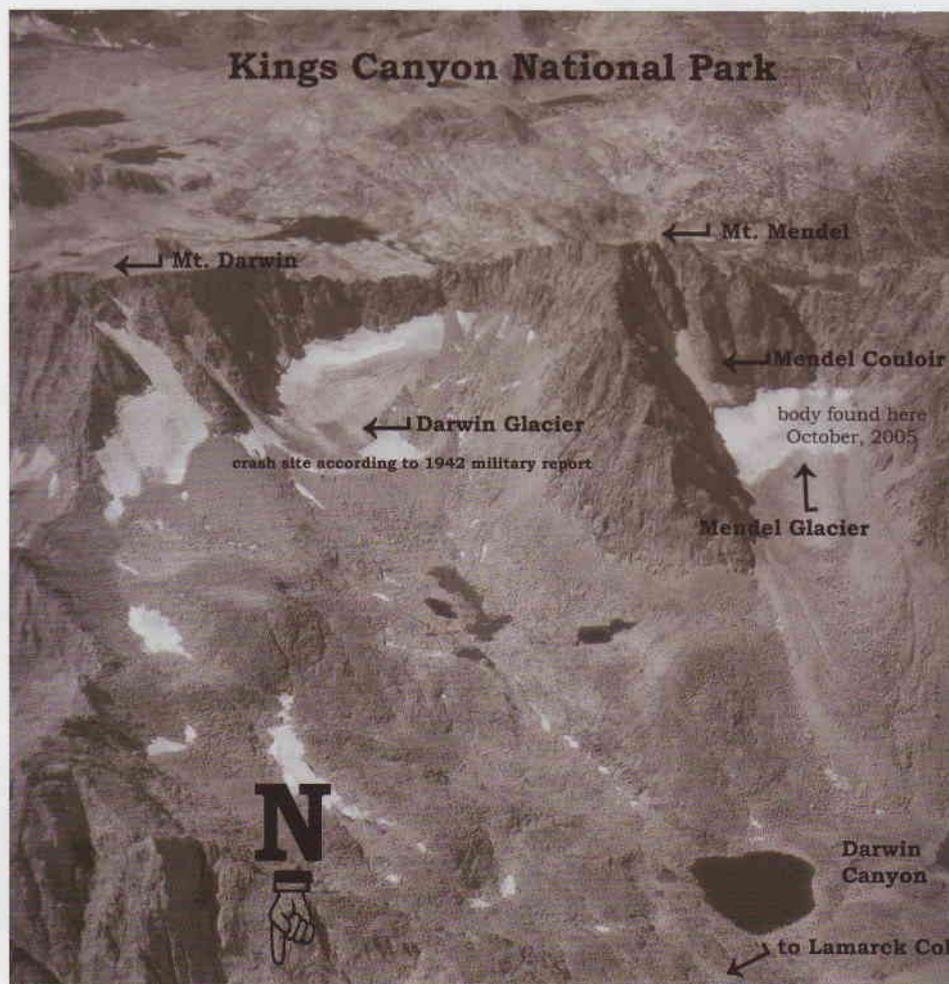
Another factor hindering Lt. Gamber would have been the lack of modern navigational equipment, says John Hubner. He flew an SNB, the Navy's version of the AT-7, during the Korean War. Hubner suspects the AT-7 that crashed had a magnetic compass but, "They were notoriously unreliable, especially in certain mountain conditions due to magnetic anomalies in the bedrock."

They may have had a radio, not that there was anyone to talk to once Lt.

Gamber lifted off. "Radios were unreliable" in the 1940s, says Hubner. "The fact that they worked at all was marvelous! But pilots expected the radios not to work," and once they left the ground they knew they could be on their own until they returned to base.

The AT-7 could fly as high as 26,000' but the cabin wasn't pressurized. With oxygen being the limiting factor, 10,000' was their effective altitude limit, according to Hubner. "Odds are they were flying low. If they were lost in the clouds and found themselves in the mountains, they would have been mighty worried. Not only did they not know where they were, they would find themselves hemmed in by a dangerous maze."

And a maze it is where the plane



Aerial view of Mt. Darwin and Mt. Mendel along with their glaciers. The Ice Man's body was found on the Mendel Glacier last October by two climbers attempting the Ice 9 climbing route in the Mendel Couloir. A 1947 military report says his plane crashed on the Darwin Glacier photo courtesy of USGS Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska



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went down. High peaks approaching 14,000' with 12,000' high jagged ridges and twisting, narrow canyons leave little maneuvering room. "You can't fly as high as the terrain, especially when at high altitude," says Hubner. "The plane simply didn't have the lift to get over an obstacle if one presented itself all of a sudden."

Lacking accurate navigational instruments, the pilot of the AT-7 would have used a combination of pilotage (i.e., holding a map on his lap, identifying way-points as they were passed) and dead-reckoning (following a compass heading for a certain amount of time at a certain speed should get you from point X to point Y). Neither technique works when the pilot is lost — which is the likely explanation for Lt. Gamber being so far off course.

According to the 1947 military report, when UC students Thomas Hodges and George Bond found the plane, the wreckage was located on the "northerly section of Darwin Glacier."

Then how did the Ice Man end up on the Mendel Glacier?

Simple, says George Bond. "Maps of that day and age didn't have Mendel mentioned on them. Not many knew where Mt. Darwin was, much less Mt. Mendel. Of course, the army didn't know a heck of a lot more than that." Today, he's convinced the wreck was located on the Mendel Glacier. And he's amazed at some ironies in life. The wife of his friend, Kirby West, went to school with the sisters of John Mortenson, one of the missing cadets.

After his discovery last October, the Ice Man was flown to the Fresno County Coroner and then to the JPAC lab at Hickam Field in Hawaii for identification. JPAC is responsible for identifying all missing U.S. service personnel. They had hoped that dental records could be used but none were found. Eventually the body was identified using mitochondrial DNA.

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Mysteries intrigue us because the facts of the story are often incomplete, vague and conflicting. In this story, Lt. William Gamber leaves Mather Field in an AT-7 Navigator with three cadets on November 18, 1942 at 8:30 a.m. Lt. Gamber is instrument-rated, an experienced pilot and flight instructor, with 709 hours (505 hours in the AT-7) in seven months. The cadets are on a "navigational training flight." Lt. Gamber flies with no co-pilot, suggesting the three cadets were in pilot training though the official record is silent on this subject.

The mystery deepens in 1947 when the plane is found 150 miles east of its turnaround point. Compounding the mystery is a report stating that wreckage was discovered on the Darwin Glacier when the Ice Man is discovered October 2005 on the Mendel Glacier.

Bad weather certainly caused the crash. Lost, and maybe in the clouds of an approaching front, Lt. Gamber found himself crossing the Sierra Nevada. Attempting to turn around within narrow Darwin Canyon, his AT-7 was unable to rise above encircling ridges and peaks and crashed. Confusion about the crash site is created by an inaccurate 1947 report.

And after 63 years, the body found in the ice of Mendel Glacier is known. He is no longer the unidentified and mysterious Ice Man. He is Leo Mustonen, a young man who hoped to serve his country and fly.

The AT-7, and its remaining crew members — Lt. William Gamber, Cadet Ernest Munn and Cadet John Mortenson are still hidden in the ice. Other than recording engine numbers to ascertain the aircraft's identity, the 1947 recovery team brought back no bodies or artifacts. At the Veterans Affairs cemetery in San Bruno, California, a headstone bears the names of the four crew members but nothing lies beneath the sod. Who knows when the rest of the crew will be discovered and returned home? SH

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