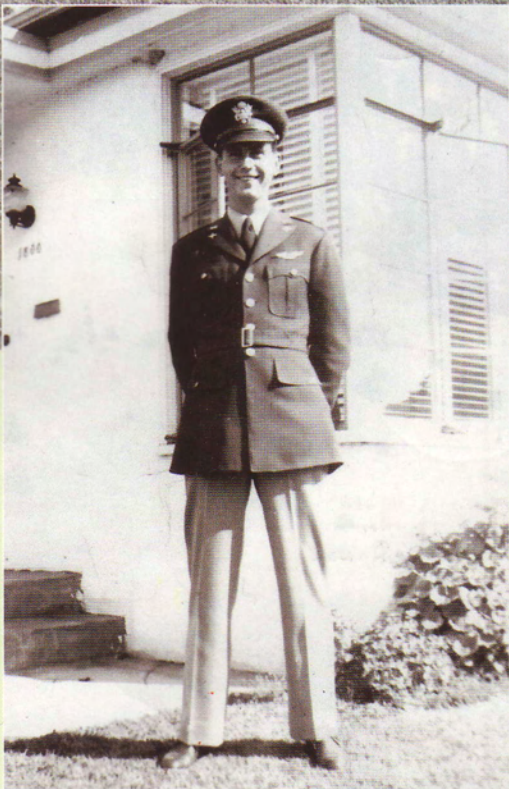
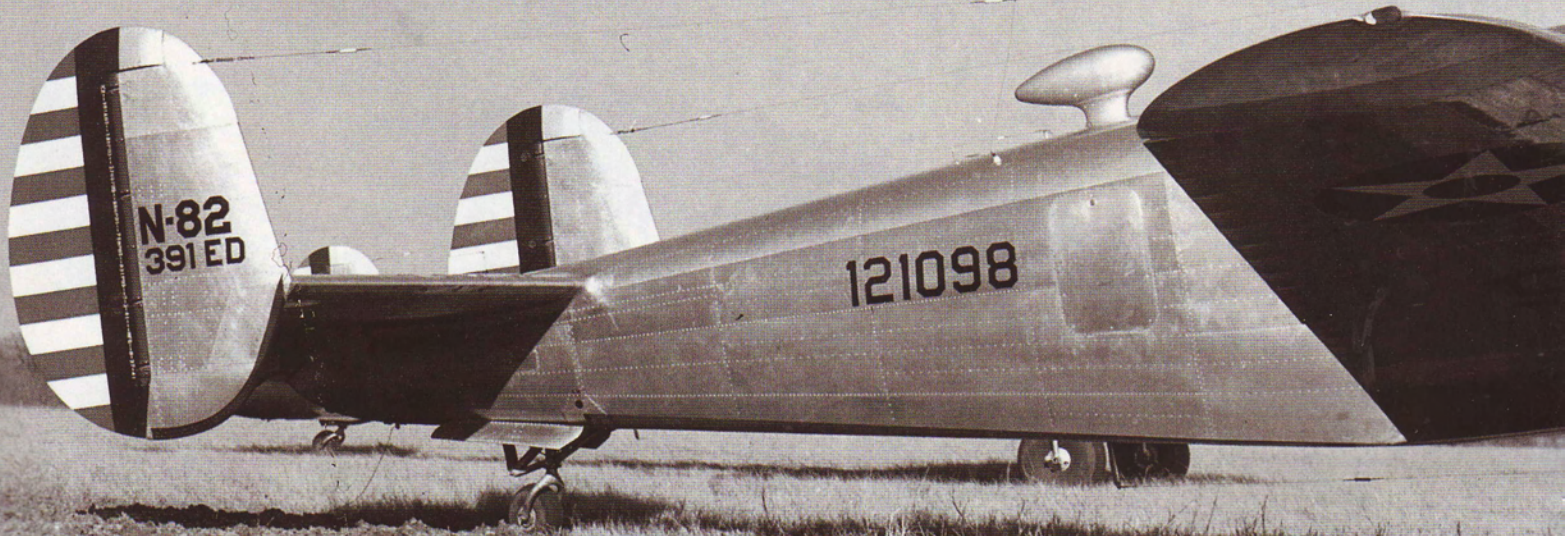


# FINAL FLIGHT

## Finding the Frozen Airmen

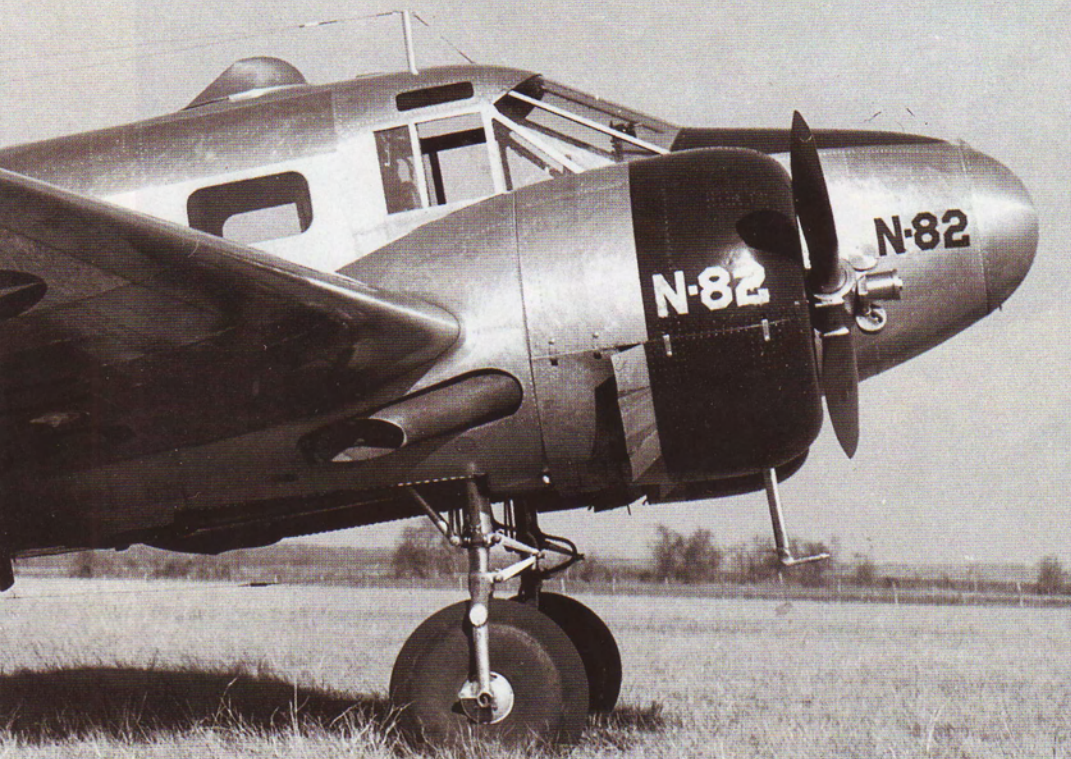
BY PETER STEKEL



2nd Lt. William Gamber



John Mortenson



Leo Mustonen



Ernest Glenn Munn

In August of 2007 I stood among the ice-embedded boulders of Mendel Glacier in Kings Canyon National Park, staring at what I thought was a dead tree. As I drew closer I realized that instead of a small, bent over tree, I was looking at the remains of a man dressed in a World War II aviator's uniform. On the third finger of his left hand was a gold ring with an onyx stone carved into the bas-relief of an ancient soldier.

I hadn't been exploring Mendel Glacier for long-lost airmen. In 2005 I had written a story for *Sierra Heritage* about a different World War II aviator whose remains had been discovered on this same glacier. This first airman had died November 18, 1942 when his U.S. Army Air Forces Beech 18 AT-7 Navigator had crashed here.

Which of the four men aboard the missing AT-7 was the Frozen Airman? Was he Second Lieutenant William Gamber, the pilot? Or was he one of the three aviation cadets: John M. Mortenson, Ernest Glenn Munn or Leo A. Mustonen? The three cadets were training to be navigators on one of the big bombers of 1942: the B-17. After they disappeared, it was five years before their crash site on Mendel Glacier was found by four University of California students. The students reported their find to the Army and three separate missions were sent into the High Sierra to identify and, if possible, recover the remains of the crew.

The first expedition was in the fall of 1947. Months had passed since the student's discovery and several feet of snow had fallen on the crash site. Still, the AT-7's two engines were found and identification tags confirmed

**The Beech 18, configured as an AT-7 Navigator. Note the turret aft of the cockpit where student navigators would take star sightings. The football-shaped object housed an automatic direction finder, which is a part of the airplane's electronic instruments used by navigator's to determine their position** image copyright by Museum of Flight, used by permission (insets) **The Beech 18 AT-7 that disappeared on November 18, 1942 was piloted by 2nd Lt. William Gamber and was crewed by aviation cadets John Mortenson, Leo Mustonen and Ernest Glenn Munn** photos courtesy of Gamber, Mortenson, Mustonen and Munn families



**View of Mendel Glacier and Mt. Mendel from Lamarck Col and entrance to Kings Canyon National Park (facing page) Searching for airplane wreckage in the bergschrund of Mendel Glacier** images by Peter Stekel

that this was the plane missing since 1942. No remains were found or recovered. In 1948, the Army mounted two more expeditions which were also unsuccessful.

Until late October, 2005, the wreck was forgotten. Then, two climbers stumbled upon human remains melting out of Mendel Glacier. The remains were clothed in the uniform of an Army Air Forces cadet. After nearly half a year, that Frozen Airman's remains were identified as Cadet Leo A. Mustonen.

I have been hiking and climbing in the Sierra since 1965 when I first visited Sequoia National Park with my Boy Scout troop. When I heard initial reports of the Frozen Airman I wanted to know more. Unfortunately, many news reports about Mustonen when he was first discovered said he couldn't have come

from a crashed airplane because no airplane had been found with his remains. He must have parachuted from the plane they said.

I thought differently. Winter was well on its way to the High Sierra in late October 2005 as a team of National Park rangers worked in sub-freezing temperatures to remove the Frozen Airman from Mendel Glacier. At day's end he lay within a 500 pound block of ice. There had been no time to look for airplane wreckage.

I was on Mendel Glacier in 2007 to do just that: look for airplane wreckage and confirm that Leo Mustonen had indeed died in an airplane crash and not from a failed parachute jump. Climbing into the Mendel Glacier cirque, my hiking companion and I found plenty of evidence of an airplane. We found a tire, parts of two engines and other pieces

of wreckage. We split up to explore further. In a moment, I saw what looked like a small tree, bent over from the frost. But it wasn't a tree. It was a man. Five months later, he was identified as Ernest Glenn Munn. He was another crew member from the missing airplane that would be coming home.

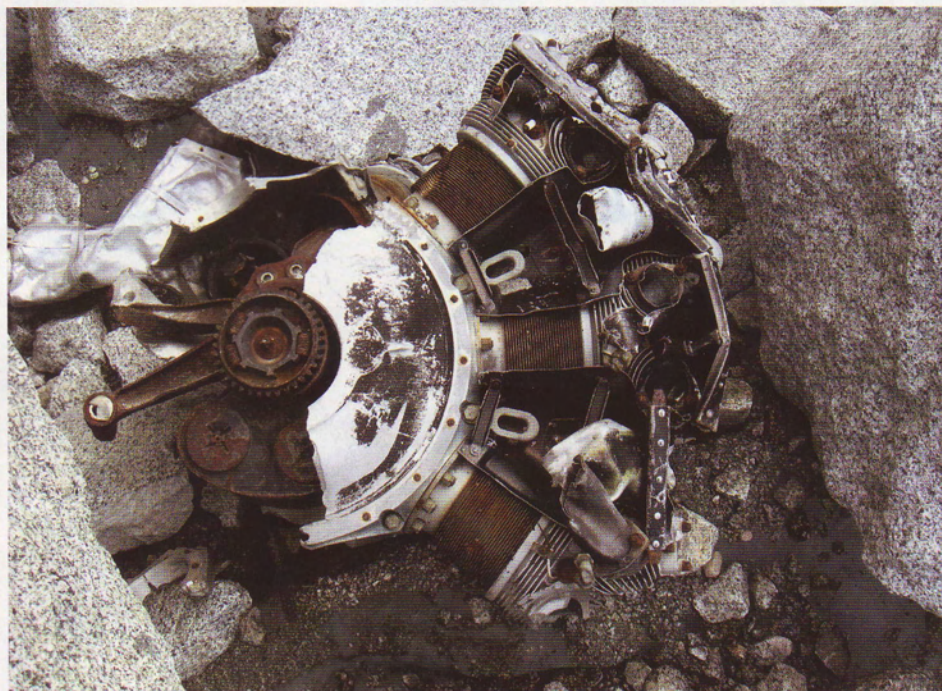
The discovery of Munn's remains should have been an ending but it turned into a beginning instead. Finding Glenn Munn inspired me to solve the mystery of how and why he died. Also, why were he and Leo Mustonen flying over the Sierra when official reports said they were supposed to be in the Central Valley? Why did it take so long for them to be found and where were the other two crew members?

Solving these mysteries lead me to write *Final Flight*. Along the way I learned incredible things





**Wing wreckage from the Beech 18 AT-7, August 2007** image by Peter Stekel



**Engine wreckage from the Beech 18 AT-7, August 2007 (below) Front wheel of the Beech 18 AT-7 found on Mendel Glacier, August 2007** images by Peter Stekel



about soldiers who never got to fight during World War II. Of 16.1 million U.S. soldiers serving during the war, 671,846 were wounded and 405,399 killed. Of these, 113,842 (28%), were non-combat deaths. Not only that, but the Army Air Forces lost more aircraft (7,100) to accidents in training or transportation than against the Japanese (4,500). These numbers account for the deaths of Glenn Munn, Leo Mustonen, John Mortenson, William Gamber and 15,530 others making the sky over the continental United States a virtual third front during the war.

I also learned it was more than the melting of glaciers that led to the two Frozen Airmen being discovered. It was the extreme remoteness of their resting place of over 60 years. Their discovery was serendipitous. It was a case of being in the right place at the right time, the right season and several years into record dry years in California.

There were other answers to discover; answers that took five years to find. Some questions remain unanswerable. Still, I'm content with what I was able to find and happy to have helped the family of Glenn Munn find closure after such a long period of time. There remains two more people somewhere in Mendel Glacier and I've promised their families to not stop looking until they're returned home. Until that time, Mendel Glacier remains sacrosanct as any other cemetery and equally protected by being within a National Park.

While studying the missing crew I got to know something about their lives. Pilot William R. Gamber was born in Payette, Ohio and graduated from high school in 1937, enrolling at Tristate College in Angola, Ohio. At Tristate, Gamber played basketball and played trumpet in the school orchestra and, in an era of slide rules and note pocket calculators, finished his four-year engineering degree in three. He enlisted as an aviation cadet in the U.S. Army Air Corps (soon renamed Air Forces) before the Pearl Harbor attack and became a pilot.

With Gamber was John M. Mortenson. At 25, Mortenson was the oldest person on board.



**Glenn Munn's parachute lay beside his remains. Though the canvas pack had rotted away, the parachute was not deployed** image by Peter Stekel

He was born and grew up around Moscow, Idaho. His family was from Sweden and were farmers.

Glenn Munn was the oldest of four children and was raised in eastern Ohio. His three younger sisters are still living and I got to meet them, as well as the rest of Glenn's family, when I attended his funeral in Colerain, Ohio during the spring of 2008.

Leo Mustonen's family came from Finland when it was still a part of Russia. He was born and grew up in Brainerd, Minnesota. Like his father, Leo was quiet, and similar to Gamber, Mustonen was also a musician.

The tragic elements of this story continue to haunt me. William Gamber was the kind of kid everybody wanted to be friends with. Bright. Articulate. Handsome. A real shining star in his

hometown. The kind of person younger kids looked up to. In school he was noted for his sportsmanship. In many ways I picture him as the archetypal "Jack Armstrong All-American Boy." His parents, especially his mother, never got over their grief and could only contain it by not talking about their only son.

Leo Mustonen's mother, Anna, never got over the death of her son either. In the aftermath of Leo's disappearance she corresponded for over a year with Glenn Munn's mother. The letters are tear-stained and her heartache fills the pages.

Movie-star-handsome, Glenn Munn was known by all the girls in Wheeling, West Virginia where he went to school, as the "Blond Bomber." His mother promised to never cut her hair until her son was returned to her. When she died at age 101 her hair

nearly touched the floor.

These boys from the lost airplane that crashed into Mendel Glacier were not the movers and shakers, the generals who decided great battles, the soldiers who raised flags on battlements, nor the politicians and leaders who decided the fate of nations. They were people just like us.

I've learned the importance of living our own lives with honesty and integrity. Only in this way can we honor the sacrifice of William Gamber, John Mortenson, Glenn Munn and Leo Mustonen. *SH*

† Map reference, page 5: N-7

*Peter Stekel's book, "Final Flight" can be purchased by visiting [wildernesspress.com](http://wildernesspress.com) or by calling 800.443.7227.*