



THE LAST MAN

A DRAMATIC sequel to an Army communique,
"One of our bombers is long overdue on a routine flight"

By **NORMAN CLYDE**

ON THE NIGHT of December 12, 1941, a United States bomber, bearing General Dargue of the United States Air Corps, five other officers and two enlisted men, circled a few times over Owens Valley east of the Sierra Nevada and then vanished. Prompt and careful search by the Air Corps revealed no trace of the missing plane. Then a succession of snowstorms rendered further search futile.

The following spring, from the top of a nearby mountain, I discovered through my binoculars the lost plane lying partially buried in snow at an elevation of some 11,250 feet along the north base of Birch Mountain. Immediately a detachment of the Air Corps was hurried from the nearest base to the scene of the disaster.

A few days later I found the spot where the plane had cracked on a rocky rib at

an altitude of 12,700 feet. After striking head-on the plane had rolled into an adjoining chute and continued down, apparently without interruption, to the point where it was discovered, at least 1500 feet below.

The bodies of Colonels Ricker and Bundy were found lying near the point of impact and that of Private Van Hamm from Idaho was discovered in the snow near the plane on the first visit to the

• *The United States Army Air Corps bomber crashed just beyond the buttress-like ridge just left of the center of the picture*



• *Below is a portion of the smashed aircraft after it crashed against a rocky rib and rolled 1500 feet down Birch Mountain*



wreckage. Those of the other occupants of the plane might be anywhere from the point of impact down the chute to the place where the plane had eventually come to rest.

Many feet of snow had fallen during the winter and numerous slides had swept down the couloir. They would naturally pick up and carry on any objects lying in the chute and since snow slides have a rolling motion they might leave objects which they happened to be bearing along, at any depth from the surface down to the rocks on the floor of the chute.

Debris from the wrecked plane lay littered all the way from the point where it had come to grief down the chute to the ship and even a short distance to a lake below. In fact some large pieces of aluminum had been carried by the wind across the lake. The depth of the snow when the plane was found varied from a few feet to 20 or 30 feet immediately below a 200-foot drop just above the mouth of the couloir.

The finding of the remaining occupants was therefore a matter of frequently and carefully scrutinizing the surface of the snow. The exposure of the couloir being a northerly one, the snow would disappear very slowly even in the warm weather of mid-summer.

Week in and week out the search went on. All the area in which there seemed any possibility of any of the lost members of the party being found, was carefully inspected at intervals of two or three days. During the first few weeks the searching parties were frequently driven back by snowstorms which suddenly enveloped the mountain. No more bodies were found anywhere up the chute, but eventually five, which had been buried at various depths down to the rocks in the bottom of the snow fan on which the

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FANTASMA

By **ELSIE V. McILVRIED**

MY SOUL would travel byways
Through tall primeval pines,
No guide to mark my wanderings
But Nature's woodland signs:
Would cross the widest ocean,
Explore uncharted seas
And sail adventuring galleons
Before a freshening breeze.

BUT ALL my roads have pavements—
And I must view my trees
Must vision my fair seas
In imagination's forest;
Across a city's housetops
In the blue of an evening sky
And sail my questing galleon—
A cloud-ship—drifting by;
Yet I am not repining
For I shall never fail
To guide in pleasant phantasy,
Ships that are mine to sail.



I established a camp at about 9000 feet in the canyon of Birch Creek, at the highest point where an adequate supply of firewood is available.

Every two or three days I made a trip up to the wrecked plane and after carefully examining the snow fan, continued up the chute to the point of impact. By the middle of August the winter snow was rapidly disappearing from the lower portion of the snow fan.

From the first, due to the manner in which the plane had obviously come plunging down the chute, and from the fact that the ribs by which the couloir is enclosed are in places rather low, I had suspected that some members of the party might have been hurled over these ribs into an adjoining couloir.

One day I clambered up to the crest of a projection which commands the lower portion of this chute. The 200-foot drop in the chute down which the plane had come was only a short distance above, and abreast of this the rib to the right is relatively low. As I looked down on the floor of the couloir immediately below me I noticed that a good deal of debris, including some rather large, heavy fragments of the plane, was beginning to show above the surface of the snow.

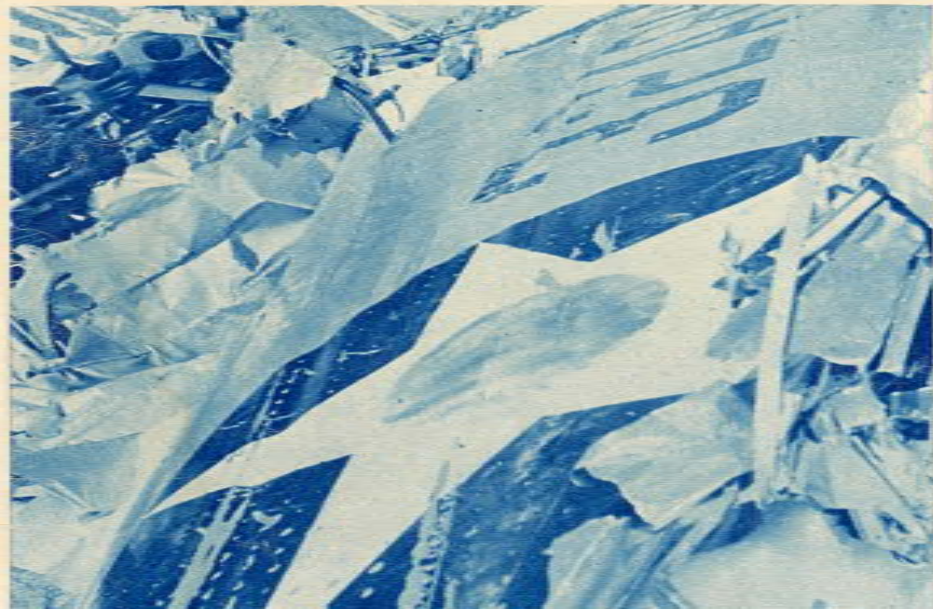
On subsequent trips I made a point of coming down this chute. The inclination was so steep that I usually glissaded down it, swinging to an abrupt stop whenever an object not previously seen attracted my attention.

One day as I came shooting down the couloir, I saw a dark object protruding above the snow, some distance below me and to the right. Swinging over toward it, I came to a stop alongside. It was the body of Sergeant Hoffman, just then beginning to appear above the snow. The long quest was ended. The last one had been found.

plane rested, were recovered. There still remained one, that of Sergeant Hoffman.

This was in early August. Meanwhile, all the members of the Air Corps detachment with the exception of about a half-dozen had returned to headquarters. The remaining men made trips at frequent intervals from their base at Big Pine, and

• *Wreckage of the big plane was scattered over a wide area of the mountain. Here is a closeup of one of the shattered wings*



• *A section of the bomber fuselage finally landed among these boulders. It took more than eight months to find the last man*

