

C:\Users\peter\Documents\COMMAND FAILURE\The Book\Chapter 4
October 24 1941 and The Boys.wpd

Chapter 4
October 24, 1941

Weather in the area around March Air Base on October 24, 1941 was what locals in the far eastern Los Angeles Basin would expect in October. Cold. Cloudy. Snow in the mountains, rain in the plains. Lots of wind blowing in off the desert. Unsettled air for an airman. The base is located near Riverside adjacent to what residents know as the High Desert. **For being so close to the ocean** it experiences the same continental climate found in the mid-west and the Rocky Mountain states. Cold and snowy in winter and miserably hot in summer.

March Air Field and Riverside are surrounded on three sides by the mountain chains that enclose the Los Angeles basin. To the north and southeast rise the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains with snowy peaks over 10,000 feet. South are the no less formidable though much shorter Santa Ana Mountains. To the east beyond the mountains is interior desert with extremes of heat and cold that account for strong to excessively strong advectional easterlies called "Santa Ana winds." These winds scream through the passes during autumn. And to the west of course lies the Pacific Ocean with its own strong weather systems.

Before all the blank spaces between hell and gone were filled in between the Pacific Ocean and the Mojave Desert, post World War II boy scouts from Los Angeles would travel to the High Desert to spend weekends camping in a fee-free world out in the dry lands. They brought water and fuel and they brought food, cooking over wood fires. They sheltered in floorless war-surplus canvas tents, slept in war-surplus sleeping bags, hiked in work boots, and appropriated kitchen gear from home. And they brought the same unknowingness of the desert and its weather that Maj. Hughes and his boys brought in 1941. They also brought along equivalent kinds of weather disasters, even though one was in the air and the other on the ground.

Nothing portends a disaster in the making than on the morning of October 24, 1941 when Maj. Hughes sent his second-in-command, Capt. Peter McGoldrick, to get the weather report for their route and get clearance for departure. There would be 19 pilots that morning instead of the 21 who had arrived the previous day. Lt. Deaton (probably) and Lt. LeClaire (who had replaced Lt. Cochran a few days previously) were on **sick call**.

Capt. McGoldrick got the weather forecast but did not share it with the other pilots. The weather was typical for that time of year. It would not be bad but neither would it be good. **"Weather conditions at Fresno were reported to be 4500 broken and 6000 broken and at Sacramento the conditions were within contact flight requirements."** That is, they could expect to be flying through a lot of clouds to get on top of the deck since their clearance to depart March Field stated their **"direct route to Sacramento"** would be at 9000 feet.

At the request of March Field Acting Operations Officer, Maj. H.M. Wittkop, in Lt. Lydon's Technical Report of Aircraft Accident Classification Committee files is the flight plan filed by Maj. Hughes. Ignoring the federal radio range course that would take the group up California's Central Valley the route is given as Sacramento, direct, at 9500 (not 9000) feet at an air speed of 200 mph with 1:50 minutes estimated time en route with enough fuel aboard for 2:30 minutes **giving a 40 minute fuel reserve upon arrival.** That would be more than enough if all went well. And why shouldn't it? The trip cross country had gone without a hitch. Mostly.

There are some inconsistencies in the flight plan, which aren't huge and so probably unimportant though it is odd that the serial number for the major's P-40 is stated as 41-13338 when all other documents record it as 41-13336. The number of P-40s in the flight is given as 20 versus 19 so another pilot may have dropped out at the last minute. Weather is given as scattered showers over the mountains with thundershowers. Radio transmitting frequency within the group was given as 4495 kc. Under "remarks" is, "Thorough consideration has been given by the pilot to the NECESSARY MAPS, EMERGENCY EQUIPMENT, NOTICES TO AIRMEN, and WEATHER CONDITIONS affecting the proposed flight."

Also deposited are two pages of weather data which cover the route between March Field and Sacramento with sky conditions also included for Palmdale, Sandberg (near present-day Gorman), Bakersfield, InyoKern, Modesto, and Fresno from 10:30 AM to 3:30 PM. The description does not adequately agree with what Capt. McGoldrick reported. Along the route high clouds above 10,000 feet are predicted being "scattered," "thin broken," "overcast," or "broken. Scattered clouds at 3500 feet, broken clouds at 8000 feet, lower scattered clouds at 6000 feet, lower broken clouds at 5000 feet are predicted along the route. Winds are predicted along the route to fluctuate from east southeast to east to south southwest, to northwest and so forth all over the compass. By 12:30 PM thunderstorms along the mountains and heavy cumulus clouds in all directions are forecast. Light to moderate rain (presumably snow at high altitude) is called for after 1:30 PM.

Strangely, visibility is recorded as "Unl." Presumably this means "unlimited?"

Major Hughes, possibly thinking back to **his salad days** as an acrobatic flyer with the Claire L. Chennault-mentored "Skylarks," or maybe more immediately to the problem of training a combat crew to fly in any and all conditions, and any and all situations, decided the combined 57th and 52nd should depart March Field together, divided into three plane elements. However, he was denied this request by the air field controller who explained that **"formation take-offs were not permitted."**

The major's reputation amongst his pilots was for being an old school stickler for military discipline and formality in the West Point tradition. It's easy to imagine how annoyed Hughes may have been, chaffing at any question to his authority and plans for making this flight as close to a combat situation as he could in a peacetime United States. Why should some lowly junior officer refuse permission for his boys to show what they could do? What with the events in Europe and China being what they were.

* * *

The pilots assembled around their aircraft awaiting orders. There was a lot of shuffling of feet, nervous cigarette smoking, and staring off into space with a smattering of chit chat between the 57th and 52nd boys. Nobody knew anybody else from one group to the other and that was a tad unsettling when it came to who you could count on in a pinch.

They all knew where they were. It had taken but a moment after their arrival the previous day to ascertain that. But none of them knew where they were about to go and why or wherefore or the conditions. Getting here was already a comedy of errors, especially losing the C-47 with their ground crew. But they had been trained to do as they were told.

Made more nervous was that pilot's unconscious awareness of weather. It looked fine here at March Field in Riverside but a look to the north where there were obviously mountains didn't appear fine at all. Clouds rising up and cresting like waves over what were certainly mountain peaks. They waited. And fretted. And shuffled their feet. And smoked their cigarettes. What questions they may have they kept to themselves. As they had been trained.

Finally, Capt. McGoldrick appeared with their clearance to leave. The group lifted off at 11:30 AM. There was a shortage of maps and, contradicting the remarks section of the filed flight plan, **"flight leaders only were equipped with a complete set of maps."**

* * *

After departing March Air Force Base and approaching the vicinity of Tehachapi Pass (elevation 3771 feet) **1st Lt. Leonard Lydon was leading the last flight of five airplanes.** 2nd Lt. John Pease (52nd PG) was on Lydon's (57th PG) left wing and Lt. Birrell (52nd PG) on his right. Lt. Carey (52nd PG) and Lt. Long (52nd PG) were behind. Encountering overcast they ascended to 9500 feet and, still in overcast, continued up to 16,700 to arrive on top of the deck. **"No oxygen was available."**

They were about 30 minutes out of March Field and **flying above the overcast** when Lt. Pease was forced to drop back with engine trouble. "I was flying on my main gas tank; mixture control, automatic lean; RPM 2400; instruments normal." Pease's first indication of trouble was sudden and immediate. His fuel pressure dropped to zero and his engine quit. So, he changed gas tanks to reserve and pushed the mixture to automatic rich. Using his wobble pump **[show photo of wobble pump]** Pease got fuel to the engine which then ran roughly. "I then noticed my oil pressure dropping to zero and my oil and prestone (radiator fluid) **[show photos of both gauges]** temperatures exceeding their limits," and he opened his cooling flaps wide.

After succeeding in getting his engine started again it began "coughing out a blue grey smoke which increased in intensity and soon forced me to open my canopy, as it (the smoke) poured into the cockpit." Seconds later the engine in the lieutenant's P-40 seized and the prop stopped dead. At this point Pease was still flying **CAVU** at 16,000 feet above solid overcast. Not knowing what was below, only knowing that he couldn't stay in his aircraft, Lt. Pease bailed out.

With Lt. Pease dropping back due to engine problems, Lt. Lydon told Lt. Carey via radio to remain with Pease. Lt. Long then moved up to take the place of Pease on Lydon's left wing. Lydon tried calling Maj. Hughes on the radio to inform him of what transpired but received no answer. There was also no answer from Capt. McGoldrick nor Lt. Young who were flying in the Headquarters Fight with Maj. Hughes.

Lydon now had his own problems. **"About this time** my automatic propeller went out and I turned the prop switch to manual. Then the motor sputtered a few times and I turned on the carburetor heat control which seemed to smooth out the motor considerably." At that point, Lydon heard from Lt. Carey that Lt. Pease had bailed out of his aircraft and that he, Carey, had seen Pease's parachute open. "He also asked me for the course and altitude of the group and I gave it to him as 290 degrees and 16,700 feet."

Carey acknowledged the call and that was the last of him that Lydon saw.

It begs the question that if the group was flying above the soup, how could Lt. Carey have seen the parachute of Lt. Pease open up? Pease was swallowed by clouds. Perhaps Lt. Pease pulled his rip cord immediately and his parachute blossomed before he sank out of sight? Nobody says one way or the other.

About five minutes after Lydon's last contact with Lt. Carey, "the C.O. started to descend through the overcast," which means, at least at this point, the remainder of the group must have been in visual contact. Or, at least most or some (meaning Hughes and the headquarters pilots) of them were. Lydon is unclear on this point. Of course, being behind Lydon, Carey would not be visible. However, Long was still visible on Lydon's left and Birrell on his right. Soon, there would be no visual contact with anyone but his wingmen as, **"I went on instruments** and started my descent at about 400 feet per minute."

While Lt. Pease floated to an uncertain impact with the ground, Lydon and his flight **"reached the top of the overcast"** and "my motor sputtered." Assuming he was running low on fuel, "I immediately switched to a full gas tank but noticed that the tank I was using still contained about 35 gallons of gas according to the gauge." **[INSERT PHOTO OF P-40 GAS GAUGE]** Lydon's motor ran rougher and rougher and he signaled to Long and Birrell to break up and "informed them by radio that my motor was cutting out." By this time Lydon's motor had stopped completely and he was dead in the water.

Putting his ship in a glide, Lydon made a right hand turn to avoid hitting or being hit by Lt. Carey whom he assumed was still behind him, **"and started changing the throttle** and carburetor heat control in an effort to get the motor started." It was all to no avail. Plus, while doing all this Lydon had entered a spin. Giving up hope of restarting his motor Lydon concentrated on exiting the spin. Accomplishing that and entering a normal glide again, Lydon opened the canopy, disengaged his radio set, pushed his goggles to the back of his head and "put the ship in a gentle right climbing turn and when the airspeed showed 100 miles an hour," and with no idea where he was or what was beneath him or what would happen once he reached the ground, Lt. Leonard Clair Lydon climbed out on the port side of his cockpit and was blown completely away from the ship, passing under and barely avoiding the left elevator.

Pulling his ripcord, Lydon's parachute opened immediately. After one or two minutes of dropping through overcast and light snow he broke into the open **"and found myself over a rocky cliff."** Though

he didn't know it, Lydon was over Deadman Canyon in Kings Canyon National Park, "drifting slightly towards the summit (of Barton Peak) **insert photo of Barton Peak** and swinging considerably in my parachute." Lt. Lydon landed with "considerable force" in a jumble of talus "about 3/4 of the way up the mountainside." Bruised by his landing, Lydon disentangled himself from his parachute and began making his way downslope through some three inches of snow. After about an hour of crawling and slipping and sliding he reached the bottom of the mountain. "I saw nothing of my plane after it disappeared in the overcast."

Insert sidebar on what clothing they were wearing [street shoes, etc]

Lts. Pease and Lydon weren't the only two pilots experiencing mechanical problems. **So was 2nd Lt. Jack West.** He was #3 in the second element in the Headquarters flight with Maj. Hughes and Capt. McGoldrick. In his written report to the Examining Committee, West explained how the entire flight departed March Field around 11 AM on October 24, 1941. "We had taken off and climbed to about 9500 feet. Then we gradually climbed higher until we were around 17,000 feet, and flew this altitude for around 25 minutes, with no oxygen in the ship."

As West descended into the soup with the rest of the flight, "my motor sputtered enough to throw me out of position and I couldn't see a thing and was going down." His engine cut out again and **even though he was not using carburetor heat, "I noticed the carburetor temperature was in the red."** **[suffering from hypoxia? Committee keeps asking him about using carb heat. Is this to check on him or to verify what other pilots were or were to told about using carb heat]** Recognizing the collision danger he now faced within his element, "I had to drop back out of position because there were fellows flying back of me."

Disoriented in the clouds, **flying on instruments, West probably lost situational awareness** because he suddenly found himself in a "tight spiral," heading down. **West later told the Examining Committee** on November 2, 1941 that despite his troubles he was able to radio Capt. McGoldrick to tell him about being caught in a spin. West managed to get himself straightened out after a secondary spin or stall just as he broke clear of the clouds. **"All I could see were mountain peaks and rocks** and I knew the ship was not going to recover this time." West knew he had to act fast or be killed in a crash. "I released my canopy, kicked right rudder and pulled right stick to snap." Then, he disengaged his seat harness, climbing out of his seat and onto the cockpit instrument panel. The canopy began to slide shut so West forced it open once again. Then, over the side he went, sucked out by

the slipstream. He later guessed his speed at 300 mpg. For a moment, West was about 200 feet over his plane which was already burning. **"I pulled the ripcord as quickly as I could.** The chute popped open, made one swing and snagged a tree."

Like Leonard Lydon, Jack West hit a mountainside in Kings Canyon National Park at the mouth of Deadman Canyon some 300 yards from his crashed and immolated airplane. It had come to ground **"with the most terrific explosion I had ever heard."** West walked and slid down to the burning P-40 in hopes he could find something to help him survive the cold and snow already burrowing into his body. He found the plane "totally washed out." There was going to be nothing but cold and snow for Jack West for the next week.

* * *

Lt. Carey lost contact with the rest of his flight when Lt. Lydon ordered him to hang back with Lt. Pease. When Pease bailed out, Carey was left to fend for himself. As were Lt. Birrell who had been on Lydon's right wing in formation and Lt. Long once Lydon and West dropped out. Meantime, the Headquarters flight, under the direction of Maj. Hughes along with everybody else now began to descend into the overcast. Being to the rear of everybody else, Lydon's disintegrating flight was likely invisible to the rest of the flyers. They were also ignorant of what had happened to Lt. Lydon and his boys because Lydon had been unsuccessful with his radio message to the C.O. So, Birrell and Long were all alone. Neither were ever seen alive again. That meant that of Lt. Lydon's flight of six, five met with disaster.

"After watching Lt. Pease bail out into the murk, Lt. Carey had reversed course and was able to sneak under the cloud deck over the Tehachapi (Mountains) and continue in the clear (in the Central Valley) to a safe landing at McClellan," in Sacramento at the pursuit group's stated destination for the day. Carey therefore proved he had learned one of flying's most important lessons: your closest or your safest harbor is sometimes behind you and not in front. As Maj. Hughes and the 57th PG demonstrated, flight is a forward progression and it can be terribly difficult to turn around when trouble strikes. There are no rest stops in the sky, no place to pull over and contemplate where you are and what you are doing and it is not easy to turn around and head back from whence you came. And because flight is a forward progression pilots often crash and burn because they have allowed the airplane to make decisions for them. In a way, the airplane flies the pilot rather than the other way around.

* * *

It's impossible to know when Birrell and Long split up but it is

easy to imagine how. Flying in thick overcast and cloud they could have easily lost sight of each other. They had little choice but to continue on their original course and hope for the best. Sadly, because they were so far east of the Central Valley, where they should have been, they were flying over the spine of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in a region where the peaks and passes were all between 10,000 to over 13,000 feet.

Lt. Richard Long came to grief first. It must have happened pretty soon after Lydon and West were forced to bail out. It wouldn't be until 1959 when Long's remains would be found by three climbers doing some mountaineering a few miles east of where Lts. Lydon and West had safely parachuted after deserting their aircraft.

Brothers, **Phil and Sheldon (Shel) Arnot** were climbing high above Roaring River (located at the mouth of **Deadman Canyon**) in Kings Canyon National Park on July 7, 1959 with Harry Pancoast and **two others** when they stumbled across signs of an airplane crash at about the 11,000 foot level. Pancoast spotted the wreckage first when the three were traversing from the south to the north summit of **what they called Mt. Sheldon** exclaiming, "What's that?" and pointing downslope to the west. His eyes had caught the gleam of light reflecting on large and small pieces of metal.

The three dropped down the slope for a look-see to what quickly became evident was aircraft wreckage. **Phil Arnot had flown 22 missions** over Europe as a B-17 co-pilot during the War and he had an instant empathy for what he saw. Bones, personal affects, engine parts "broken apart and heavily rusted," and plenty of mangled wreckage. "His plane obviously came straight down. The machine guns were buried right up to the magazines. The engine parts were partly buried in a small radius rather than scattered widely. The crash was definitely not a 'pancake' crash." Phil Arnot, with a pilot's eye surmised this pilot had not suffered, had not known what hit him. That Lt. Long had entered a spin and had not the time nor opportunity to bail out. He may not even have known what was up until it was too late. "The wings were crumpled when we came upon the site." They had to pry one wing open to see the Army Air Corps insignia, "the first indication as to what we had discovered." That's when they found the fuel gauge from a Curtis-Wright airplane their experienced eyes surmised came from a P-40. They had found Lt. Richard Long, missing since October 24, 1941.

Four days after their wreckage discovery Harry Pancoast, with Phil and his brother, Shel Arnot reached Grant Grove Ranger Station, headquarters of Kings Canyon National Park. Here they shared their discovery. For physical evidence they presented the rangers with the Curtis-Wright fuel gauge, a fountain pen, a

wallet with the initials "RNL" and a lower jaw bone from a human being.

Of course, they created quite a sensation.

"Rangers from all the inner offices came pouring out to look at the 15 minute topo map to show them exactly where the wreckage was located." It was the kind of interest and excitement many people working for the National Park Service live for: a real and a physical touch with the past; a human story. Something not bookish or academic. Not a tourist or visitor display. Something that touches the heart and the mind and reminds people of tragedy and sacrifice. In short, real and not created nor imagined history.

Such horrific experiences are not easily put aside. War combat veterans are known for their closed-lipped descriptions of combat versus descriptions by those who did not serve in the front lines. Those who saw it and participated in the blood and guts had less to glory over than the ones who viewed it from afar.

With the sensitivity borne of war's horror, **nearly four decades later Phil Arnot recalled his discovery.** He further described the discovery in his book of essays, *High Sierra, John Muir's Range of Light*. The chapters are presented as trail guide descriptions but they offer less a description of how to get there as they do what to expect when you arrive. Arnot depicts the area where they found Lt. Long's crash site as one of the most remote and wildest in the entire Sierra Nevada Mountains. In his fifteen visits to the region between 1955 and the early 1990s Arnot wrote that he had seen only two other parties. "As late as 1959 two peaks in the immediate vicinity were unclimbed and as late as 1974 the summit register of Mt. Brewer (13,570 feet), the most prominent peak for miles around, still held the 1924 signatures of Sierran pioneer explorers Joseph and Marion LeConte. **(Show photo of summit register)**

Prior to departing March Field on that horrific October day Lt. Richard N. Long told one of the other pilots how he was, **"sick and tired** of his engine cutting out all the time." Long had planned on being **married October 24, 1941**. The ceremony had been postponed when Long's furlough at his Selfridge Field, Michigan, duty station was canceled so he could join the 57th PG on their flight to California. His fiancé was Canadian-native, Rachel Emily Thomasson, who lived in Michigan at the time. She moved with her family to Sacramento, California sometime after the Lt. Long's death. Rachel Thomasson died, aged 90, in 2010 having never married. She had never given up hope that her fiancé would be found.

* * *

1st Lt. William Birrell kept flying north. Unlike Lt. Carey he apparently felt there was nothing else that he could do. All the while he drifted ever so slightly westward, probably within the range of error of his magnetic compass, but never losing the clouds. What else could he do since his commander had never given out their course or destination?

How Lt. Birrell managed to not hit anything for the next over one hundred air miles is wondrous indeed as he flew across the spine of the Sierra Nevada and it's highest peaks and passes. Though the lieutenant's luck did finally give out. His body, **"burned beyond recognition,"** was found the next day in the vicinity of Bass Lake, south of Yosemite National Park, inside his demolished P-40. He had come down violently around the 5000 foot level on Gray's Mountain (also known as Gray's Peak, elevation 5800 feet). According to the *Fresno Bee*, **"Birrell's plane apparently crashed into the peak with terrific force about 2 P.M. Friday."** A man cutting fence posts at an unoccupied CCC (**Civilian Conservation Corps**) Camp reported hearing Birrell's plane flying overhead through the clouds. Then, disaster. There was an explosion and fireball as the lieutenant's aircraft collided with the ground.

Without knowing at the time what they were seeing, **a private pilot named Claude Williams**, proprietor of a resort at Bass Lake, and his observer, forest ranger Eldridge (or Eldredge) Westfall, later spotted Lt. Birrell's aircraft wreckage from the air.

Maj. William F. Kyle, who would later serve on the Aircraft Accident Classification Committee for Lt. West, Lt. Lydon, and Lt. Pease, led the recovery team to Lt. Birrell's crash site. It was a difficult task made even more so by the remoteness of the site. Today there is a good quality two-wheel drive but unpaved US Forest Service road in the area but in 1941 access was not so easy. Birrell's two brothers and their parents had a memorial plaque built for William. In July of 1942, delivering the memorial, George, one of William's younger brothers, described the 14 mile arduous overland journey to reach the spot where his brother had died. **"The proprietor of the camp at Bass Lake** got together a party of pack horses and mules, and all of us made the trip to the crash site. There was no road or trail of any kind at that time."

William Birrell was eventually identified by Fresno Air Base commander, Col. Latha A. Smith, because of the **flyer's name tag** pinned onto his shirt. **(Show name tag photo from Melvin Mortenson's blouse-Final Flight image collection)** Birrell's **remains were cremated** and buried in the family cemetery plot back

in Kinsman, Ohio.

* * *

Maj. Hughes commanded the lead HQ Group and Lt. Lyons the trail end Charlie third group. First Lt. Frank Mears lead the group in the middle and his leadership experience was totally different from the other two. It shows how Mears kept his group together, maintained situational awareness under the trying conditions flying in the clouds, and demonstrated flexibility in decision making, all of which precluded disaster.

"We took off from March Field, reported Lt. Mears. "I don't remember the course, but I know we made a couple of S turns and climbed above the overcast." **[provide a map of Mears route]** Flying at 5000 feet he says they saw Mt. Baldy through the clouds and "not over a half mile or so from it." It's not likely he could have been so close to Mt. Baldy given the squadron's line of flight, as he later explained. Such a distance would be difficult at the lieutenants stated height if anyone expected to cross the San Gabriel Mountains.

Their natural route even given acceptance or not of the radio range course for that era, before getting off course, follows over Cajon Pass, which is the route I-15 takes today. According to the flight plan submitted by Capt. McGoldrick for Maj. Hughes, flight leaders had maps of the route.

Mears says he had left all his maps in his map case so they were unavailable to him. He told the Examining Committee his assumption given their stated goal that day of Sacramento (in the **Central Valley**) would be for Maj. Hughes to lead them into the San Joaquin Valley but, "I suddenly noticed Rosamond Lake was to the left so that we passed directly over Rogers Dry Lake and the old Muroc Camp." This means that instead of heading northwest towards San Joaquin Valley by crossing over the Tehachapi Mountains that the entire flight was drifting to the right (east and north northeast).

This was confirmed **when they passed over the tiny town of Cantil,** which Mears recognized by a dry lake directly to the hamlet's east. "At this point we had started to climb to 16,000 feet." Mears, with some history and knowledge of California geography and what was north, south, east, and west of where they were and should have been was probably at this time beginning to scratch his head and wishing he had his map case in the cockpit with him. But, like a good and well-trained Army officer and pilot he kept his head and obeyed orders.

That is what he had been trained to do. **[insert Bernie Lays**

comments on their training]

As Lt. Mears explained in his testimony, he was flying in one of the older P-40s (#39-175) which was equipped with oxygen though "it was not turned on." The newer P-40C's in the flight did not have oxygen at all. His flight consisted of Lts. Fairlamb (#39-210), Bilby (aircraft not known but presumably a #41-C model), Aiken (#39-174), Scott (#41-13454) and Clark (#39-208). They were later joined by Carey (#39-219) after he lost contact with Lydon's group after watching Pease bail out.

How long they remained at 16,000 feet, Mears did not recall but he did recall that **"45 or 50 minutes from March Field, Lt. Lydon started calling Major Hughes but he did not get an answer."**

This radio communication was the beginning of the problems with Lydon's group, especially that being experienced by Lt. Pease. It's painfully obvious to the most casual observer that radio failure between the HQ front end of the squadron and the rest of the command existed but not between the ends and the middle. Lydon could communicate with Mears and Mears could communicate with Hughes but the tail end Charlie could not communicate with his leader and vice versa.

Pretty soon Mears heard a voice on the radio (presumably that of Lt. Pease) say, "My oil pressure is going down." Then, a bit later, "No oil pressure. No oil pressure." Immediately after that, Mears heard Lt. Carey radio to Lt. Lydon that Lt. Pease had bailed out.

Again, Mears heard Lydon try to hail their commander on the radio, only to fail again and then fail to raise *anybody* in the headquarters flight. It must have been frustrating to the extreme for all the pilots involved in the middle and especially frustrating to Lt. Mears being the unsatisfying forwarding communicator in the middle. He could hear everything going in and out but could not communicate because "my transmitter was out."

Some five minutes later, Major Hughes began to descend and Lt. Mears, following behind, tried to keep his flight in formation but the HQ flight quickly disappeared into the clouds and did not reappear.

Lost and lacking leadership, Lt. Mears did the obvious. He reversed his commanders's decision and took his flight out of the clouds and back on top to 16,000 feet to reconsider and continued on their original 315 degree course for "a minute and a half" in hopes that Maj. Hughes would reappear. Expended time at height above accepted oxygen levels did not affect his decision.

"As it (the HQ flight of Maj. Hughes) did not appear, I pointed to my boys that we were turning back." A turn of 180 degrees was begun but modified to 240 degrees; Mears had elected to head for the San Joaquin Valley in hopes of finding a hole in the clouds.

Finding such a hole they dropped to between 13,000 and 14,000 feet and were shocked to see a forest with "trees so close I could have counted them." That was enough inspiration for Lt. Mears to perform a **chandelle** and complete "a 360 degree turn." Mears may have been confused during this part of his statement, or perhaps the transcriber made a mistake because a 360 degree turn would bring him completely around in a full circle and back where he began. If he was making a chandelle and turning back he would turn 180 degrees.

Seeing another hole over the Valley, Mears took his flight "into a long dive at a speed of between 250 and 300 miles per hour." Looking back to see how his boys were doing Lt Mears noticed they had picked up a stray. This was Lt. Carey. "He had seen the chandelle out of the hole and joined us."

Mears and his boys "came out of the overcast at about 8000 feet right in **the foothills east of Visalia.**" The terrain had looked familiar to Mears. "It looked like Bakersfield," so he headed for the town "**looking for the airport.**" What he saw at first was the name of downtown Visalia and the town's name "on top a building," probably the town's water tower *[insert photo]*. Now having his bearings, Mears turned right (north) and continued on approximately 175 miles further north to Stockton, where he landed his flight to refuel. It had been two hours since leaving March Field and they were still within their 40 minute fuel reserve.

And so, given his geographical situation and reserve fuel and feeling confident he had enough gas, Lt. Carey did not land in Stockton but continued the 60 or so miles further north to McClellan Field in Sacramento. "**He wanted to get to Sacramento to report Pease's bail out.**"

Lt. Mears was also anxious to continue north as well because like any junior who had disobeyed his superior officer he was worried about having broken formation and broken command. Surprise awaited him, however. When Lt. Mears got to McClellan Field "the flight was not there." Where was Maj. Hughes with the HQ flight and where were all of Lt. Lyons' and the tail end Charlie flight?

It was a big mystery to Lt. Mears. And unlike mysteries in the movies or on radio the boys were accustomed to seeing and hearing, the solution was not a near nor pretty one.