Command Failure
US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster

by Peter Stekel

the 57th and 52nd Pursuit Squadrons and Their Misadventures
October-November 1941

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There was a time when convention dictated that young men in their late teens into their late 20s were called "boys." Boys. Most of them still (legally) below the age of consent. Still (legally) below the voting age. Still (legally) below the drinking age. Still (legally) below the cigarette smoking age. Yet their country believed them old enough to fight for, to defend, and to die for their country. Some of these boys would eventually pilot two- and four-engined bombers or fighter aircraft during the second world war. They were mostly 19 or 20 years old - barely out of their childhood. With all the inexperience and naivete that comes with youth.

How to understand such kinds of youth today? Imagine boarding an equivalent-sized aircraft to that era, say a Bombardier 7500 turbo-prop. And when you check out the cockpit you see a pre-pubescent teenager in sweats and Nike Jordans at the controls. That's how it was with these masters of aviation war. These masters of the air. Except they wore leather jackets and street shoes, button-down shirts and ties trussed up in Windsor knots.

Command Failure, US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster is a story of that era. An era when children flew large airplanes equipped to destroy cities and kill thousands of people. And who flew other airplanes in pursuit and defense; fighters to protect those bombers. Frozen by time and place into history, boys they were. And boys these masters will ever be until a time when there is no difference between the land, the sky, or the sea. As all fade into eternity.

Command Failure complements and expands upon my two previous books which detailed US Army Air Forces training accidents in the

big bombers of that era. Like those previous books this newest book stands in stead of so much more going on in our country during the early 1940s. This was a time when the United States was an isolationist country surrounded by wars being fought by western democracies against Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany.

While isolationism determined public policy, military policy was looking ahead to the inevitable need to combat fascism in Europe, imperialism in Asia, and to protect our coastlines. Into this milieu can be found the story of the 57th and 52nd Pursuit Squadrons and their tragic misadventures in California, October-November, 1941 while on a training flight.

While the world was at war, boys in the United States were learning to fly. As in the past this involved truncated aerial sessions. Also, inexperienced pilots pretending knowledge and working through navigation errors (or, worse, confronting their own ignorance of the subject). There were constant mechanical breakdowns and leadership hubris. And all too often fiery deaths in airplane crashes. Accidents happened all the time so it is humbling to realize that between 1942-1945 the United States lost more airplanes and crews to training accidents within our own borders than in combat against the Japanese. As *Command Failure* documents, the accident and death *rate* for aviation crews being trained between 1936-1941 was no different than the accident and death *rate* during the upcoming war years. All that would change with the war was the total numbers.

Deaths as always in training were tragic yet mostly ignored (his luck was up, poor soul), poorly investigated, and were ruled by expediency. All these factors come into play in the story I tell in *Command Failure, US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster.*

If the past is a foreign country then this story certainly qualifies being of that foreign land. Without a doubt there are parallels of the 57th and 52nd Pursuit Group story to the training, combat, and political stories of today. Because, we know that if history doesn't repeat itself, it surely rhymes.

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The Story

Command Failure is a story about domestic military aviation accidents, death, and wilderness survival in the two months leading up to the United States entering what eventually became known as World War II. The significance of this nomenclature is a topic addressed early on in the book because "World War II" as an officially recognized and sanctioned term didn't exist until 1945.

On a deeper level *Command Failure* is the story of how boys were trained to fly and kill with airplanes. And how unequipped they were to do so with the poor level of training given them. *Command Failure* is also the story of how they spent their time on the ground and not in the air. At garden parties. Being officers and gentlemen. Doing so on horse back while learning the ins and outs of polo. And social graces. In a simpler nation recently removed from the Great War and uninterested, unwilling, to become involved in yet another European or another global war.

But, still...

World War II military aircraft fatal and non-fatal training accidents are well documented. Between 1942-1945 the United States lost more than 7100 combat aircraft and 5300 trainers with 15,530 aviator deaths in over 52,000 domestic accidents. These deaths by accident within our country's borders were three times the eventual combat losses sustained against the Japanese in the south Pacific.

Far less studied are losses sustained during training by United States Army aviation before 1942. In the five years before the war there were 301 fatal accidents with 510 deaths from 3334 total accidents with 10% the number of 1942-1945 flyers. These numbers are nearly equal to the rate of accidental deaths during the war. The most well-documented Army Air Corps disaster (the USAAC became the Army Air Forces, USAAF, June 20, 1941) was it's 1934 attempt to deliver the US Mail. But there was an even greater disaster experienced by the USAAF. This was a disaster so severe it threatened national security weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, and our country's entry into World War II. This is covered in *Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster*

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It is October 20, 1941 and the 57th Pursuit Group (PG) from Windsor Locks, Connecticut, is meeting up with the 52nd PG at Selfridge Field in Michigan. The war in Europe is 25 months old and war in Asia between Japan and China has already killed millions in over five years of invasion and combat. Meanwhile, the United States of America is an isolationist nation unwilling to commit to what is going on "over there." Sadly, this isolationism ignores the German U-boat infamous sinking of American commercial shipping like the *SS Ruben James*.

Still, our country's military, unencumbered by political thinking, is preparing. Under the command of 1929 West Point graduate Major Clayton E. Hughes, over the next few days the combined 57th and 52nd PGs will strip the northeast seaboard and Great Lakes regions of their pursuit (i.e. fighter) air defenses to take part in a strategy testing west coast defenses against air attack. They will easily navigate a radio range course from Michigan to Texas and Arizona in clear weather, arriving at March Army Air Field (AAF) in Riverside, California on the 23rd of October.

Portending the terrible events to come is the loss along the way, due to mechanical breakdowns, of the PG's C-47 cargo plane. Lost is its crew of mechanics and spare parts. Furthermore, six of the group's 25 P-40 Tomahawk pursuit aircraft drop out along the way due to mechanical breakdowns and pilot illness.

The primary purpose of this flight is to test west coast air defenses against an air assault from unspecified aggressors. Secondarily, a rigorously pragmatic Major Hughes wants his boys to get practical experience following orders while on crosscountry flight and experience close formation flying under simulated combat conditions.

Disaster awaits because a third purpose of the exercise should have been in plotting long range navigation. However, the group carries no maps and relies completely on following a known and established radio range course. That's fine in the United States from the east coast to the west but impractical anywhere else. Major Hughes seems to have ignored he was relying on a navigation method unavailable in the European or in Asian combat zones. This planning error simply begs for the misfortune and trouble Major Hughes and his boys are about to encounter.

Another behavioral failure of Major Hughes that begs for trouble is his refusal to file a flight plan from March AAF in southern California to Hamilton AAF in Sacramento, northern California. His intention, as in day's past, assumes fine weather and he intends to follow another radio range course up California's Central Valley. What need then to tell anyone where he is going?

Sadly, he exacerbates matters by again flying without maps.

The group's departure date is October 24th and the weather is "ify" with low clouds rolling in and obscuring mountains that rise to 10,000 feet and above. The major's directions to his boys is to "follow the leader." Which works well when you can see the leader. However, within minutes the Major and his 18 P-40s are deep "in the soup" and Major Hughes is learning that the reliability of radio range navigation drops horribly, dangerously, and precipitously in bad weather.

The 19 P-40 Tomahawks are soon lost. Inexperience in formation flying soon kicks in and the squadron formation begins to drift apart then separate because they cannot see each other. Worse, they try to climb out of the weather but after reaching over 18,000 feet are still in clouds and every pilot is suffering from hypoxia (oxygen starvation). The classic symptoms of hypoxia are declining mental abilities and decision-making, something that affects them all.

Aircraft accident investigators will tell you that trouble doesn't come at you all at once. It sneaks up from a cascade of incidents; some major and some minor. Flying in bad weather is like that too. First there is a hint of weather and, because flight is a forward progression, a pilot may not recognize there is trouble coming up from behind, below, or above until it is too late. A thin layer of clouds may thicken from the ground up or the other way around and then, suddenly it's too late to do too little, too much, or not enough because you're in the thick of it. Visibility, zero. You cannot see where you are or where you've been. You can't decide if your best course is in front of you or behind. It can be like standing in a deep, dark, closet with no idea of how to locate the door.

But flight is a forward progression. And so ten times out of ten it's forward you go. There is no opportunity to pull over by the side of the road and wait for conditions to improve. What makes matters worse is knowing there are mountains close by. There lies the danger and that is what Major Hughes and his boys now face.

* * *

The tipping point of disaster never comes easy but always comes early. Within 30 minutes of leaving March AAF the five boys flying "tail end Charlie" in the formation all seem to have experienced engine problems at about the same time.

Flying above 12,000 feet without supplemental oxygen they begin to suffer from hypoxia. In the cold, moist air their carburetors began to freeze up. One by one their engines, starved for fuel

and oxygen, began to fail. Then seize. Three boys are forced to bail out in heavy cloud, not even knowing what ground lies below them. Remember they have no maps. Two straggle on, circling and hoping to find a hole in the clouds. Until colliding into mountains and crashing in fireballs.

One of the bailed-out pilots spends a night out in the cold, wrapped within his parachute. The next day he's able to walk to civilization. The other two, by a miracle, find each other on the ground and spend a week in an old cattleman's cabin deep within the wilderness of Kings Canyon National Park in the High Sierra mountains. Nearly starving, frozen, and hypothermic they are eventfully rescued but in need of hospitalization. Ironically enough, winter conditions are so severe that several rescuers require medical attention and rescue themselves.

Of the remaining boys, eight manage to land with Major Hughes (figuratively and literally and actually flying on fumes) at a remote airfield in the desert north of Reno, Nevada. They are hundreds of miles off course and on the wrong side of the Sierra Nevada mountains from where they intended to be. Photographs show their Tomahawks lined up in a row being perused curiously by spectators. In a group portrait the boys themselves have goofy grins on their faces. They have "dodged a bullet" but seem unaware of the danger.

The rest of the 57th and 52nd pilots are scattered all over central California and their intended route to Sacramento. Luck rather than any especial skill gets them there alive.

* * *

Over the next week matters went from bad to worse. An investigation of the October 24th happenings was begun then suspended while Major Hughes and his remaining squadron members flew on towards Seattle to complete their mission. Half-way there they were called back to Sacramento and, again encountering bad weather, they split up north of San Francisco. Once again, deep in the soup two P-40s flying in formation side-by-side collided with a mountain. A third pilot pulled away just in time but mechanical malfunction forced him to bail out. He broke his leg during the procedure. Landing in a farmer's fallow field he dragged himself and crawled two miles in the dark, in rain and mud, before being able to flag down a car and get rescued.

* * *

All in all, by this time, of the 19 P-40 Tomahawks that left March AAF on October 24th, by November 2 there had been four fatalities, four bailouts, and one other plane damaged upon

landing near Reno and unable to fly. That is a nearly 50% loss of aircraft to the squadron. Most impactful though was that the loss of so much of the squadron effectively left the entire northeastern seaboard of the United States without *any* pursuit or fighter aircraft to defend that section of the country from air attack through the new year, 1942.

Major Hughes had a lot to answer for when a second investigation was convened in early November, 1941.

* * *

How did this disaster come to be? During the 1930s, requirements to enter pilot school were stiff and unyielding. Shouldn't the boys have been better trained? Flying cadets had to be unmarried and with a college degree under their belts. Excellent physical conditioning was required as was superior moral character. Candidates had to be willing and able to follow direction without question. Above all, because flying was a fraternity, pilots were expected to do many non-pilot things. They were educated in etiquette and social graces. Taught to ride horses and play polo. It was a different time than now.

In the 1930s, military men learning to fly died during training. The overall numbers were small because the number of cadets in training was small and effort was expended to lower the rates of accident and deaths. Training was long and intense, typically two years. The aircraft were old or in poor shape or still in experimental form. That gave plenty of opportunities to make mistakes. Consequently, people died.

This was still the situation in the autumn of 1941 when Major Hughes and his boys flew to California.

Much would change in 1942 when the college graduation requirement was dropped to two years of school and then in 1943 to no college at all. Manpower requirements demanded it. The air war over Europe, especially, was a meat grinder consuming bomber pilots and crews. By 1943 a bomber crew over Europe was expected to complete 25 missions before being sent home to the "Zone of the Interior." The odds were against it and not easily broken.

* * *

Major Hughes made many poor decisions that might account for the events of October-November 1941 being the worst peacetime disaster suffered by the US Army Air Forces. The ramifications of leaving the northeastern seaboard of the United States defenseless is the most significant and severe outcome. Yet there are good reasons that explain many of his bad decisions.

As with any accident, cascading events worked against Major Hughes. Some of these events were out of his control and presented him with several choices that could have gone either way; bad or good. In the combat pilot philosophy of the time, his luck simply ran out. The most significant of these cascading events was losing his mechanics and spare parts when his C-47 support airplane was, itself, rendered *hors de combat*. Then there was losing six of his pilots, including two of his best and most experienced, to mechanical breakdowns and illness before the squadron reached California.

Not taking any maps along on such a long flight was a significant failure of Major Hughes. Relying on a radio range course was another failure given how such navigational aids were known to be unreliable in bad weather. His "follow me" attitude smacks of hubris in his leadership abilities and distrust in his squadron's piloting and navigational abilities. Ironically, his pilots *were* all inexperienced flyers and possessed only the rudiments of navigation knowledge. Given this, Hughes could almost be thought of as a mother quail shepherding her chicks though dangerous coyote-infested terrain. "Follow me" worked in the good weather flying of the south and southwest but became a failure of leadership with the type of weather the PGs encountered in California.

The worst decision Major Hughes made though was flying while hypoxic. Trying to fly above the weather without supplemental oxygen was just plain stupid. Everything turned sour on two separate and horrible days because of that particularly poor decision.

* * *

The attitude of pursuit pilots, the manner in which they were trained during the 1930s, and the army culture of the times can explain a good deal about why and how things went wrong for Major Hughes. Their attitude can best be summed up in the phase, "arrogance is good." Pursuit pilots have to be supremely confident of themselves and their abilities to survive aerial combat, even if their abilities are not up to the level they think they are. That's where the arrogance comes in.

Pilot training during the 1930s, unlike during the coming world war, was confined to a small, elite, and collegiate few. In part this was due to the United States having a small, elite, professional peacetime military. It was also because of a limited amount of resources (i.e. airplanes). Army culture of the time was also almost cavalier about pilot losses (a.k.a. deaths) through accidents. This could best be summed up by the phrase, "He ran out of luck."

There was a peculiar culture amongst pilot trainees during the 1930s, which flyer, author, and screenwriter Beirne Lay (Yale, 1931) lays out in his 1937 book *I Wanted Wings*. Towards the end of his flight training, Lay reflected on the, "injustices suffered; illogical orders; the crude hazing of the two hundred and four self-respecting grown men ranging from 20 to 27 years of age who made up our July class." And, to what purpose were these injustices, orders, and hazing? Of this peculiar culture? It meant, "We were learning to 'take it,' to obey orders reasonable or otherwise without question, to withstand an overload on self-control, and to stay on our toes every minute."

Learning to "take it" actually began not with training but with applying to "the finest school in the world, getting accepted, and getting through the physical. As Lay recalled, a candidate needed a good education, a sound heart, and keen spirits to even apply. The physical exam was so daunting that "only 40% of West Point *graduates* can pass." Thousands of "eager young men who wanted to become Army fliers" filed past medical examiners yearly and "in some years 95% of them" didn't make the grade. They were found lacking in a *something special* medical examiners were looking for, "physically or psychologically."

* * *

Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster will synthesize all these factors by telling the story of Major Clayton E. Hughes and his boys and his two pursuit groups. Why did pilots follow a leader they later said lacked their confidence? What does the opinion of inexperienced pilots count against their commander with over a decade of flight experience? How does weather affect an experienced pilot's planning? What defines leadership and what exculpates the lack of leadership? And hubris; what about that? How does the tenor of the times in the 1930s explain what happened to the combined 57th and 52nd PGs?

Past published accounts have roasted the leadership of Major Hughes but there is evidence the writers had a bone to pick with historical truth. What does our 21st century problem with "alternative facts" have to do with events from pre-WWII America and how does the nomenclature of WWI and WWII fit into this story? Is there a role for revisionist history here and how does it play in this story?

Finally, if the actions of Major Hughes were so devastating and incorrect why was he not cashiered from the Army and why did he spend the next decades in various positions of command? This and more will be covered, explored, and explained in *Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster*.

* * *

We live today in a liability-driven culture. But that's not how the F.A.A. and N.T.S.B. view the world. They have taken to heart the lessons learned by decades of commercial, private, and military accident investigations. No matter how fault *may* be perceived, today's accident investigations are carried out without assigning blame. The goal is to encourage people to be honest and admit mistakes so that problems, as well as errors, can be identified and corrected.

Contrast this philosophy to what Major Hughes faced. During the two investigations into his behavior and decision-making Hughes had to balance what he knew he should have done with what he actually did. This was driven by a desire to safeguard and salvage his career. The culture of the times didn't encourage a pilot such as the major to be forthcoming. Rather, it encouraged him to hide his failures in judgement lest authorities seek a scapegoat for the very real disaster experienced by the 57th and 52nd PGs rather than solutions. Given this, there is no wonder that the autumn of 1941 was an example of *Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster*.

The Author

Peter Stekel (www.peterstekel.com) is the author of two World War II aviation history books. His speciality is addressing military aircraft accidents and fatalities during training exercises in the mountains of California. Stekel is well known by aviation archaeologists and historians for his deep research and attention to historical details.

Peter Stekel's interest in military aviation accidents stems from his discovery in 2007 of the remains of a World War II aviator in the Mendel Glacier of Kings Canyon National Park. That story, and how the aviator became entombed in the glacier in 1942, became the basis for his first World War II history book, *Final Flight - The Mystery of a WWII Plane Crash and the Frozen Airmen in the High Sierra* (2010 *Wilderness Press*, www.FinalFlightTheBook.com). His second World War II history book, *Beneath Haunted Waters - The Tragic Tale of Two B-24s Lost in the Sierra Nevada Mountains During World War II*, explores the 1943 mysterious disappearance of two B-24 Liberator bombers and their decades later discoveries (2017 *Lyons Press*, www.BeneathHauntedWaters.com).

Raised and educated in California, Peter Stekel has a BA in botany from the University of California, Davis and did graduate work in ecology at Humboldt State University. Stekel holds a secondary school teaching certificate in life science and has worked as a high school biology teacher, outdoor school

educator/administrator, and laboratory/field scientist. He possesses well-rounded freelance writer credentials having published, since 1991, over 700 feature and news articles in over 40 periodicals and newspapers. He has covered such diverse topics as American history, Olympic sports, homelessness, travel and recreation, theater and entertainment, and local politics.

Peter Stekel has spent his life hiking, climbing, and studying the natural history of California's Sierra Nevada mountains. He brings this breath and depth of knowledge and experience to good use in his World War II aviation history books as he studies the airplane crashes that have occurred in these mountains.

Stekel is also the author of two best-selling hiking guides to the Cascade Mountains of Washington. These are *Best Hikes Seattle 3d edition* and *Best Wildflower Hikes Western Washington*. He is also author of a mystery novel and a memoir of his climbing experiences.

Peter Stekel lives in Seattle, Washington.

The Audience

Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster is a military aviation story and it will appeal to that very large demographic. Widening the appeal are readers interested in California history, World War II history and warbirds (predominantly piston-driven military aircraft from the 1930-1960s).

The audience for *Command Failure* also includes people beyond aviation and military subjects. Within this group are readers interested in true historical mysteries, adventure stories, outdoor recreation, national parks, and Sierra Nevada natural history. I will blend all these elements together to keep reader groups interested and involved in the story. The writing style for *Command Failure* will use the technique of narrative non-fiction.

Other Books on This Subject

Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster enters a wide open and exciting field for books abounding in World War II and California history.

Combat *training* for air crews in World War II was statistically as hazardous as combat. How dangerous was combat training? The United States lost 4500 aircraft shot down by the Japanese in the South Pacific. In comparison, 7100 aircraft and over 15,000

airmen were lost to accidental death during the war. In the Royal Air Force, 12% of all aviator casualties (8300) died in training accidents.

The numbers are startling but the stories that give context to these deaths generally have not been pursued as much as combat tales. Also, little is published about aircrew training during World War II. What happened in the months, and in the case of pilots, nearly two years, of training that preceded deployment overseas is neither adequately or systemically chronicled. It should be and its past time to do it!

There are a few specialty books on the subject of home front aviation losses but are not direct competitors of *Command Failure*. These books are compendiums and not the narrative I intend. They include *Aircraft Wrecks in the Mountains and Deserts of California, 1909-2002* by Gary Pat Macha and Don Jordan, *Wreck Chasing Commercial Aircraft Crashes & Crash Sites: Vol 1 and 2,* by Nicholas A. Veronica and others, and the three volume, 1336 page, *Fatal Army Air Forces Aviation Accidents in the United States, 1941-1945* by Anthony Mireles.

Warbirds are popular subjects for war historians and present-day pilots. Such books as *Hunting Warbirds,* by Carl Hoffman, tell the story of the search for individual airplanes that were either lost in combat or found and then lost again. But the focus is on the airplane and not the crew. *Leave No Man Behind,* by George Galdorisi and Thomas Phillips, covers the entire history of recovering downed pilots during wartime but nothing about searching for warbirds or their crews lost within the United States. There is also Donald L. Miller's *Masters of the Air* (a part of which was transcribed into a multi-part television series by Tom Hanks and ohers). Another book focusing on lost air crews during training is Tom Wilber's *Vanishing Point*. A search on Good Reads and Amazon.com will turn up many other books on the subject. The interest is out there!

Marketing

The acceptance by readers of my two previous books of World War II era history, *Final Flight* [over 8000 copies sold] and *Beneath Haunted Waters* [over 2000 copies sold] demonstrates interest in that part of World War II that does not involve the European or Pacific fronts. Everybody loves a good story and a great mystery, especially when founded in a firm sense of place. I will promote *Command Failure* with the same zeal as I did for *Final Flight* and *Beneath Haunted Waters*.

Media attention in these kinds of stories has always been strong

though books about the "home front" are a new genre. Lost airplanes draw as much media interest as shipwrecks. Newspaper coverage, magazines, movies and television, and now the internet with YouTube, Facebook, and other social media - all provide outlets for promotion.

Years as a public school educator have given me ample public speaking experience. My book presentations have been filmed for television and web broadcasts. I've been interviewed for the BBC, National Geographic Television, and National Public Radio. The Seattle Public Library system and the Seattle Museum of Flight websites have audio and video podcasts of my presentations. Videos are available at www.BeneathHauntedWaters.com and www.FinalFlightTheBook.com

Many websites are devoted to "wreck chasing" or "aviation archeology," the terms which describe warbird enthusiasts who search for crashed airplanes. The websites are quite extensive with heavily researched material and discussion forums. Examples include, WWW.Accident-Report.com, WWW.Aircraftwrecks.com, and WWW.Wreckchasing.com. Along with these websites are several hundred airplane museums across the country. Together they serve as a clearing house for aviation, air shows, and aviation related stories, representing excellent marketing venues for *Command Failure*.

Expanded Table of Contents

Command Failure: US Army Air Forces and its Worst Peacetime Disaster

Chapter 1. Prologue: It Was a Day Full of Clouds

Departing Riverside, California on their way to Sacramento in the central part of the state on October 24, 1941 are 19 members of the combined 57th and 52nd Pursuit Groups (PG) lead by 1929 West Point graduate Major Clayton E. Hughes. They quickly encounter bad weather over the Tehachapi Mountains. Hoping to avoid collisions with high peaks they climb to over 18,000 feet all without supplemental oxygen. The result is that all the pilots suffer from hypoxia (oxygen starvation) which affects their ability to think rationally.

Lost in the clouds the squadron breaks up into smaller groups. Due to the cold and damp and mechanical breakdowns some of their P-40 Tomahawks experience engine seizures from frozen carburetors, necessitating three pilots to bail out over unknown terrain and territory. Two other pilots are killed in fiery crashes. (SIDEBAR: "The Caterpillar Club-How to Bail Out of a P-40").

Chapter 2. Connecticut to California: October 19-23, 1941

Taking a step back from the action in Chapter 1, we review the story of the 57th PG departing their home base at Windsor Locks (the "Windsor Locks Boys"), Connecticut to meet up with the 52nd PG at Selfridge Field in Michigan. Several of the pilots are by name and background introduced to readers. The mission of the combined PGs in "Operations Order #39," to test air defenses of US Army Air Fields on the west coast, is reviewed and explained. Their expected itinerary follows a Radio Range Course (explained in the text) in fair weather crosscountry to southern California. Major Hughes insists they fly as if in combat; "on a war-footing." (SIDEBAR: "History of the 57th PG"). (SIDEBAR: Phil Cochrane from the popular "Terry and the Pirates" newspaper comic strip).

Chapter 3. When Did the Terms WWI and WWII Come About?

You can't have a World War I without World War II can you? When did these terms first come into use? Until the mid 1940s there was not even brief mention of a "World War II" in the American press. At the time this story takes place there was talk of "The War" or the "Current War" to differentiate it from the "1914-1918 War" or the "Great War." Understanding the terms in use during late 1941 to describe the current Asian and European wars against national socialism and imperialism is essential to understanding the reason Major Hughes operated on a war-footing. It also explains the importance of the 57th and 52nd PGs mission to test west coast air defenses. And, which will be seen in later chapters, why the Windsor Locks Boys were not upset nor concerned about losses during this training exercise.

Chapter 4. October 24, 1941 and The Boys

The Boys. In 1930s and 1940s young men and women were referred to as "Boys" and "Girls." It's in letters home from those boys and girls to their parents. You hear it in radio plays, the news, and see it in movies of the era. The Boys. The Girls. This was the standard. From here on out in the book we will call the PG pilots the Boys.

It's October 24, 1941 and all the world is at war in Europe and Asia but the United States is not. Yet, Major Hughes puts his squadron on a war-footing and insists that they fly no matter what the weather conditions or condition of their aircraft. As shown in Chapter 1, this results in three pilots being forced to bail out of their Tomahawks due to engine seizures. Worse yet is that two further pilots lost and separated from the main group and bewildered by bad weather are killed in fiery crashes. One crash site won't be discovered for another 15 years. Meanwhile,

the rest of the squadron, ignorant of what has occurred to five of their compatriots, continues their flight north.

Chapter 5. October 24, 1941 and Major Hughes

Members of the two PGs are not acquainted with each other. They have just met in Michigan a couple of days beforehand and flown a few days crosscountry. Boys from both PGs have less than a year's flight experience. Being unfamiliar with each other means group cohesion and teamwork is poor. Their radios don't work well, they lack navigation skills (and have no idea what their route is anyway), are required by protocol to fly below 12,000 feet since they lack supplemental oxygen, and are unfamiliar with the workings and foibles of the P-40 Tomahawk. This lack of knowledge really shows when the squadron starts to fall apart, lost in the clouds. Not only are five pilots missing from the group, the main group is further split with nine landing near Reno, Nevada and the remaining boys are scattered all over California hundreds of miles from the main group. Their commanding officer had only one rule for his boys that day: "Follow me!" Nobody has a map. Nobody knows what their ultimate destination is for this day. And when all hell breaks loose nobody knows what to do.

It shouldn't be this way. Early in his career Major Hughes belonged to the *Skylarks*, a proto-Blue Angels group of precision army pilots. Accountability and teamwork should have been in his DNA and yet he was known as a martinet. Pilots make mistakes whether they are willing to admit it or not so what went wrong with Major Hughes had everything to do with how army pilots were trained during the 1930s.

Chapter 6. October 25-November 1, 1941: Regrouping the 57th and 52nd PGs

It took a few days for Major Hughes to reassemble his squadron, now reduced from 19 to 14. Besides the nine P-40s near Reno, Nevada on the *east* side of the Sierra Nevada mountains there were five others scattered all over California's Central Valley on the *west* side of the mountains. When they were all finally reunited (minus one in Nevada that was not flight worthy) they were forced to wait another day while an investigation of the October 24th events was begun. Finally, on November 2nd the squadron was able to depart from Sacramento.

Chapter 7. Lost in the Mountains - October 24-November 1, 1941 and later

There were three pilots forced to bail out October 24th. They were lieutenants Pease, West, and Lydon. After spending the night out in the open, wrapped in his parachute, Lt. Pease was able to

walk out of the wilderness to a rancher's cabin and secure help.

Though they bailed out at different times (therefore, different places) Lts. West and Lydon actually landed about the same area in the remote and inaccessible Deadman Canyon in Roaring River Valley of Kings Canyon National Park. There they reunited after separately spending a night outside in the wintery snow and cold. They found each other in a broken down old cattleman's cabin. Through days of snowstorms they slowly began to starve but for occasionally catching fish in the river. They made several attempts to self rescue but were always turned back by deep snow and the cold and the lack of proper shoes and clothing. Eventually West and Lydon were spotted by rescue aircraft and a team on horseback is able to reach them. But conditions of this rescue were so severe that many of the rescuers were exhausted and needed rescuing and medical attention!

(SIDEBAR: "Tell Me What Were Their Names?" The merchant ship *SS Reuben James* has been sunk by Nazi U-boats on the open Atlantic Ocean while carrying cargo from the USA to Great Britain. This sidebar explains that even though the USA was not officially at war with the Nazis, American ships were being sunk in the Atlantic. Why this is important to the PGs and their war-footing mission is explained).

Chapter 8. Death. Destruction - October 24, 1941:
While Pease, West and Lydon were trying to survive winter conditions on the ground after their bailouts, and while the rest of the squadron were trying to locate safe landings and then regroup, locating the still missing Lt. Birrell and Lt. Long was forgotten. By now, however, both had crashed and were burnt to death.

Birrell and Long were separated in the same cloudy conditions that found Pease, West, and Lydon cast adrift from the main group. While mechanical problems necessitated these three to bail out of their P-40s, Birrell and Long kept flying in circles. They were hoping to find a hole in the cloud cover and get their bearings. Long impacted the ground at over 12,000 feet up canyon from where West and Lydon eventually met up. Birrell flew further north before hitting a mountain just south of Yosemite National Park. The fireball from his collision was seen for miles around and his fate was quickly learned. Long's ground impact was in wilderness and his crash site not discovered for another 15 years.

Meanwhile, Lt. James E. Miles Jr., from Hammer Field in Fresno, was detailed on a search mission for the missing flyers. Why only one man in a Stearman bi-plane trainer with only an observer was despatched has never been explained. Anyway, the pilot behaves

like he is on more of a joyride sightseeing tour than anything else. Flying up a narrow box canyon in rising terrain he was unable to turn around. Fortunately his speed was slow enough he was able to put the plane down... not on the ground but in a tree! Together with his observer he walked out to a small Sierra Nevada foothill town with a good deal of "egg on his face."

Chapter 9. History of the P-40

At this point it's worthwhile to draw away from the action of October, 1941 with Major Hughes and his boys to examine the aircraft they flew. This is necessary in order to understand why the pilots had so many mechanical issues; issues that account for multiple bailouts and deaths.

(SIDEBAR: Confusing common names of P-40)

Chapter 10. What the Pilots Said About the P-40

The Windsor Locks Boys didn't begin having problems with their P-40 Tomahawks in California. There had been problems for months. Documents from the files of the 57th PG show a range of problems both mechanical and from lack of training. Several of the pilots who found themselves over California had already experienced multiple crackups. There had been deaths too. This chapter will examine the previous year's worth of those occurrences and show how these events relate to what was happening October and then November, 1941.

It is unknown what issues the 52nd PG boys had with their P-40s at Selfridge Field in Michigan before meeting up with the 57th PG.

Chapter 11. November 2, 1941: Lost *Again*

Following a delay while Maj Hughes is interrogated about the events of October 24th, the squadron resumes its mission to test air defenses on west coast. They get as far as southern Oregon when they are summoned to return to Sacramento for further investigations into the occurrences of October 24. In a tragic replay of that terrible day the squadron encounters stormy weather and flies off course in northern California, breaking up in a deep layer of clouds.

Lt. Speckman and Lt. Truax are killed when their Tomahawks crash and burn in mountainous terrain north of San Francisco Bay. Flying with Speckman and Truax in tight formation, Lt. Radovich almost meets their same fate but is forced to bail out of his P-40 when he runs out of fuel. While bailing out, Radovich strikes the horizontal stabilizer and his leg is broken. After reaching

the ground in a farmer's field he must crawl over two miles in heavy rain through mud and muck and in the dark to a highway where he is rescued.

Unaware of the fate of Radovich, Truax, and Speckman, Major Hughes leads the other aircraft to the San Francisco area. Through increasingly bad weather and poor visibility some pilots successfully land seriously off-course in Oakland while others continue further off-course south to safety.

With the further loss of three pilots, plus the one pilot left behind at Smith Valley in Nevada with his damaged Tomahawk, there are now remain nine pilots under the command of Major Hughes.

Chapter 12. The Investigation [post November 2] or [Hughes in the hot seat]

The numbers are terrible to consider. Of 24 pilots and their commander with a support ship with equal numbers, only 19 P-40s reached March Field in Riverside, CA. Within the following week those numbers were reduced by five dead, four bailouts, and one plane wrecked on the ground. This leaves only ten of the original 25 for a 2/3 loss rate.

The first investigation of October 24th was by necessity followed by a deeper second investigation following the November 2nd debacle. The committee was willing to blame the commanding officer and point out inconsistencies in his reports and contradictions by certain members of his squadron but not willing to reprimand him beyond relieving Major Hughes of command. Someone had to be held responsible and the buck has to stop with the man in charge. While Major Hughes remained in California his nine remaining pilots returned east with only three making it back unscathed by further mechanical problems.

Chapter 13. Accidents and Pilot Experience/training

Past writers in books, magazines, and journals have excoriated Major Hughes for poor leadership leading to the loss of his command killed, injured, or forced to bail out of their aircraft. Accident investigators in 1941 were quick to saddle the major with 100% of the blame for his squadron's poor performance; after all he was the commander. They also were unwilling to countenance inconsistencies in the major's testimony as to what happened October 24th and November 2nd but ascribed it to hypoxia, though never actually using that term.

Unsaid at the time was how the loss of so many pursuit aircraft left the east coast of the USA open to attack by hostile powers. However, the USA was not at war then and, politically speaking,

isolationist policies in Congress still held sway. Despite the president's attempts to help the UK fight Nazism it didn't look like there was any chance America would be going to war. Of course all that changed a month later with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941 but neither the accident investigation board nor Major Hughes could be expected to be prescient of those events.

The overall affect of the losses sustained by the 57th and 52nd PGs was to reinforce what the Army Air Forces already knew about accidents. They happened. And there were enough years of data to indicate accidents, fatal or not, happened at the same rate from year to year. Amazingly, as the country geared up massively for war in 1942 through 1945 and with millions of boys involved in training, the *rate* of accidents, fatal or not, remained more or less constant.

During the 1930s accidents were not only caused by pilot error and mechanical failures. The peculiar culture, as written about by pilot-authors at the time, of the Army Air Corps (which became the Army Air Forces June 20, 1941) is also to blame in a significant way.

Chapter 14. Incompetence, Folly, or Both?

Given all of the above, can or should a case be made against Major Hughes as being incompetent, a fool, or both? This chapter takes a deep look at the psychology of military incompetence and if Major Hughes fits the model. Was he as bad as he has been portrayed and does the major deserve the poor reputation given to him by past writers? Is there anything from history, the major's actions, what the investigating committee discovered and what they wrote of their conclusions of the major's actions, that can be used to rehabilitate his reputation? Was his biggest sin not the loss of his command but trying to cover his ass and escape responsibility and accountability for his actions in order to preserve his military career?

Chapter 15. The Fighter Pilot Mentality

What makes a soldier follow a commander into battle when they think that commander is not worthy of leadership and respect? Part of it is training. And when it comes to flying airplanes a lot of it has to do with whether you are a bomber pilot, a transport pilot, or a fighter pilot. The psychology and training of fighter pilots and their desire/ability to "push the envelope" will be examined in this chapter. Their philosophy can be easily summed up in the phrase, "Sometimes arrogance is good." All of this is important to understanding the mindset of Major Hughes and the behavior of the 57th and 52nd PG boys.

Chapter 16. The Searchers

Many independent aviation archeologists and aviation enthusiasts have tried to follow the flight of the PGs and figure out as much as possible: What Happened? Who are these people and what have their studies shown or uncovered? Some of these people are journalist Tony Krizan, aircraft crash researcher Pat Macha, the independent historical research group Project Tomahawk, the people who found Lt. Long years after he disappeared, and others.

Chapter 17. Rashomon-Trial by Error

"The public dearly loves a hero; but the men who have been both heroic and lucky must share their honours, as they are the first to insist, with others whose courage was not less, though their luck failed them." Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh, *The War in the Air*.

Using the "Rashomon Effect" this chapter reviews and summarizes the contradicting interpretations and descriptions of what happened to the pilots of the 57th and 52nd PGs during their California disasters. The "Rashomon Effect" describes an event via the differing points of view of the people involved. The term comes from Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* and is used by Kurosawa to investigate the unreliability of eye-witness testimony.

With the "Rashomon Effect" in mind, this chapter will dive deeply into the historical record of newspaper accounts, contemporary pilot accounts, army investigators, and other eyewitness sources and the conclusions they made to decide what happened October 24 and November 2, 1941. Also examined will be the how and why of conclusions made as to who was to blame, who should be blamed, or whether there is no blame whatsoever-only bad luck.

The chapter will also deal with the opinions and range of perspectives brought to the story by outsiders years after the events described. Decades before the events covered in *Command Failure* Stephen Crane wrote about people who judge harshly without examining their own prejudices. He called them out for being "swollen with the values of their opinions" and he faulted them for believing in the importance of the "bloom upon their cheeks." Isn't it unfair to judge harshly the people in this story since we are not privy to what was in their minds and because we were not there?

Appendix 1
Biographical sketches of the boys with the 57th and 52nd PGs covering their lives before 1941 and their fates afterward.

Appendix 2

Operations Order #39 detailing the 57th and 52nd PGs to California to test air defenses. A facsimile copy of the actual Operations Order #39, defining the mission from Connecticut to California, is reproduced. Quoted from time to time within the body of the text in *Command Failure* this is an opportunity for readers to see what the boys may (or may not) have seen prior to their crosscountry flight.

Appendix 3
Facsimile copies of actual official weather reports from October 24 and November 2, 1941

MAPS

1. The route from Windsor Looks, CT to March Field in Riverside, CA following the southern Radio Range route then is use within the United States of America.

2. The Radio Range route from California to Seattle, WA departing from March Army Air Base in Riverside and proceeding up the Central Valley *west* of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Significant geographical points are marked.

3. The various routes taken by the flyers October 24, 1941 after departing Riverside, CA and splitting up over the Tehachapi Mountains. Locations of bailout points and crash sites are marked on the map. Significant geographical points are marked. (It might be possible to combine maps 2 and 3 unless this leads to a confusing amount of data in one place).

3. The various routes taken by the flyers November 2 flying north-to-south from Oregon to California. Bailout points and crash sites are marked on the map. Significant geographical points are marked.

PHOTOGRAPHS (a mixture of color and B&W images from private collections, families, public domain, and the author's collection)

-Pilot photos (where available)
-Group photo of Major Hughes and his 57th PG posed in front of a P-40 at Windsor Locks, CT (a very good image to use for book cover)
-the P-40 Tomahawk (external view) 57th PG marked on tail
-the P-40 Tomahawk (internal, cockpit view)
-Allison engine from P-40 Tomahawk
-Carburetor heat control of the P-40
-Barton-Lackey Cabin (old cattleman cabin in Kings Canyon National Park)

-Barton Peak (site of Lt. West bailout location)
-Habitat of Roaring River Canyon (area where West and Lydon survived a week in the wilderness)
-Winter forested scene of Roaring River Canyon
-Sugarloaf Valley in summer (rescue route of West and Lydon)
-B-18 and C-47 (aircraft necessary to telling the complete story of the disaster)
-Memorial at site of Lt. Birrell's crash site
-the old, 1940s-era, Marin County Courthouse in San Rafael
-Water tower, Visalia CA
-Lt. Long's crash site in Kings Canyon National Park
-Crash site where the P-40 of Lt. Pease was found
-Parachute handle from the parachute of Lt. Pease
-a PT-17 Stearman similar to what was used in October 24th search
-Scenes from Smith Valley airport
-Glenn Curtis portrait (P-40 designer and builder)
-57th FS "First in the Blue" insignia
-Mitchel Field main gate (public domain postcard image)
-Curtiss factory with P-40s under assembly line construction
-Snowy Sierra Nevada peaks in winter
-Clouds in the Sierra foothills
-Little Lake Store ruins
-Smith Valley in 2019
-author photo

other photos to be decided later

Sample Chapters (attached)

Prologue, It Was a Day Full of Clouds.
Chapter 3, When Did the Terms WWI and WWII Come About?
Chapter 4, October 24, 1941 and The Boys.