

Command Failure - The US Army Air Forces and it's Worst Peacetime Disaster

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Book Proposal

Outline of the story

World War II military aircraft fatal and non-fatal training accidents are well documented. Between 1942-1945 the USA lost 7100 combat aircraft and 5300 trainers along with 15,530 pilots, crew members, and ground personnel in over 52,000 domestic accidents. These aircraft losses within our country's borders were three times the eventual losses sustained in combat against the Japanese in the south Pacific.

Far less studied are losses sustained during training by the US Army Air Forces (ASAAF) and its predecessor US Army Air Corps (USAAC) before the war. The most well-known example was the army's disastrous attempt to deliver the US Mail in 1934. But there was an even greater disaster; a disaster so great it threatened national security one month before the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, and our entry into World War II. This is the story of *Command Failure: the US Army Air Forces and it's Worst Peacetime Disaster*.

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It is October 20, 1941 and the 57th Pursuit Group 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 the war in Asia has raged for over five years. Meanwhile, the United States of America is an isolationist nation unwilling to be sullied by what is going on "over there."

Still, the country's military 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 take part in a defensive strategy. They will easily follow a radio range course from Michigan to Texas and Arizona, arriving at March Army Air Field (AAF) in Riverside, California on the 24th of October. Portending the terrible events to come to them is the loss along the way (due to mechanical breakdowns) of the PG's C-47 cargo plane with its crew of mechanics and spare parts. Furthermore, six of the group's 25 P-40 Tomahawk pursuit (i.e. fighter) aircraft drop out along the way due to mechanical breakdowns and illness.

The primary purpose of the flight is the test west coast air defenses against an air assault from unspecified aggressors.

Secondarily Maj. Hughes wants his "boys" to get practical experience in cross country flight and in close formation flying. A third purpose should have been in plotting long range navigation but the group carries no maps and relies completely on following a radio range course. This planning error is simply begging for the misfortune and trouble Maj. Hughes is about to encounter.

Another behavior of Maj. Hughes that asks for trouble is his refusal to file a flight plan from March AAF to Hamilton AAF in Sacramento. His intention, as in day's past, is to follow a radio range course and he exacerbates matters by again flying without maps. The group's departure date is October 25th 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 half an hour the 19 P-40s are deep "in the soup" and Maj. Hughes is learning that the reliability of radio range navigation drops precipitously in bad weather.

They are soon lost 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 all suffering from hypoxia or oxygen starvation. The classic symptom of hypoxia is declining mental abilities and decision-making, something that affects them all.

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 but still, all the same, all important. 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 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. But, because flight is a forward progression 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 and that is what Maj. Hughes and his boys now faced.

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The tipping point of disaster came 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 began 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 were forced to bail out, not even knowing what ground lay below them. Two managed to fly on until crashing in fireballs.

One of the bailed out pilots spent the night out in the cold and was able to walk to civilization. The other two, by a miracle, found each other on the ground and spent 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 were eventually rescued and in need of hospitalization. Ironically enough, winter conditions were so severe that several rescuers required medical attention and rescue themselves.

Of the remaining boys, eight managed to land with Maj. Hughes (literally flying on fumes) at a remote airfield in the desert near Reno, Nevada. They were hundreds of miles off course and on the wrong side of the Sierra Nevada. The remaining pilots were scattered all around their intended route to Sacramento. It was luck rather than any especial skill that got them there alive.

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Over the next week matters went from bad to worse. An investigation of the October 24th happenings was begun then suspended while Maj. Hughes and his remaining squadron members flew on towards Seattle to complete their mission. Half-way there they were called back to Sacramento and, encountering bad weather, they split up north of San Francisco. 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 was forced 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 help.

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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 and unable to fly for a nearly 50% loss of 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.

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

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How did this disaster come to be? During the 1930s, requirements to enter pilot school were stiff and unyielding. Men had to be unmarried and with a college degree under their belts. Excellent physical shape 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. Taught to ride horses and play polo. It was a different time.

In the 1930s, plenty of men learning to fly died during training. The overall numbers were small because the number of men 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 for boys, that's what they called young men in that era, to make mistakes and die.

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

Much would change in 1942 when the college requirement was dropped to two years 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." None could make it.

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Maj. Hughes made many poor decisions that can 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. The major can hardly be held blameless for events under his command yet there are good reasons that can explain many of his bad decisions.

As with any accident there were cascading events that worked against Maj. Hughes. 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 events involved 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 worked against the major as well because relying on a radio range course was a bad idea 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. 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 in the south and southwest. It was undone by the type of weather none but the lone California born and raised flyer of the 57th PG knew about.

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

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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 Maj. Hughes. Attitude can best be summed up in the phrase, "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."

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In conclusion, *Command Failure: the US Army Air Forces and it's Worst Peacetime Disaster* will synthesize all these factors by telling the story of Maj. Clayton E. Hughes and his boys and his squadron. 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 Maj. 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 concept 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 Maj. 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: the US Army Air Forces and it's 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 Maj. 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 mistakes 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: the US Army Air Forces and it's Worst Peacetime Disaster*.