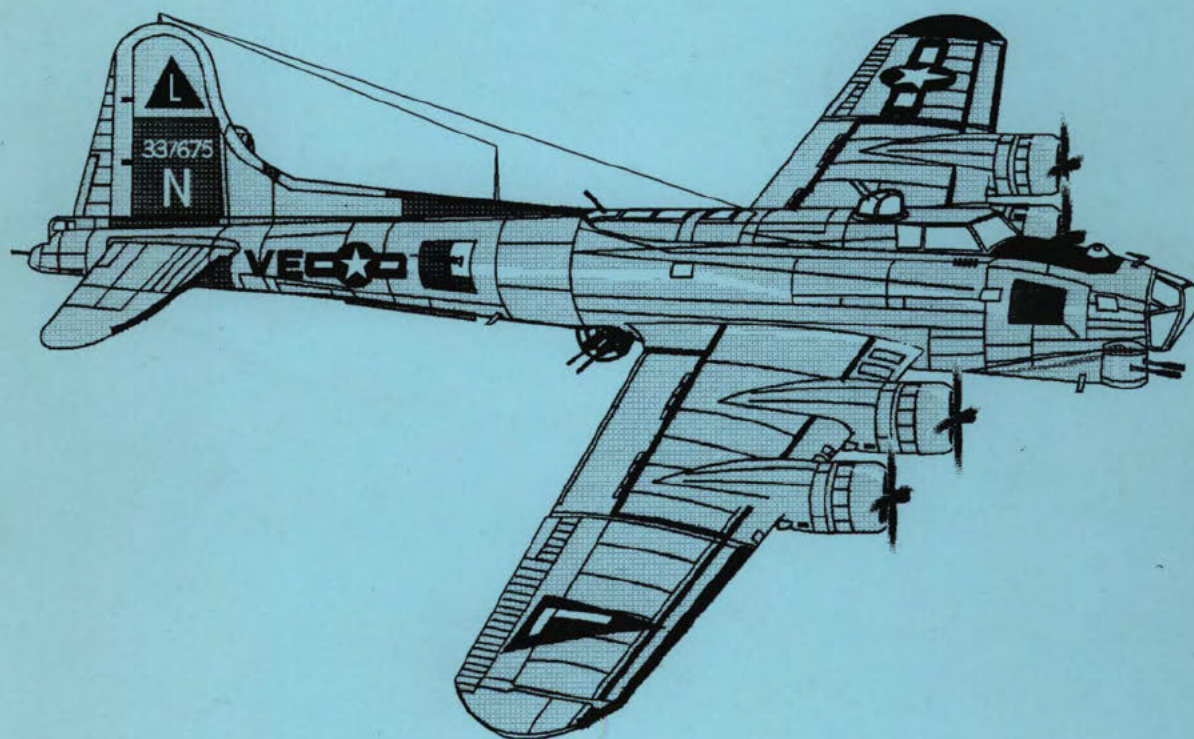


SEARCH FOR THE DOWNED

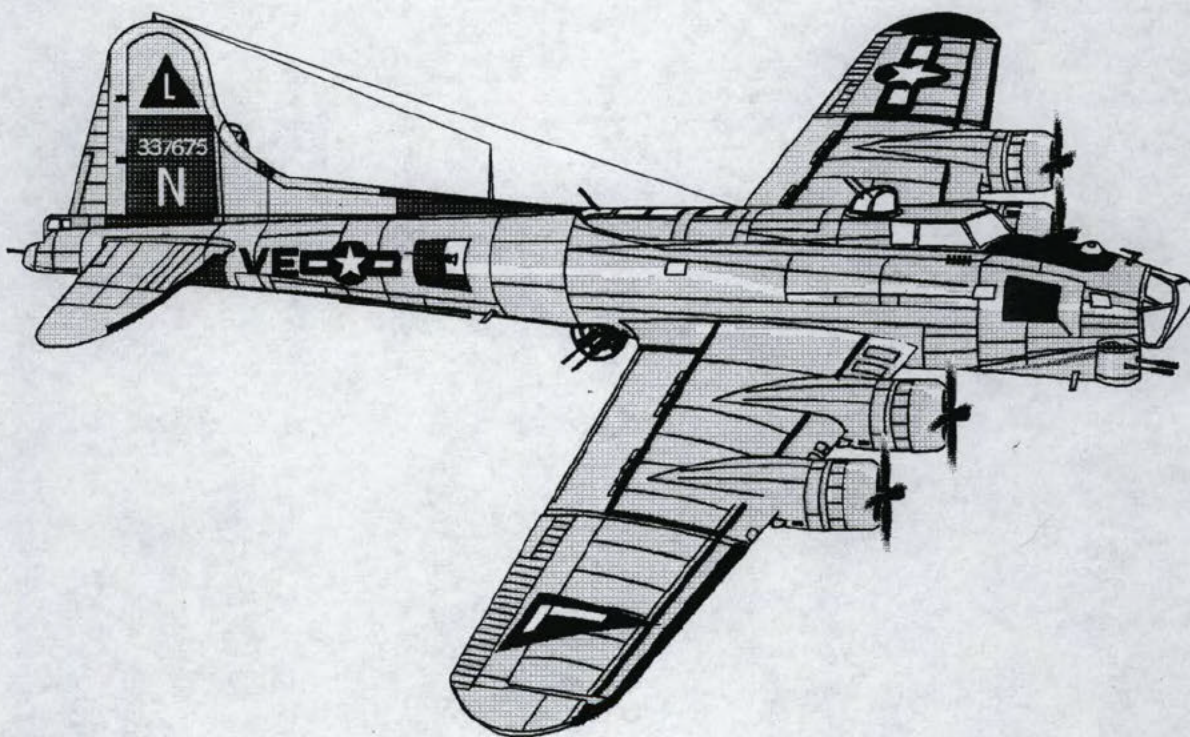
by
John P. Ferguson



Heritage Program
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Intermountain Region
Payette National Forest
1996

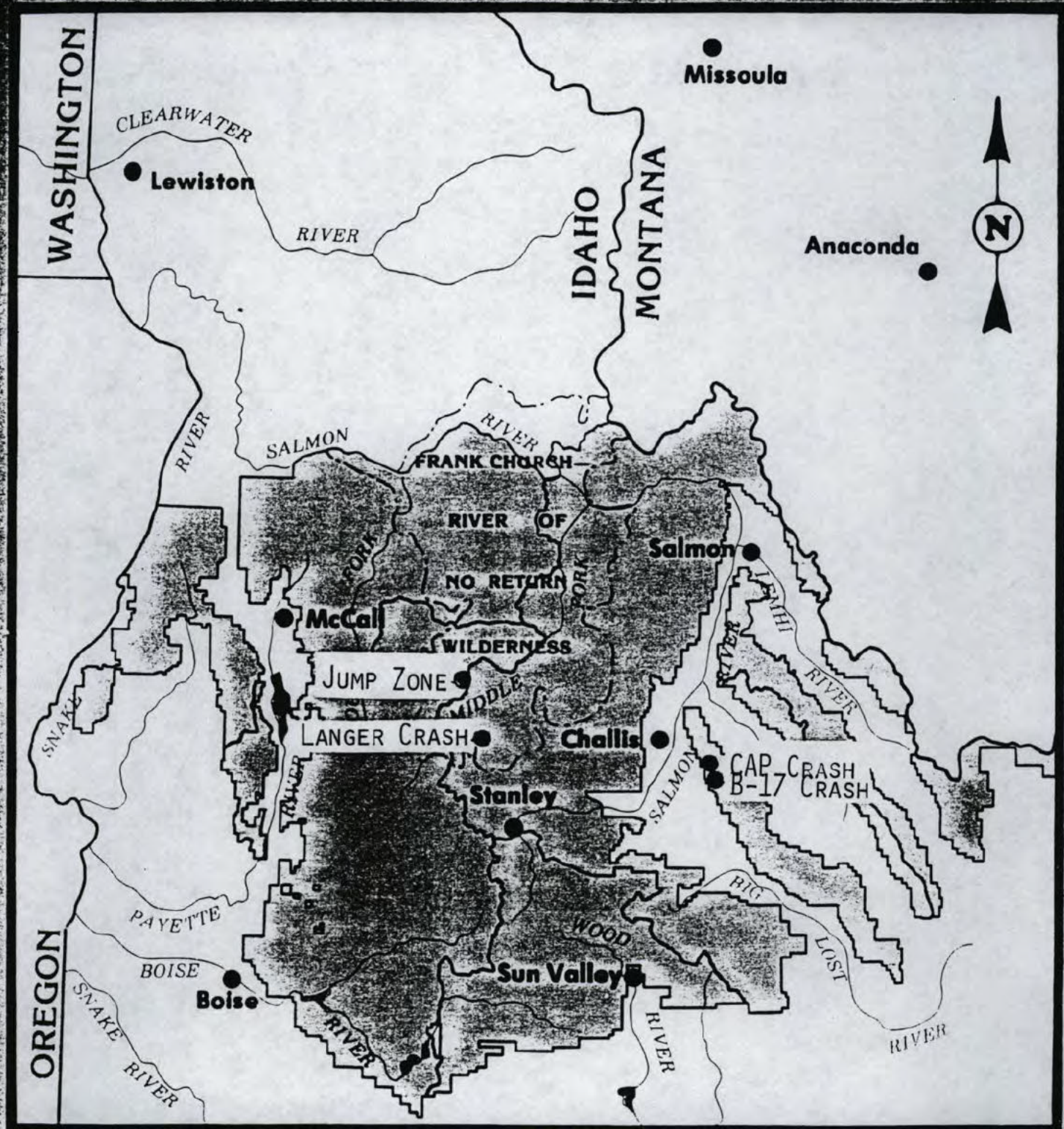
SEARCH FOR THE DOWNED

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LOCATION MAP



SEARCH FOR THE DOWNED

by John P. Ferguson

In the central part of the State of Idaho lies a large block of wild, primitive wilderness land, commonly known as the "Primitive Area." In March 1931, the Forest Service created the "Idaho Primitive Area." The million plus acres was formed from portions of the Idaho, Payette, Salmon, Challis, Nezperce, and Bitterroot National Forests. Presently, the area has been expanded to 2.3 million acres and is designated as the "Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness," a land virtually undisturbed, of towering mountains, rugged canyons and fast running creeks and rivers. A few remnants of old homestead cabins and mining claims remain, but no roads. Access to the area is gained by trail and a few Forest Service/ private airstrips. Today, the Salmon and the Middle Fork Salmon country is used by hikers, hunters, rafters, and others that enjoy the wild, whitewater rapids and the scenic beauty of the wilderness.

This article is about an airplane crash that occurred over 50 years ago in the primitive area and can be classed as one of the greatest search and rescue missions, by ground and air personnel, in the history of the backcountry and the northwest.

It honors two of the many people who participated in the search and rescue mission, Charley J. Langer, a Forest Ranger who was killed while flying the search mission, and W. Penn Stohr, Idaho's famous "Miracle Mountain Pilot" who played a principal role in searching for the downed airmen. It also acknowledges the other heroic and conscientious Forest Service men, local inhabitants and military personnel that made the search and rescue mission a success.

The author first became a friend to Charley Langer in 1938, when he was the Forest Ranger at Stanley, Idaho, and Ferguson was stationed at Redfish Lake nearby. The author's friendship with Penn Stohr occurred when he flew with Stohr in the early 1940's.

On March 30, 1943, a B-17F "Flying Fortress" bomber assigned to the 316th Squadron, 88th Bomb Group (Heavy), U.S. Army Air Corp., Walla Walla Air Base, Washington, flying in severe inclement weather, became disabled and crashed in the Middle Fork Salmon River area, in the Idaho Primitive Area. Eight of the nine airmen parachuted to relative safety but were lost in the vast wilderness. The ninth man was presumed to have landed in the Middle Fork Salmon River and drowned. The body was never recovered.

The squadron was on a training mission practicing formation flying. However, this B-17 was assigned to fly separate and apart because of instrument problems, especially the need to recalibrate its magnetic compass. Other than that, the airplane was considered operational.

Earlier in the day the weather was cloudy at Walla Walla, however, later that same day a fast-moving cold front moved into the area. It was classified severe and closed the air base. The squadron was ordered back to the base and returned. However, the B-17 was further away and was unable to return before the base became socked-in. The tower directed the B-17 to re-compute a flight plan to Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho. The crew had no objection to spending overnight in Boise—they had previously trained at Gowen Field. It was rated as a model B-17 base until it was converted to a B-24 base in May 1943.

The storm became worse, no visible ground objects could be seen and airway beam and radio communication was useless due to static. With faulty instruments, the flight became a hit or miss situation. The airplane had taken off at 2:00 p.m., in Walla Walla and now was flying aimlessly toward the primitive area.

About 8:50 p.m. the pilot became aware that the fuel was almost exhausted with an estimated 10 minutes of fuel left. 2nd Lt. Joseph R. Brensinger, the pilot, declared an emergency and ordered the crew to bail out—they bailed out. The pilot had turned on the landing lights, set the aircraft on automatic pilot, and reduced the air speed from 200 plus mph to 120 mph to facilitate parachuting from the airplane. The crews' emergency jump will be addressed later. In the meantime, the B-17 continued to fly in a northeasterly direction.

The first ground observation of the B-17 was about 9:00 p.m. Milt Hood, his daughter Rosalie, and her husband Bob Speers heard and saw the plane fly over the Hood Ranch on the Middle Fork Salmon River. The Hood Ranch and the McCall Ranch (Fern Larsen) were the only occupied homesteads on the river during the winter. It was about 11 miles from the jump zone. The next ranch downstream was the Flying "W" Ranch, another 32 miles downstream from Hood's. The airplane, flying an erratic flight path, continued across the Challis National Forest and into the Salmon National Forest. It was next observed by Mrs. O'Connor and Farrell Terry at Forney, Idaho, a small settlement in the wilderness on the Salmon National Forest, at 9:30 p.m. It was flying in a circle when suddenly it changed its direction and flew northerly, probably due to severe swirling winds aloft. It passed over the Blackbird Mine about 9:40 p.m. Beyond the Blackbird Mine it made $\pm 180^\circ$ turn and was seen again, by Mrs. O'Connor passing by Forney about 9:50 p.m., heading southeasterly toward Challis, Idaho.

Merle G. Markle, A.O., Fire Control, Challis National Forest, was leaving a Ration Board meeting at the Court House, with Lewis B. Koch, Jesse Jarvis, and Frank Burstedt, when they looked up and saw the B-17, with its landing lights on, making an elongated circle, wings tilted at a 30° angle and losing altitude. Markle immediately knew the aircraft was in trouble. At the same time, both Forest Supervisor Earnest E. McKee and Herbert L. Smith, A.O., Challis National Forest, observed the B-17; McKee from the post office and Smith from his home. Markle phoned McKee and Smith. This was the first notification that the Forest Service was aware of a military airplane in distress. The B-17, still flying in an elongated circle, drifted towards the Pahsimeroi Valley. The men believed that an engine was on fire because they could see a glow in the sky when the plane was turned away from them. The time was 10:00 p.m. Markle telephoned Forest Rangers H. J. Freece, Archie Murchie, and Claude Morin and alerted them to the emergency. Ranger Morin picked up the aircraft over the Pahsimeroi Valley and followed it until the B-17 finally disappeared behind a ridge and crashed to the ground. He pinpointed the direction as S. 16° W. from the May Ranger Station, placing it in Crane Basin in the Lost River Mountain Range. The men in Challis also followed the plane until it crashed by lining up poles for direction and determined the plane had crashed in Crane Basin, S. 49° E. about 20 miles southeast of Challis, Idaho. The time of the crash was 10:10 p.m., March 30, 1943.

It is interesting to note that the B-17 flew un-manned for 1 hour and 20 minutes and over 150 miles distance between the time the airmen parachuted from the plane and it crashed in the Lost River Mountains. The estimated 10 minutes of fuel left must have been an error.

Supervisor McKee assigned M. G. Markle to organize a search and rescue team and Markle notified the Custer County Sheriff Shull. Assistant Forest Supervisor H. L. Smith was ordered to man the telephone. The nearest military air base was Hill Field in Utah and they were contacted within 15 minutes of the crash. The Pocatello Air Base and Gowen Field in Boise, was alerted at the same time. The Salmon National Forest was contacted to gain their cooperation and telephone calls were placed,

on the network of telephone lines the Forest Service had maintained in the backcountry. It was these calls that gave word of the sightings at Hood Ranch, Forney, and the Blackbird Mine and gave an indication of the direction the plane had been flying.

Sheriff M. H. Shull, accompanied by Conservation Officer Marshall Edson, Lee Clark, LeRoy Drake, and Dan O'Connor, left Challis late at night for the crash scene. However, the Forest Service made the decision to send their rescue team out at daylight. The Forest Service team was made up of Clark Bosen, Verald Smith, David Hughes, and R. Weichbrodt, backpacking first aid supplies, rations, and an SPF radio. Inspection of the wreckage indicated that no bodies could be found. The rescue teams reasoned that the airmen had parachuted from the airplane earlier and made their report to Challis by SPF radio. Looking at the mangled wreckage of the B-17, the rescuers could hardly envision it to be the beautiful airplane that it was. The B-17 had 4 Pratt and Whitney engines, 1,200 hp; wingspan 103' 9"; length 74' 4"; max. weight 65,500 lbs.; max. speed 287 mph, range 2,000 miles; and an armament of 13-50 cal. machine guns, a load of 17,600 lbs. of bombs. Boeing Co. produced 12,731 of them during World War II. (see photograph)

On the morning of March 31, the Forest Service began the initial aerial and ground search mission to find the missing men. A cadre of Forest Service men and local experienced woodsmen, all of whom were knowledgeable of the wilderness area and particularly adept at rescue and survival techniques, were assembled by Markle under Ranger's Freece, Murchie, Morin, and Langer. Penn Stohr and the local C.A.P. pilots formed the aerial search group and the ground teams awaited results. The proposed plan was to aerial search by flying township by township if possible. The area to be covered was from above the Blackbird Mine in T. 21 N., R. 18 E., on the Salmon National Forest southerly and westerly to the Pistol Creek area and southeasterly towards Challis.

Captain Kelly at the Walla Walla Air Base was advised of the effort to date. He was technically in charge of the military investigation. However, he was unable to leave his base due to weather and planned to arrive in Challis on April 2. The first military personnel to arrive in Challis was Lt. Sid Schleimer and a group of enlisted men from the Pocatello Air Base in Idaho, on April 1. The military people were guided to the wreckage by Dave Mifflin of the Forest Service. They used an SPF radio to expedite their reports to the Pocatello Air Base. Their reports were relayed by telephone from Challis. The reports stated that the wreckage was a B-17F bomber and that no bodies had been found. The information was passed on to Walla Walla.

On the morning of April 2, four military airplanes and some additional C.A.P. planes arrived in Challis. They joined the search with each plane being furnished a local man to act as observer and guide. The four military aircraft were UC-78, Cessna "Bobcats," a twin-engine, low-wing cabin plane. It proved to be limited for searching purposes. It flew too fast and with the low wing, it prevented good visibility of the ground. They were used mostly for higher altitude flying. The C.A.P. civilian pilots operated under the direction of Major A. A. Bennett of Boise. C.A.P. pilots Lionel Dean and Glenn Jenkins of Twin Falls made up the seven planes flying out of Challis on April 2. Penn Stohr began his search missions from Cascade and McCall, Idaho but later worked out of Challis and Stanley. The author flew with Stohr on the initial flights, however, the military officers and Challis staff made the decision to fly the missions themselves. Markle and O'Connor flew most of the missions, however Hansen, Smith, Murchie, Kock, and Morin, and of course Langer also participated in the searches.

Penn Stohr played a major part in the afore-mentioned search and rescue. His pilot's log book shows that he flew the Travelaire 101 hours and 30 minutes during the mission. Therefore, it is proper to acknowledge him more closely. On January 29, 1943, two months prior to this plane crash, Stohr had performed a similar rescue mission. A twin-engine B-23 bomber, with an 8-man crew, flying from

Tonopah, Nevada to Boise, Idaho, lost its bearing in a severe snowstorm. Lost over the Idaho wilderness and about out of fuel, it finally crashed landed on a small lake (Loon Lake) northeast of McCall. Fifteen days later Penn Stohr found the downed flyers. Stohr doing the impossible, landed his Travelaire several times on the icy lake and rescued the men despite USAAC officers skepticism that such a feat could be accomplished. On his second trip to the lake, he took two Forest Service men in to ground search for three of the airman who had attempted to walk out. All the men were rescued alive. Penn Stohr made numerous emergency flights into the backcountry and became famous in Idaho's aviation history for his various feats. The author, John P. Ferguson flew with Penn Stohr in the early 1940's.

On Saturday, April 3, one of the C.A.P. airplanes, piloted by Clell McDowell of Twin Falls and Lt. William Bartlett, Pocatello Air Base, crashed within two miles of the B-17 wreckage, at the head of Devils Canyon. The plane was flying low to the ground searching for the airmen when it encountered bad air and hit the ridge. The damage wasn't serious, it wiped out the landing gear and left a few kinks in the wing and fuselage. The pilot and his observer walked to the highway and got a ride to town.

The weather on April 5 was cloudy with high overcast, however, all the planes were engaged in the search to the maximum. Captain Bill Kelly and Lt. Arthur A. Crofts, pilot and co-pilot respectively, arrived from Hill Field, Utah. Their airplane was a UC-43 Beechcraft, staggered-wing bi-plane with a speed range of 120-150 mph. Merle Markle accompanied Capt. Kelly and Lt. Crofts on their first assignment on April 5—they covered the area around Hoodoo Meadows. They flew for 3-1/2 hours, found nothing and the area was eliminated from the search plan. The Beechcraft returned to Challis at 1:00 p.m. and was immediately gassed up for additional flights.

Ranger Charley Langer was at the airport headquarters and engaged in the planning conversations. He offered his opinion that the B-17 might have flown in the Cape Horn, Fall Creek-Soldier Creek area. He also suggested that if the search area was extended to cover his Ranger District, it was his duty to fly with them as observer. Langer hadn't flown much and it was common knowledge that he didn't care to fly, but again he felt it was his duty. His opinion was based on the fact that a B-17 had flown over Stanley, Idaho about 4:00 p.m. He thought it could be the same B-17, however, the time element would not substantiate it. Plans were changed to include the Stanley District.

A serious tragedy was about to happen. At 2:45 p.m., a squadron of planes consisting of the four UC-78 "Bobcats" and the UC-43 Beechcraft took off to fly the Upper East Fork, Slate Creek, Warm Springs, Sawtooth Valley, and Cape Horn Areas. All the Army Air Corp. planes were equipped with radios and it was agreed that they would keep in touch with each other. The four UC-78, twin-engine planes returned to Challis at 5:30 p.m. No alarm for the late Beechcraft was made, as it had enough fuel to fly until about 7:30 p.m. By that time a search could not be undertaken because of darkness. However, the field was circled with car lights by the town's people just in case.

Reports indicated that all the planes had contact in the vicinity of Castle Peak at 4:00 p.m. It was the last time they saw the Beechcraft flying west toward Sawtooth Valley. Webb Lanier, at the Cape Horn Lodge, was contacted. He reported seeing two planes at 4:00 p.m. The first was a twin-engine plane identified as the one Ranger Freece was flying in and the other was a single engine biplane heading toward Marsh Creek flying low and fast. Other reports placed the plane in Slate Creek and Champion Creek. The times were uncertain, but it did give an indication of the route the plane was flying.

Early Tuesday morning, April 6, all planes were assigned to fly the Stanley Ranger District. Markle and Herb Smith went along with Capt. Keith Kelly and flew Marsh Creek and the surrounding

area. The C.A.P. planes flew the route that the Beechcraft might have flown back to Challis. Stohr worked the Middle Fork-Camas Creek area, all to no avail. On Wednesday, April 7, the weather was good and all planes were active. The search area was expanded to cover the Sawtooth Range and the South Fork Payette River. Webb Lanier left Cape Horn and hiked down Marsh Creek on snowshoes. He planned to signal the planes overhead with a smoke signal if he found anything. Lanier found nothing and eventually met up with the Middle Fork ground crew on Thursday night at the cabin at the mouth of Big Soldier Creek.

After Wednesday no real hope was held out that the Beechcraft and the men would be found alive. It had continued to snow and it was believed that any wreckage would be covered with snow and hard to detect. Friday, April 9, was a bad day. No planes were able to leave the ground. Saturday was also stormy and only two planes took off, restricted to low levels.

Sunday and Monday the skies were clear and the search was renewed vigorously. On Tuesday, April 13, the decision to re-fly the area between Cape Horn-Soldier Mtn. and the Middle Fork Salmon proved a success. About mid-morning, Dan O'Connor, the Forest Service observer flying in a C.A.P. airplane piloted by Glen Jenkins of Twin Falls, Idaho, spotted the wreckage of the UC-43 Beechcraft. Pilot Jenkins circled the scene until he was sure that no signs of life existed and then returned to Challis with the disappointing news. Two planes with Dan O'Connor and Webb Lanier as guides were sent out to pinpoint the location.

The Forest Service immediately organized a ground rescue party. A snowplane was dispatched from Jackson, Wyoming and William Swigart's crawler type snow toboggan, along with other supplies and equipment was sent to Stanley, Idaho, at the end of the road. Penn Stohr's Travelaire NC-623-H was ordered to Stanley. The rescue party left Challis at 1:00 p.m. and were ready to leave Stanley at 4:00 p.m. in the snow toboggan and snowplane. It was 21 miles to the Cape Horn Lodge and the ground equipment had a hard time traveling in the soft snow. Dan O'Connor, while moving the ski-toboggan to Cape Horn, had a break down. During the repair of the equipment he lost part of a finger and had to be flown to the Pocatello Air Base. Webb Lanier and Ranger Freece made the first trip and the snowplane made three trips, carrying five men and supplies, in the night, by 2:00 a.m. The snow toboggan made one trip and stayed at the lodge to transport the men from the lodge to the trail above Wagontown. Penn Stohr arrived in Stanley at 9:00 a.m. and by 10:00 a.m. flew the remaining eight men to Beaver Creek. Lanier and Freece left for the crash scene at 10:30 p.m. the night of April 13 and started up the Ruffneck trail by midnight. They reached the plane at 4:40 a.m. and reported by radio that the three men were in the plane but were dead. Three Army Air Corp. men, Dr. Haskley, and Lts. Hammond and Schleimer, guided by Charles LaMarr arrived at the wreckage at 2:30 p.m. The other ground rescue members left the road with toboggans, canvas, rope, etc. to bring out the bodies and arrived back at the plane at 3:30 p.m.

The crash of the UC-43 Beechcraft was investigated by Rangers Freece and Morin who came to the following conclusions: The crash occurred at the base of a very steep snow-covered rock slide area and a heavy timber stand. The plane was flying a contour route around the east slope of the fork of Fall Creek which heads at Ruffneck Pass. It struck the ground with the slope rather than against it on about a 45° angle. It appeared that the Beechcraft was flying up the creek and had turned sharply to the left and had almost completed the turn when it crashed. The canyon was wide enough to complete the turn ordinarily when the accident happened.

There is no doubt that the plane was in a complete left vertical bank from the time it first hit the trees until it crashed in the snow. The first tree hit was a lodgepole snag, it clipped 2 feet off the top about 50 feet high. It cut a path 10 feet wide through the timber for about 100 yards. The plane went in on its side, the left wing straight down and the right wing straight up. The angle of impact was

determined from the way the trees had broken off. Wing segments, portions of fuselage, broken wood, and needles were scattered for a considerable distance. Both left wings were completely demolished and no large pieces could be found. There was a dent or two in the right wings, but no indication that the right wings had hit a tree. There was little damage from the back of the cabin to the tail, except that the left half of the tail had been thrown off 30-40 yards downslope from the plane. The airplane came to rest after making a complete 180° turnabout at the end of its path through the timber. All windows were broken and the cabin was caved in, however, there remained enough room for the occupants to sit upright in their seats.

To the left of the plane two wing tanks were found empty and no evidence of leakage was found on the ground. The engine had broken from its mounts and tipped forward and had not telescoped into the cabin compartment. The propeller had stopped in a horizontal position. The right blade had been slightly bent, the left blade showed no signs of nicks or scratches and the propeller turned freely. The indications were that the engine motor was dead when the crash occurred. Most of the instruments were broken, however the speed indicator registered 120 mph. There was no clock in the instrument panel, but Captain Kelley's watch had stopped at 4:05 p.m. The ignition switch was on, but it was agreed that the motor was dead at the time of impact. Near the floor on the right side of the cabin was the fuel lever. It was in position 3. It was the belly tank and proved to be empty. Inspection indicated that it was almost impossible for the pilot to reach across a passenger in the co-pilot seat and change the position to other tanks. The co-pilot's seat was movable but not quickly. This factor could have had a bearing on the crash. Of the two fuel tanks in the right wing, one was full and the other was partially full.

There are several logical reasons for the crash, but the most logical one was engine failure. From the facts: (1) the engine was dead; (2) the line and angle of flight; (3) the location of the crash; (4) the banked position of the plane; and other factors. The situation looked as follows. If the plane had been flying down the creek when the engine quit, the pilot would have logically attempted to reach the open slope. However, to do so he would have had to bank and turn to the right. More logically, in view of the vertical left bank he made and the fact that the pilot's foot was jammed in the right rudder, it is believed that he was flying up the creek when engine failure occurred. Again he would have attempted to reach the open area and to do so he would have had to turn and bank to the left. It appeared he did not have the altitude or speed to make it and crashed into the trees. When he saw the left wing low to the ground he applied right rudder to level the plane but was too late in doing so. Others thought downdrafts may have caused the crash, however, it was the opinion of Freece, Morin, and Markle that the plane was flying up the creek, climbing, when the engine quit, at the worst possible time, the plane, at about 9,000 feet, lost altitude and speed and nosed into the ground before the pilot was able to switch the fuel lever to the wing tanks that contained additional fuel.

Webb Lanier and Ranger Freece left the lodge, at 10:30 p.m. in the snowplane, then snowshoed up the Ruffneck Trail, via Vanity Summit to the scene of the wreck, which they reached at 4:40 a.m. on April 14. Three Army men, Dr. Haskley and Lts. Hammond and Schleimer arrived at 2:30 p.m. and Ranger Morin and seven other men reached the plane at 3:30 p.m. with toboggans and supplies. The bodies were extracted from the plane, wrapped in canvas and loaded on the toboggans. The rescue team returned, via Vanity Summit, to the end of the road at Cape Horn at 3:00 a.m. and Penn Stohr flew the bodies and men to Stanley at 8:30 a.m. on April 15. From Stanley, the bodies were taken to Challis by Army ambulances.

Charley Langer's mother, Mrs. Mary Kell, his wife Leah, his daughter Mary, and his son, Charley J. Langer, Jr. attended services and Charley Langer was transported for burial in Lewiston, Idaho.

The Langer rescue crew consisted of: Merle Markle, J. DeLoy Hansen, Herb Freece, Archie Murchie, Claude Morin, Dick West, Dan O'Connor, Tom O'Connor, Webb Lanier, Sheriff M. H. Shull, Conservation Officer Marshall Edson, W. B. Swigert (snowmobile), Jimmy Braman (ski-plane), Fred Abercrombie, Lts. Schleimer and Hammond, Army doctors Haskley and one unnamed, and pilot Penn Stohr.

Following the Langer rescue, a number of the men were reassigned to the Middle Fork search and rescue team.

Relations between the Army and the Forest Service was very good. Actually the Army didn't have anyone with experience of any kind as to search and rescue techniques in wilderness country or anyone knowledgeable in planning aerial searches in the mountainous and rugged canyon terrain. Therefore, planning and operations was left to the Forest Service with agreement by the Army when consulted. The Forest Service furnished all the equipment and supplies, snowshoes, ski-plane, toboggans, tents, camp facilities, food, vehicles, airplanes, etc. The Forest Service organized all ground search parties and furnished guides and observers to accompany the USAAC and C.A.P. airplanes.

The Army people had a small problem amongst themselves. The three air bases (Pocatello, Hill, and Walla Walla) had detachments involved and each wanted to be in charge. Captain Keith Kelly of the Walla Walla base was actually in charge. However, Lt. Sid Schleimer of the Pocatello air base seemed to command the ground forces.

The C.A.P. pilots did an excellent job under the command of Major A. A. Bennett, who fully understood the Forest Service position and needs.

One incident occurred when Penn Stohr flew the five airmen from Indian Creek L.F. to Cascade for transfer to the Gowen Field Hospital in Boise. Apparently there was a misunderstanding between Capt. Kelly and others as to what authority Penn Stohr had to fly the men to Cascade instead of Challis for questioning and that Stohr had acted without instructions. Penn Stohr was exonerated of any charges when Merle Markle overheard Lt. Schleimer give Stohr specific instructions to do so. Penn Stohr took it all good naturedly, he remained quiet and just gave Capt. Kelly a stern look.

The Challis townspeople were provoked at the Army pilots. They acted like it was a show instead of serious business, making numerous dangerous maneuvers over town. In spite of these incidents the townspeople treated the Army fliers well. Many gave up their ration cards to help furnish subsistence to the group.

All in all, a fine degree of cooperation was exhibited by the military personnel, the C.A.P. pilots, local townspeople, and the Forest Service officers and employees. The mission, both on the Langer crash and the Middle Fork Salmon search, proved to be a huge success. It is important to state that the U.S. Army Air Corp financed the entire cost of the search and rescue mission, with the exception of the Forest Service contribution that was not included.

As a tribute to Charley Langer, the U.S. Forest Service named a high peak "Langer Peak" (elevation 9,315 feet). The peak, a short distance from the crash site, is identified on the USGS 7-1/2 minute quadrangle map. At the crash site (elevation 7,080 feet), the Forest Service erected a rubble-rock monument with a marble plaque inscribed in honor of Forest Ranger Charley J. Langer, pilot Captain Bill Kelly, and co-pilot Lt. Arthur A. Crofts. A large group of Forest Service people and local townspeople from Challis, Stanley, and the backcountry attended the memorial.

On the evening of April 6, the Middle Fork rescue crew reorganized to continue the search for the remaining four airmen. The first five airmen had been found at the Indian Creek Guard Station. Ranger Freece was placed in charge of the Challis men and Ranger Morin was second-in-command. The men and equipment were flown into the Middle Fork in the C.A.P. airplanes. The party was made

up of 17 men. Ten by plane from Challis, three additional men followed, and four men from the Payette National Forest joined the group. The names of the Payette men are not known, however, they came from the Bear Valley District.

We now resume the story of the B-17 "Flying Fortress" crew that parachuted from the bomber at 8:50 p.m. on the night of March 30, 1943. The men, comprised of four officers and five enlisted airmen, were as follows:

2nd Lt. Joseph R. Brensinger, Pilot, Fairfield, Alabama;
F/O Howard E. Thompson, Co-Pilot, Springfield, Oregon;
2nd Lt. Austin Finley, Navigator, Broken Bow, Oklahoma;
2nd Lt. George W. Smith, Bombardier, Los Angeles, California;
S/Sgt. Henry C. Van Slager, Engineer, South Bend, Indiana;
S/Sgt. Howard A. Pope, Asst. Engineer, Athens, Georgia;
S/Sgt. Morris Becker, Radio Operator, Ozone Park, New York;
S/Sgt. Harvey T. Wiegand, Asst. Radio Operator, Indianapolis, Indiana;
Sgt. Erwin R. Grundman, Gunner, Compton, California.

The normal crew was 10 men, but Sgt. Peter Durante was hospitalized on that particular day.

S/Sgt. Pope was the first to bail out, followed by S/Sgt. Wiegand, Sgt. Grundman, S/Sgt. Becker, S/Sgt. Van Slager, 2nd Lt. Finley, 2nd Lt. Smith, F/O Thompson, and 2nd Lt. Brensinger, in that order. Smith, Thompson, and Brensinger bailed out of the front hatch. The men were strung out in a straight line almost parallel to the Middle Fork Salmon River. This was later verified by the rescue team from found parachutes and tracks of the men. One of the main factors in not readily spotting the men from the air was the inability to distinguish the white parachutes on the white snow floor. They descended on both sides of the river on the upslopes, some landing in trees and others in deep snow, in the section of river between Big Soldier Creek and Little Soldier Creek—a distance of about 19.5 miles on the river.

S/Sgt. Pope landed on Big Soldier Creek upstream and sought refuge in a cabin where he found food. He stayed at the cabin until he was spotted by a C.A.P. plane, piloted by Glen Nolte of Nampa, Idaho, and the ground rescue team reached him and brought him to the Indian Creek landing field. He was unhurt, flown to Challis and then to the Pocatello air base. S/Sgt. Wiegand landed on the banks of the Middle Fork Salmon River near the Sheepeater Hot Springs. He hiked downstream then climbed up the side of the mountain. Tired, he sat under a tree and a little while later heard S/Sgt. Becker yell on the mountain above him. S/Sgt. Grundman had met up with Becker and the three airmen got together. They spent the night under a tree in deep snow and on March 31, they proceeded down the Middle Fork to the mouth of Greyhound Creek where they saw a cabin on the other side of the river. After fording the river, they spent time building a raft. However, it was found to be too small so they kicked it out into the river and it floated about 200 feet and hung up on a rock. They remained at the cabin and built a fire. S/Stg. Wiegand attempted to dry his shoes and managed to scorch them badly. It proved very difficult to hike in them. The next morning they forded the river again and hiked down to Pistol Creek to the bridge. Crossing the river again to the Challis side, they hiked downstream until they heard the voices of 2nd Lts. Finley and Thompson, who had found the Indian Creek Guard Station the previous day. They were forced to ford the river again and the five airmen got together. 2nd Lt. Finley had landed on the Challis side of the river and had gone downstream until he met 2nd Lt. Thompson. They crossed the bridge and continued downstream to the Indian Creek Guard Station, which they reached on April 2 or 3. The next day they heard Wiegand, Becker, and Grundham coming down the opposite side of the river.

The Indian Creek Guard Station was a fine structure—it was a supervisor's cabin with good furnishings and lots of food. There was a telephone in the cabin but the men couldn't get it to work. Late on the afternoon of April 5, they discovered the box with the cut-off switch outside on a pole. When they returned to the cabin the telephone rang and they broke in on a conversation between Milt Hood and a woman neighbor, Fern Larsen. The information was telephoned to the Forest Service in Challis and it was the first word the outside world received of the area that the downed airmen was located in. The ground search team was immediately alerted. A critical point to recall was that if the airmen at Indian Creek Guard Station had found the telephone switch sooner, the ill-fated flight of Ranger Langer, Captain Kelly, and Lt. Crofts in the UC-43 Beechcraft, would never have had to take place on April 5, 1943.

Penn Stohr flew the five men from Indian Creek L.F. to Cascade, Idaho, where they were taken by Army ambulances to the Gowen Field Hospital in Boise. The Travelaire plane on skis was the only means to fly them out, on April 11.

An extensive ground search was made to find S/Sgt. Van Slager, however, it proved to no avail. From the order of jumping it was determined that he would have landed between the locations of Becker and Finley. There, it was presumed that he may have fallen into the Middle Fork Salmon River and drowned. The body was never recovered. The search was called off by the Army on April 18.

2nd Lt. George Smith, the bombardier, gives a detailed account of his experience in a paper entitled "*Survivor.*" In brief, Smith states that when he jumped he lost his flying boots during the parachute's opening shock. He landed in a tree and hung there all night. In the morning he dropped about 10 feet to the ground and started to crawl in the snow. He tore up his pants and wrapped his feet with the cloth. The first thing he did was climb the mountain to view where he was. It was snowing as he looked across the desolate primitive area of snow-capped mountains and rugged canyons—he was lost in the wilderness. He hiked downhill in the deep snow and the next day he spotted the river. He had landed near Greyhound Creek. He continued downstream on the third day, but by now his feet had become painful from sharp branches and rocks under the snow. On day 4, he couldn't walk and remained handicapped in the snow for three days. He ate snow and grass and drank from the river. He doesn't say, but it was understood that he asked his rescuers what those elongated round berries were under the trees. It's not known if he tasted them, but he knows now that they were elk droppings.

2nd Lt. Smith had been withstanding the hardship and hazards for seven days, but the eighth day would prove to be a good luck day. Bob Speers, Milt Hood's son-in-law, was hiking upriver to recover S/Sgt. Pope, who had been found by the C.A.P. plane. Speers periodically hollered out "hello" and Smith heard him and called back. Speers fired his gun and Smith answered "over here" and they found each other. Bob Speers asked "Why did you leave the cabin?" Smith answered "I never saw a cabin." It was then Bob Speers knew he had found another survivor. Speers used his first aid kit and carried Smith to a big tree and built a fire and fed him. A planned signal to a C.A.P. plane in late afternoon gave the information to the rescue team. On the ninth day, 2nd Lt. George Smith was carried to the Indian Creek Guard Station. It took 10 men 14 hours to carry Smith over the 8-mile trail on a stretcher. 1st Lt. Alexander MacKay was flown in from Pocatello to give Smith medical attention. Smith recalls that the doctor paced the floor all night because he didn't have the proper tools to amputate his feet. Smith never lost his feet. On Friday, April 9, C.A.P. pilot Lionel Dean attempted to fly Smith to Challis from the Hood Ranch but had to return to the ranch because of bad weather. It was two days before he was able to be flown out of the Middle Fork Salmon River to Challis, on April 11. The same day Major A. A. Bennett, Wing Commander of the C.A.P., flew Smith to the Pocatello Air Base Hospital for medical treatment.

The last of the survivors was Pilot 2nd Lt. Joseph R. Brensinger. He was found by Ranger Claude Morin at about the same time as 2nd Lt. Smith was found. He guessed he had walked 20 to 30 miles from his landing area, which is unknown. It just seemed that long, he probably walked and crawled about 5 miles.

Ranger Morin stated that the rescue crews broke into three-man groups. He walked the trail towards Indian Creek, and the other two men spread apart on horseback. Morin had walked about 3 miles from the Hood Ranch when he noticed a dark object across the river under a tree. Continuing to look at the dark object, he thought he observed a movement. He called out, "Are you one of the airmen?" A feeble voice replied, "Yes, I'm the pilot." Morin knew he had found another of the airmen and said, "Hold on, I'll get to you as soon as I can," and he moved off to find a place to ford the river. The pilot said "Please don't leave me" when Morin assured him it would only be a short while. When Ranger Morin got to the pilot he found him to be in extremely bad shape. He administered emergency first aid and signaled for the men on horseback. They forded the river and the pilot was loaded on a horse and taken to the Hood Ranch. He was given medical treatment by an Army doctor and arrangements were made to have a C.A.P. plane fly him out to Challis and then fly him to the Pocatello Air Base Hospital. Thus, eight of the nine airmen had been rescued. A continuing search was made for S/Sgt. Henry C. Van Slager, but to no avail. Van Slager's body nor his parachute were found. It was presumed that he had landed in the river and drowned.

The rescue mission was finally halted on April 24. Penn Stohr returned to McCall on April 25—and one of the most spectacular search and rescue missions was ended. A "well done, good job" was all the reward the pilots and ground crews needed, everybody knew they were a heroic group that would be part of the history of the Middle Fork Salmon River country.

POSTSCRIPT: This article was prepared from the author's personal knowledge, portions of official records, oral conversations with former rescuers and portions of Smith's write-up. Most of the documentation was destroyed in the 1970's when the U.S. Forest Service records suffered water damage when the Federal Building in Ogden, Utah flooded.

NOTES: 1. In all, three planes were lost, four men were killed, two more narrowly escaped death and another man lost part of a finger.

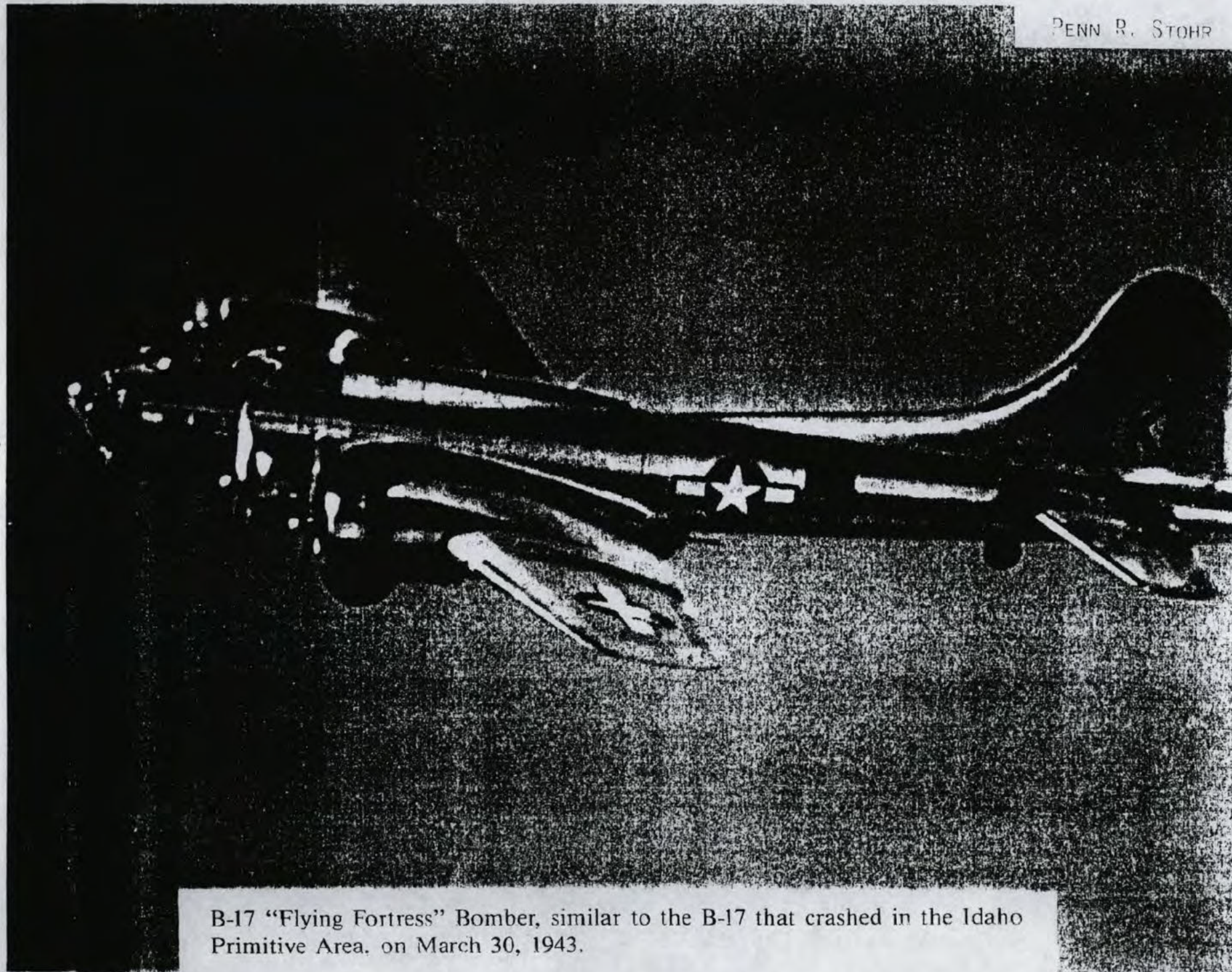
2. Charles Reeder, an old pioneer mountain pilot, flew into Indian Creek L.F. in the dead of the night, with an Army doctor to administer medical treatment to 2nd. Lt. George Smith's frozen feet.

3. Approximately 50 men and 17 aircraft were used in the rescue mission, in addition to the numerous local people that gave their assistance to the effort.

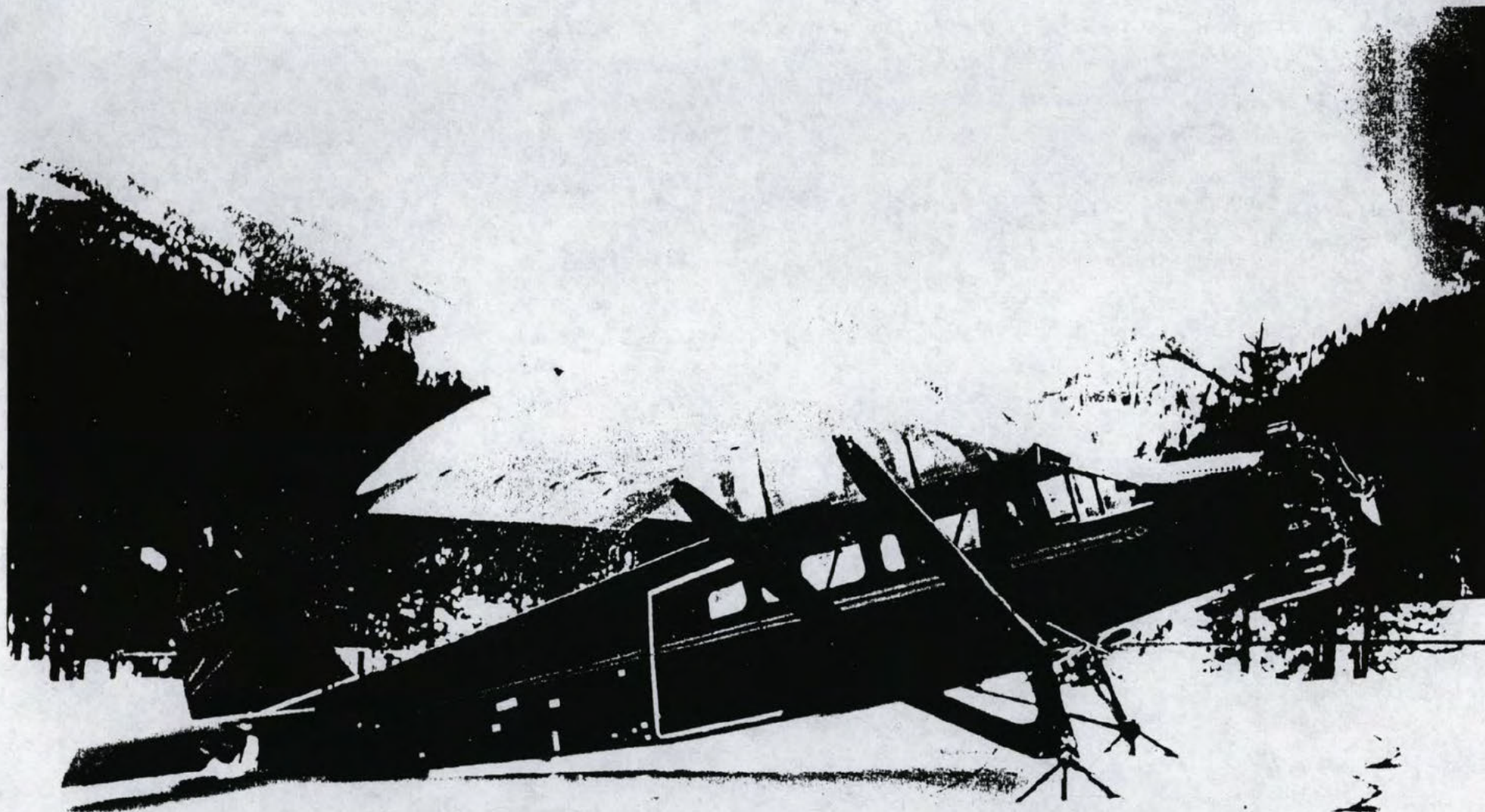
4. For a copy of the article "Survivor" (copyright 1993) contact Mr. George Smith, 4378 Stanford St., Carlsbad, California 92008-7922, phone (619) 434-9068.

The author, John P. Ferguson retired in January 1980 having a career of approximately 40 years in the U.S. Forest Service. He served as Chief, Cadastral and Geodetic Control Unit, Intermountain Region. In his early days he worked and flew in the primitive area and continued to do so during his entire career. He is one of the group of original smokejumpers and is credited with making the first fire jump in the Intermountain Region in 1943.

PENN R. STOHR



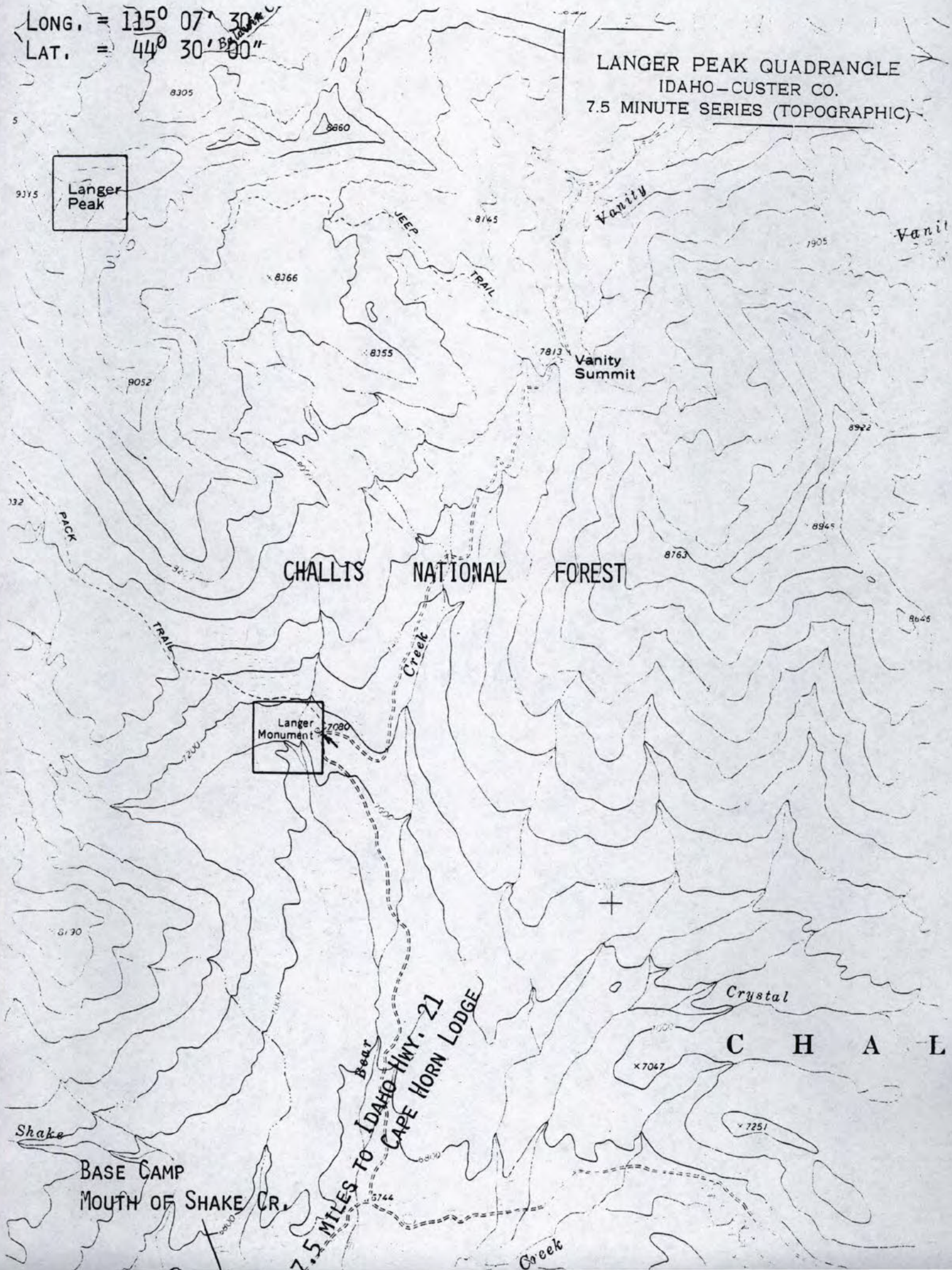
B-17 "Flying Fortress" Bomber, similar to the B-17 that crashed in the Idaho Primitive Area, on March 30, 1943.



Travelaire, 6000-B (Johnson Flying Service, under contract to the U.S. Forest Service): Sister ship NC-9038 to Penn Stohr's NC-623-H, used on search and rescue mission.

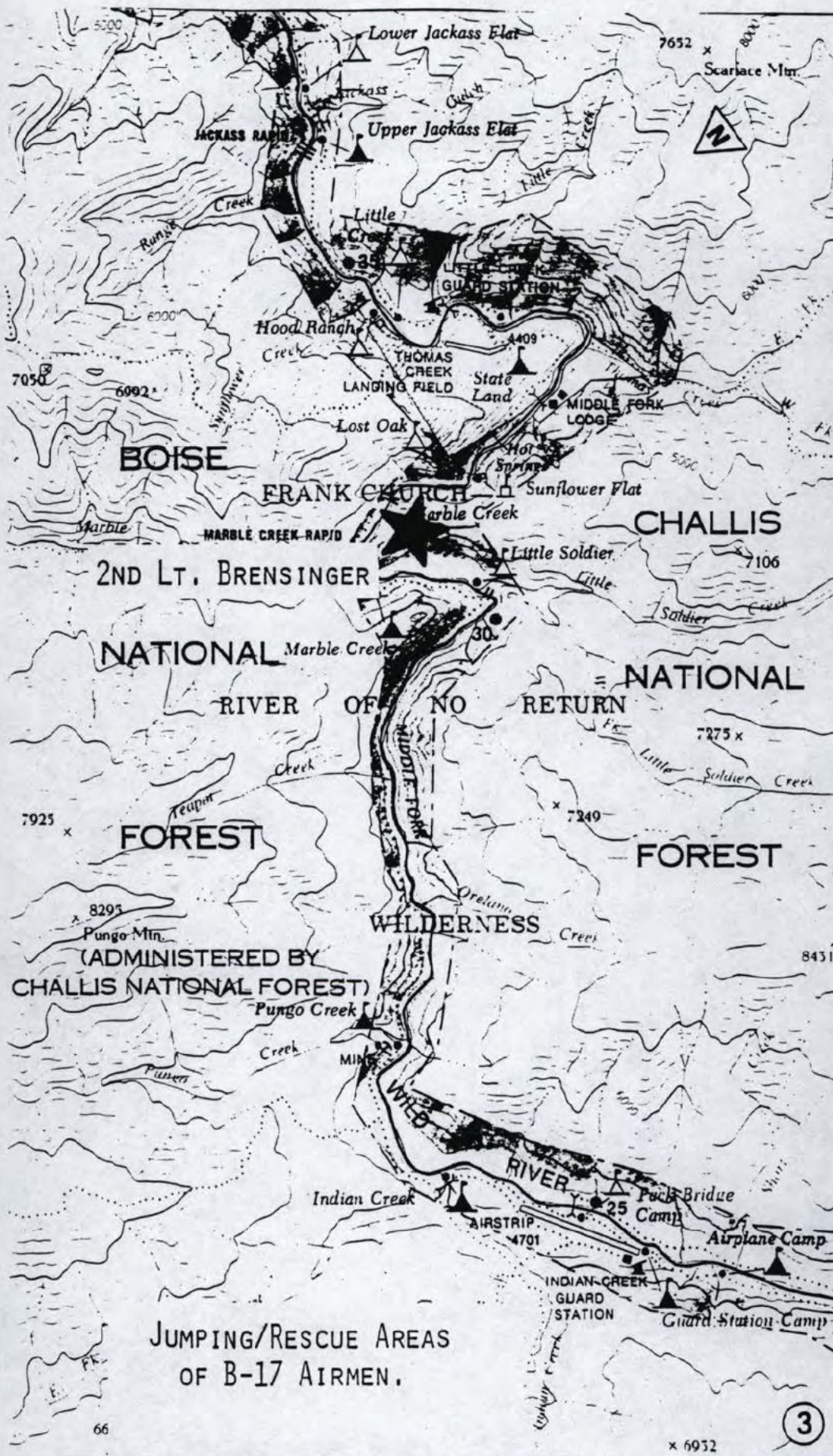
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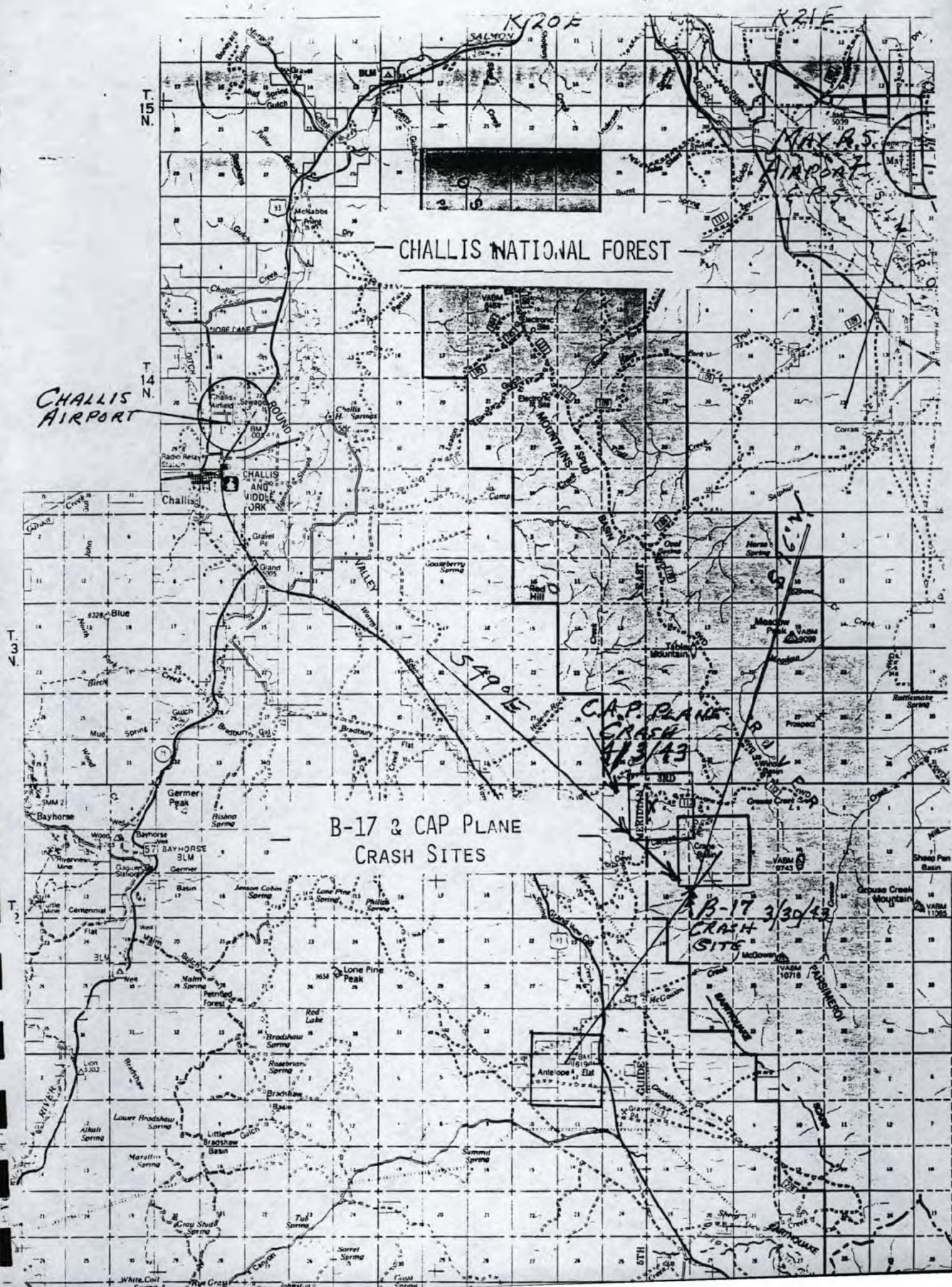
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APPENDIX

The following undated letter and information was gathered by John P. Ferguson and addressed to Jack Demmons, was written in response to the question:

"What happened to the bomber crewmen, after the crash,
and during World War II?"

John P. Ferguson
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Mr. Jack Demmons, Historian
National Smokejumper Association
P.O. Box 4081
Missoula, Montana 59806-4081

Dear Jack:

I appreciated receiving your most welcomed letter of 2-12-96.
However, I believe a brief reply is in order.

I am honored that you would select my article, "Search for the
Downed" for your presentation to the Museum of Mountain Flying.
It is just one of the many incidents that happened to me during
my 40-year career with the U.S. Forest Service. I hope the
group will find it interesting. Many such stories exist, but
I'm getting to old to write about them.

You asked, "if any of the B-17 wreckage was still at the site?".
Not that I know of. There was never an official attempt to re-
move the wreck, however, after 53-years I doubt that much is left.
The site is relatively close to the road so every hiker, rancher,
townspeople, etc. took away a souvenir. At the July 8, 1993 re-
union (50-years) at Challis, Idaho, pictures were taken of many
of the rescue party holding up parts of the B-17 airplane. The
C.A.P. plane that crashed nearby was recovered by its owner.

About the story, it could have taken up 3 to 4 times more space.
I have a considerable amount of research material on it. Lt.
George Smith gave me a great deal of information. One question
that always comes up is: What happened to the crew members later?
George Smith gave some information that was very interesting, so
I'll pass it along to you.

In 1st. Lt. George Smith's case, he continued operation after operation on his feet at various Army hospitals and was finally transferred to inactive status on May 31, 1945. In the interim, he has written his paper "Survivor" and attended the 50th. Reunion, at Challis, with Harvey Wiegand. The town gave them a great reception with most of the members of the rescue teams. He made a trip into the primitive area and visited all the rescue sites, etc. in July 1993. He had only limited information, having contacted only Austin Finley, Harvey Wiegand, Mrs. Brensinger and Mrs. Pope in 1993.

Mrs. Brensinger was 11-years younger than ~~than~~ Joe and was only about 12-years old when WWII began so she doesn't remeber much. She said that Joe died approximately nine years ago. After his return to active duty, he was transferred to B-24's and sent to Italy, where amongst other missions, he participated in the famous Ploesti Oil Field raid. In that raid, 178 bombers took off from Benghazi, Libya an a 1,500 mile flight to destroy the Ploesti Oil Field in Romania, which they did but American losses were severe. Four hundred and forty-six men of the 1,733 men on the mission were killed and only 33 of the original 178 planes came through fit to fly again. Subsequently, Joe was transferred to the Far Eastern Theater and at the end of the war retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Harvey Wiegand was a replacement on another crew and went to England in June of 1943, where he was assigned to the 545th. Bomb Squadron of the 384th. Bomb Group stationed at Grafton-Underwood. The squadron was made up mainly of men from Utah.

On August 17, 1943, one year after American planes first struck at Germany, he was shot down on a raid over Schweinfurt, captured and impridoned in Stalag 17, located nears Krem, Austria. On that raid, 376 Eight Air Force bombers hammered Regensburg and Schweinfurt, where Nazi fighters and ball-bearings for their engines were manufactured. Casuslties were heavy and sixty of the planes on the mission did not come back. Weigand's plane being one of them.

While in Stalag 17, Wiegand came across Erwin Grundman and Howard Pope, who while flying on separate crews were also shot down and imprisoned until the end of the war.

Wiegand told Smith that toward the end of the war, Hitler ordered that all prisoners were to be killed should Germany be losing the war, but those orders were never carried out. In fact, in April 1945 to avoid the prisoners falling into the hands of the advancing Russians, the prisoners in Stalag 17, were marched from near Krems, about 30 miles northwest of Vienna, Austria to a supposedly safer area.

That infamous death march across the Alps involved 4,000 allied prisoners of war and lasted 18 days. Then while hiding in the forest to avoid detection, they were rescued by an American tank force. An American Lieutenant Colonel, in an advancing tank, told them how lucky they were because normally before entering a forest his tanks would level it, but on this occasion he had a premonition and did not order it done. The Colonel was Arthur J. Downey of Valley Springs, Long Island, N.Y.

Mrs. Pope said that Howard Pope had died in December 1976 from a heart attack. He , also, had been sent to England, and was stationed 30 miles from London. Howard had been shot down on a raid over Germany and imprisoned in Stalag 17 and that he had participated in the infamous death march across the Alps.

As it turned out, three of the former crew members, serving on three different bomber crews, had all been shot down and ended up in the same prisoner-of-war camp.

At the 1993 Reunion Smith talked to Austin Finlay. He said, he became a replacement navigator on a crew assigned to Bury St. Edmunds in England, with the 94th. Bomb Group. He completed his 25 missions with only slight injuries. However, his outfit, suffered a 500% turnover rate. During that period, his outfit comprised about 20 crews and lost 100 crews and planes in combat. At the end of the war, he retired as a Captain in the USAAF.

As for the other members of the crew, all efforts have failed to contact them and neither Smith or I have any information about them.

I could go on and on about details of the story, but I'm getting worn out on this typewriter. Suffice to say that while Penn Stohr was flying most of the search missions with Army and USFS brass (as previously mentioned I was booted out of the co-pilot seat) I did manage to spend time in the Ace of Diamonds Saloon, in Stanley --- trouble was I didn't drink at the time.

About the Noorduyn, Noorduyn #35156 was never part of the Smokejumper (Jumping Doctor) program in the USFS. I, first became acquainted with it when it was assigned to Gowen Field, in Boise, as part of the setting up a 2nd. Air Force Search and Rescue Unit. The unit was under Col. Frank Fletcher (a "jumping doctor" trained in Missoula), We had two different pilots Maj. Kelly and Maj. Riordan, and an enlisted man Staff-Sargent Gates. Lloyd Johnson and myself started the initial training (jumps), in the sagebrush south of Gowen Field Air Base. Johnson was returned to McCall, however, the USFS put me on a temporary detail to assist at Gowen Field. I can't remember, I think I spent a couple of months at the Air Base. In return for my smokejumping training I got Air Corp training in the hospital (on how to amputate arms and legs of crash victims and plane-crash fire fighting techniques --- leaning about flash-back fires and how to recover bodies from airplane crashes). This all happened before the 1943 fire season when I made the first fire jump in Region Four and then went into the U.S. Army Air Corp. As for the Noorduyn, I didn't like it. The wheels were too close to each other and it often ground-looped. While on a search mission we crashed at Fairchild Air Base in Spokane and on a search in California we developed electrical problems over Mt. Whitney and made a hard forced landing at Wendover, Utah. The plane was assigned out of Hdqrs. Colorado Springs, so I don't know much about it after my assignment in Boise. The pictures of the training jump was not at McCall it was at Gowen Field Air Base, Boise, Idaho.

As I recall, the Forest Service Noorduyn was #N-58689 and Ed Schultz was the pilot. You fellows in Missoula know more about the Noorduyn than I do, it was mostly a R-5 and R-6 thing.

I don't remember knowing Wally Tower, he must have been after my time. The only pilots that I still have contact with are! Warren Ellison, Kenny Roth, Penn Stohr, Jr., Jim Larkin, etc.

Now for the sad news:

J. Karl Bryning, 75, died January 14, 1996, in Pocatello, Idaho. He was born March 13, 1920, at Pocatello. He served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during WWII, and was recipient of the Silver Cross. He was Regional Air Officer for the U.S. Forest Service, Region 4, the BLM, and the Aerial Firefighting Suppression Group, retiring in 1978. He is survived by his wife, Dorothy; two sons, J. Kelly and John Bryning of Fort Hall, Idaho; a grandson; and four sisters, Grace Hopkins and Opal Marshall of Pocatello, and Gladys Ford and Genevieve Morris of Ogden, Utah.

I knew and flew with Karl all during his career in Region Four and I will miss him --- as pilots go, he was one of the best.

So much for this letter (it was to be a brief one). Well! Read what I send you (just what I can recall, I just had my 77th. birthday on January 26 --- might not be many more). I owe Kenny Roth a letter, but I'll have to wait for another day. As for my health, lately I've been getting dizzy and passing out --- the dizziness isn't new I've often been accused of it.

I haven't been getting any of your historical write-ups lately --- have you written any others. Kenny use to send me the ones from the Seeley Lake paper --- Seeley Lake was where I made my first jump --- I remember, it took Derry, Cooley, Waite, Cochran, Smith, Dodge, Nash, Woods and others to get me out of the plane.

Thanks again! Hope to hear from you again, one of these days.

Sincerely,

John P. Ferguson (Fergie)