

AIR CORPS DETACHMENT
BIG PINE, CALIFORNIA

August 10, 1942

SUBJECT: Report of Rescue and Salvage trip as authorized in Paragraph 1 S.O. 138, as amended by S.O. 139, Headquarters Air Base, March Field, California.

TO : Commanding Officer, Air Base, March Field, California.

1. Pursuant to verbal orders of the Commanding Officer, received by the undersigned at 2130, 6 May 1942 from Operations Officer Major Herman, and confirmed by Interstate Telegram MRH M500G, 9 May 1942 a detachment consisting of the undersigned and eight (8) EM was selected and equipped same night with all available mountain equipment at Muroc; and being joined at 0130, 7 May 1942 by Surgeon Captain C.A. Mounce and 10 EM from March Field, departed Muroc at 0350, 7 May 1942 for Big Pine, Inyo County, California. The mission of this party was to make a search in the vicinity of Birch Mountain and Birch Lake to the west fifteen miles and at an altitude of 11,000 feet and above from Big Pine, California. The wreckage of an airplane had been discovered on May 5, 1942 by Norman Clyde, Sierran mountaineer, from Kidd Mountain to the north, through use of binoculars. There was solid snow at the time above 7,500 feet all along the east side of the Sierra Nevada in that vicinity, and Doctor Clyde estimated the snow at the elevation where the ship lay to be from eight to fifteen feet deep on the level. Birch Lake, upon the shores of which the ship rested was covered with an ice cap of five feet in depth.

2. Arrangements were made on May 7 in Big Pine, by Captain James Liddell of March Field for horses and packer hire to assist in the search and Doctor Clyde was hired to supervise the climbing and work in the snow and ice in the vicinity of and above the site of the plane wreckage. Plans were laid to make a trip on May 8 to the ship by horse back as far as possible and the rest of the way on foot. That night, a camp site having been picked ten miles from Big Pine and at an altitude of 6,500 feet, all members of the detachment were quartered in a rooming house in Big Pine.

3. On May 8 a party in charge of Captain James Liddell departed Big Pine at daylight by automobile to McMurray Meadows above the Birch Creek camp site and from there by horse and foot to the wreckage of the ship. Camp site policed and camp established at Birch Creek Crossing. Ship identified by Captain Liddell at B-18 Tow Target Det. ship number 12 from March Field, being the one which crashed on the evening of December 12, 1941 with six officers and two enlisted men. The body of Pvt. Van Hamm was found in the snow at the scene of the wreck, the body being well preserved by the extreme cold. Arrangements were made through the operations officer at March Field that evening for contract undertaker to come for Van Hamm body on May 10. Captain Liddell and three other officers returned to proper stations pursuant to S.O. 138, Hq. March Field with Major W.C. Evans left in charge.

4. Arriving on the evening of May 7, 1942 were eight (8) EM of the 4th Signal Platoon from March Field under Corporal McCastin. This section was equipped with two panel trucks containing radio sets for transmission and receiving and three "walkie-talkie" sets to be used for training in maintaining

contact with the rescue crew. The sets were more or less successful in operation and for a week were used until the men were desirous of returning to March Field, at which time they all were released by Major Evans for return to March Field.

5. At the time of being ordered on this mission it was apparently considered that all bodies on the ship would be soon found and accordingly three ambulances were taken along to the site of the camp. Two of these with six out of eight EM from March Field were returned two days after establishing camp as it became clear that the recovery of all bodies would take a long time, and each recovery would be a job for the contract undertaker's hearse.

6. On May 11, surgeon Mounce was ordered to return to proper station to be replaced by Surgeon Graesser of Muroc same date. Surgeon Graesser was ordered back to proper station the next day, leaving the detachment without services of a medical officer for the balance of the detail. At this time too much cannot be said for the excellent state of training and splendid co-operation of the Medical EM left with the detachment. More will be said of that in remarks to follow.

7. From May 10 to May 14 snow fell each day, making work of rescue difficult and on two days turning back party at altitude of 9000 feet or less.

8. May 18 search produced two bodies (Bundy and Ricker) which were reburied in snow and wire sent to Base to send undertaker for same on May 22. These two bodies were recovered at 12700 feet and two trips were necessary to bring them down to trails where vehicles could take the bodies. At this time there was a three mile carry by hand from the site of the crashed plane to where the horses could be loaded, this being at an altitude of 9000 to 10,000 feet. Snow was from five to fifteen feet deep and no trail a good deal of the distance.

9. Bodies of Colonels Bundy and Ricker brought out and shipped to Riverside by contract undertaker on May 22. From then to May 30 each day was below freezing at over 9000 feet and each trip attempted was turned back without any further finds. The search trip on May 31 produced no finds.

10. June 6 search party discovered body of Major Hugh McCaffery and prepared same for bringing out on June 9 for removal by undertaker to Riverside. June 9 trip resulted in discovery of body of Lieutenant Homer Burns by his brother-in-law, Albert Bergen, who had accompanied parties on many days of this search. Mr. Bergen, brought to the vicinity of the wreck early in May by the father of Lieutenant Burns, had been indefatigable in his devotion to the effort of trying to salvage as many of the bodies as possible in a short time. A civilian without any official status, he was a pleasure to work with and well liked by the men. Mr. George Burns, father of the Lieutenant, was tremendously active in the search and as a result was a constant source of worry to all due to his considerable age and high blood pressure. Fortunately he was not on the trip when his son was found, and agreed upon the request of the undersigned, to not stay and view his son when he was brought out of the snow, but rather to leave with his family and consult the undertaker in Riverside. The body of Lieutenant Burns was removed on June 10 and shipped by undertaker to Riverside with body of McCaffery.

11. June 24, Lieutenant Henneck, MP Sub Depot arrived to superintend

breaking up of ship. Accompanied party on June 27 and after viewing ship decided that further breakup would be impractical until all bodies had been removed due to danger of further rockslides causing damage to bodies or perhaps covering same. Lieutenant Henneck returned to March Field to await final salvage of bodies.

12. Broke camp at Birch Creek June 30 and leaving six men on rations and quarters (S.O. 181 Hq Air Base March Field) departed with balance of detachment for Muroc and March Field, proper stations for EM, pursuant to VOCO Air Base March Field, California. Six men left at Big Pine to continue search with guide Norman Clyde for remaining bodies, Major General Herbert A. Dargue, Captain James G. Leavitt, and S/Sgt. Hoffman. Corporal Schelper in charge of detail.

13. July 3 bodies of General Dargue and Captain Leavitt found by search party. Removed to hearse of contract undertaker and shipped to Riverside on July 6.

14. On July 15, Corporal Charles Rice substituted for Corporal Schelper in charge of detail, Corporal Schelper being returned to Muroc as section chief in charge of Muroc operations office.

15. July 27 S/Sgt. Hoffman found in different chute from all other bodies still buried in snow. Arrangements made with undertaker to transport body to Riverside on August 2, and body removed to freezing plant of Rollin Giroux in Big Pine for proper keeping, July 29.

16. Major Evans returned from March Field to Big Pine August 1 to clear July bills incurred by men of detachment, arrange for shipment of last body, and confer with men on further stay to assist in final disposition of ship and bringing out of further personal effects of those who died in crash as well as certain ordnance property. Major Evans returned to March Field on August 3, with certain personal and government issue effects for disposition.

17. Remaining men of detachment returned to proper stations, Muroc and March Field August 10, 1942, having completed detail as ordered by Commanding Officer Air Base, March Field, California.

18. Supply of all foodstuffs and equipment, so far as obtainable, was good from Muroc; other purchases being made on proper forms locally. It should be noted that equipment peculiar to mountain climbing was not obtainable from a government facility. Supply Officers at Muroc and March Field were most helpful in prompt attention to requests in so far as they were able to effect delivery. Major Herman, then operations officer at March Field, was at all times most helpful in his direction as to policy in the conduct of the search. By orders of the Commanding Officer, all reports of progress were made to Major Herman.

19. The conduct of the men during the arduous work incidental to heavy burden in snow at high altitudes was exemplary and worthy of the highest tradition of the service. Of the more than fifty men who participated in the work of the detachment three were sent back to organizations as unsuitable and these were men who committed only minor infractions. On this mission there was no room for any type of carelessness or inattention to duty no matter how trivial.

The best gauge of efficiency available is the record that not one man day was lost from accident or sickness in more than three months, and there was no one ever late for duty and no malingering. Morale was excellent and from this detachment may later be drawn men who are capable of performing feats of mountain climbing, and snow rescue that will compare with any professional work. To single out different men for willingness would be unfair to the others, but certain individuals deserve special mention for outstanding ability in certain lines.

Sergeant (now 1st Sergeant) Bruce Bailey, B and C Det., Muroc picked the men and organized this detail in such a way that when he left it to return to Muroc for promotion it functioned smoothly.

Private First Class (now S/Sergeant) Andrew Foster Miller took over as lead sergeant from Bailey and by his leadership and outstanding strength inspired the men of the detachment to performance which brought praise to them from the guide, one of the finest in the Sierras and covered in a later paragraph.

Private First Class Charles L. Peris, B and C. Det., Muroc, a splendid horseman, was able to and did give much help to the packer and served as instructor to the other men less skillful in the handling of mountain horses, thus minimizing accidents to inept handling of horses in the rugged country.

Corporal (now Sergeant) Paul O. Bragg, cook and mess sergeant, 44th Materiel Squadron, March Field bought for and cooked a uniformly splendid mess throughout the time spent, under adverse conditions in all sorts of weather and in the open. This in itself was responsible for a good part of the fine performance of the detachment.

Corporal Technician 5th Grade Donald E. Moyer, Med Det., March Field took over duties of the surgeon for ten weeks and his skillful work with minor injuries and potential sickness kept the men of the detachment without a single day lost. In addition this soldier was the finest high scaler and snow worker in the detachment and by his performance taught the other men how to protect themselves in the dangerous high country where a false step might mean permanent injury or death.

20. Doctor Norman Clyde, hired as guide, is considered to be the finest Sierran and snow climber in the eastern Sierras. His handling of the men and the instruction given by him to them both on the trail and in camp at night was excellent. It was he who found the ship on May 5, and it was he who found the bodies of Colonels Bundy and Ricker almost at the top of Birch Mountain, when no other man would have ventured up there due to the still frozen condition of the snow. His skill made it possible to get the bodies out without undue delay. It is the opinion of the undersigned that Dr. Clyde could well be hired by the army to prepare men for just such emergency work so that future crashes could be tended in this sort of terrain by experienced men so as to achieve successful rescue with a minimum of personnel and expenditure. Mr. Wallace Partridge, and two sons Wilfred and Kenneth, owners of the Glacier Pack Train, furnished horses and pack mules. This family was outstanding in its cooperation at all times and has undergone serious monetary loss this season by subordinating its regular seasonal business to the wishes of the detachment

regarding days of hire. Mr. Kenneth Partridge who made most of the trips commanded the respect of the men at all times and exercised an authority over them that went a long way toward efficiency in operation. The senior Partridge, being a County Supervisor and prominent and well thought of man in the Owens Valley was able to obtain many favors for the detachment which would not otherwise have been available.

21. Men and women of the Valley who merit thanks for their party in improving the work of the detachment and the lives of the men therein are:

Mr. and Mrs. George Vonderheide, managers of Keough's Hot Springs, where baths were furnished always at half the usual rate and in many cases free, in order that stiffness from riding and work in the cold might be eliminated and the men kept in proper health.

Mr. and Mrs. Harry Mendenall, owners of the Art and Camera Shop in Big Pine who extended the use of their store as headquarters at all times to the detachment, and who also handled all telephone calls to and from March Field, all this without thought of charge. These two people are deputy sheriffs and kept the various collected personal effects in their vault until moved.

Mr. Rollin Giroux who furnished the use of his freezing chamber for preparation of some of the bodies salvaged until the undertaker called for them, thus rendering a distinct and needed service, all without charge. Mr. Giroux operates a large apple packing house and kept his freezing chamber in operation after all his fruit had been moved just for this use.

Mr. Ed Parker, hydrographer for the City of Los Angeles in Big Pine, and Mr. James F. Nikolaus, Standard Oil Distributor in Big Pine. Both of these gentlemen took charge of search parties on several days and due to their experience were of great value, and in addition Mr. Nikolaus did repair work on government vehicles several times at no charge.

The Parent Teacher Association of Big Pine and American Legion Post of Bishop and Big Pine who both had the detachment to several entertainments which tended to raise the morale of the detachment and keep the men happy and contented.

22. The men of the detachment would be a credit to any organization and it would be a privilege for the undersigned to have them under his command.

23. It should be noted that as of July 15, 1942 none of the bills submitted on Forms 15 had been paid to vendees, these bills having been submitted through proper channels on May 31, 1942. This is not due to any fault of S-4 at March Field as same were properly processed by that office. However the feeling of vendees who are so long in receiving their money is not very favorable to the government and any steps taken to eliminate this period of waiting would be in the interests of the service.

24. Two hundred dollars (\$200.00) advanced to the Detachment by Base

Chaplain, March Field, has been repaid to Chaplain's Fund by Major Evans.

WILLIAM C. EVANS
Major, Air Corps
Commanding Detachment