

Frozen body in Sierra believed to be WWII airman / Victim found by climbers could be from plane that crashed in '42

Suzanne Herel : 5-7 minutes : 10/20/2005

Ice climbers have discovered what investigators believe are the remains of a World War II airman who crashed in Kings Canyon National Park and whose body -- still wearing an unopened parachute -- has been preserved in glacial ice for more than 60 years.

Park rangers and a forensic anthropologist began to carefully excavate the discovery on Wednesday.

"It's almost a snapshot in time," said Dr. [Bob Mann](#), deputy scientific director of the [Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command](#), based in Hawaii. "This crewman, whoever he turns out to be, he's somebody who went missing 60 years ago. He was in this one position all that time. It's like opening a time capsule -- what did he have in his pockets? What did he have with him?"

The body -- whose frozen, face-down head, arm and shoulder were visible above the snow -- was discovered by ice climbers last weekend at the base of a remote area known as Mount Mendel or Mendel Glacier, said park spokeswoman [Jody Lyle](#). She estimated that about 80 percent of the body was encased in ice. The area, in the extreme northern portion of the mountainous wilderness that makes up the park, takes several days to reach by foot.

Lyle said the excavation crew hoped to dislodge the body by late Wednesday or today, after which it would be taken to the county coroner's office for an autopsy.

Meanwhile, the crew was camping in weather that was expected to drop to 15 degrees overnight.

Investigators believe for several reasons that the man was a World War II veteran.

During World War II, many military training centers were situated in California's Central Valley and used training routes over the Sierra Nevada. [Flight training](#) sometimes was fatal -- during the 1940s and '50s, up to two dozen planes crashed in the craggy backcountry of Kings Canyon and the adjoining Sequoia National Park, Lyle said.

Some speculate that the man's fate could be tied to an AT-7 military training plane that crashed in the Mendel Glacier area Nov. 18, 1942. Four bodies were recovered from the wreck after it was found by a hiker in 1947.

In addition, the parachute pack discovered on the man's back is stenciled with the words "U.S. Army Air Corps.," which preceded the formation of the [U.S. Air Force](#) in 1947. The ice climbers cut a small piece of fabric from the man's parachute and showed it to Inyo

County Sheriff's Department officials when they reported the find. It appeared to be silk, which largely was replaced by nylon in the manufacture of military parachutes when the United States placed an embargo on Japanese silk in 1941.

According to Mann, once the body is removed, it will be kept frozen at the county morgue.

"You always try to keep remains in the same condition that they were found to avoid decomposition," he said. "Not having seen the body, I don't know for sure, but I would suspect the body would be in pretty good condition. There should be some soft tissue as well, which is something we rarely find."

Soft tissue allows scientists to conduct more extensive DNA tests, according to [Larry Greer](#), a spokesman for the [Pentagon's](#) POW/MIA office in Washington. Skeletal remains will contain what is known as mitochondrial DNA, which must be traced through the maternal blood line, he said.

The condition of the body will depend in part on how much melting and refreezing has gone on around it for the past 60 years or so, Mann said.

"Normally, what we deal with is skeletal remains, but in this case here it would be a fresher individual," Mann said.

Mann said investigators hope the man is wearing his dog tags or has a wallet in his pocket or that his name is stitched into his uniform to help identify him. The parachute also may carry a serial number that could be tracked.

"These are all pieces of the puzzle," Mann said.

Of the 88,000 U.S. war veterans missing, 78,000 are from World War II. Many were lost in plane crashes over the Pacific Ocean.

The remains of World War II veterans tend to be easier to identify than those of later wars. Planes did not travel as fast in the earlier war, and if they were hit by weaponry, it wouldn't have been high-tech explosives. In addition, many such remains have been recovered in the jungles of Papua New Guinea, where it is cultural tradition to respect bodies and leave them alone, Greer said.

The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command was activated at [Hickam Air Force Base on Oahu](#) in 2003 to account for as many of the country's missing war veterans as possible, and its highest priority is the rescue of prisoners of war, according to the command's Web site.

With modern technology, the command has been able to identify veterans as far back as the War of 1812 and the Civil War, Mann said.

"We don't give up on them," he said. "We don't care if they died four years ago or 140 years ago."

"You can imagine what an emotional thing it is to return a key ring, a wallet, a comb, even socks to family members. We're sure hoping for a successful return of this airman to his family."