

2020

Gone Fishing: Military Brass in the High Sierra, 1944

Jack Fisher
jfisher37@icloud.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/eshj>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Jack (2020) "Gone Fishing: Military Brass in the High Sierra, 1944," *Eastern Sierra History Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/eshj/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eastern Sierra History Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Gone Fishing: Military Brass in the High Sierra – 1944¹

Jack Fisher²

The airport in Bishop, California, long celebrated as a soaring center since gliding became a popular recreational sport in the 1930s, enjoyed a unique claim to momentary national fame: its role in the John Ford directed 1932 filming of action-thriller *Air Mail* starring Ralph Bellamy and Pat O'Brien. The movie, a chronicle of early barnstorming flight, also launched the acrobatic flying career of stunt pilot Paul Mantz, the only willing volunteer for the following spectacle: a bi-winged plane touches down directly in front of an open hangar, flies through it and bursts out of a paper-thin back wall before immediately taking off again. With multiple cameras positioned to record the action from every angle, the scene was shot in a single flawless take.³

All of this was achieved at high altitude, one reason the War Department wanted the Bishop facility for its emerging National Defense Program. Back in 1939, numerous airfields throughout the Eastern Sierra were declared essential for possible military use. Following the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, every coastal flight center was believed vulnerable to impending Japanese attack. The decision came down to immediately convert Bishop Airport to Bishop Army Air Field (BAAF). Runway 12/30 was extended to 7,500 feet, thus exceeding the 6,000 ft. runway of Los Angeles' Mines Field, later to become the LAX we know today.⁴

As a result, bombers like the B-24 Liberator built by Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego and the B-17 Flying Fortress built by Boeing near Seattle could land in Bishop. Auxiliary runways 7/25 and 16/34 were re-configured according to Army specification. Still identifiable today are the foundational vestiges of numerous perimeter artillery emplacements for anti-aircraft defense; also several bunkers originally built for the storage of military ordnance brought to Bishop from the weapons depot near Hawthorne, Nevada.⁵

In late July, 1944, USFS Ranger Roy Boothe received a confidential memorandum from an old friend and fishing partner, General H. H. (Hap) Arnold, at the time Commander of Army Air Corps operations worldwide. He along with colleagues needed "a little mental relaxation from arduous duties," preferably high in the Sierra Nevada. That two leaders

¹ Presented at the 3rd Annual Eastern Sierra History Conference, Oct. 26-28, 2018 in the Page Center of the Sierra Nevada Aquatic Research Center (SNARC) in Crowley Lake, California.

² Retired surgeon and avocational historian with a recreational devotion to the Eastern Sierra since 1977.

³ See on YouTube excerpts of the film, *Air Mail*, including the "hangar-storming" sequence, complete with a snow-capped Sierra Nevada in the background:
https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-att-att_001&hsimp=yhs-att_001&hspart=att&p=air+mail+movie+1932#id=1&vid=22d5232147d8ccdb717e66d9322925e&action=click

⁴ All four runways at LAX today exceed 10,000 ft.

⁵ A Navy-trained pilot landing today would recognize the Army design. During the Cold War, Hawthorne's weapons depot, sited inland for defensive reasons, was our nation's largest.

of our military were confident enough and willing to step away from their primary duties was remarkable in itself. The invasion of Europe by Allied Forces had commenced on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and while the Normandy invasion beachheads were secured, full objectives of Operation Overlord were still very much in question.⁶

By August 6 of that year, General Patton's 3rd Army had been activated only days before. The so-called breakout and reclaiming of France's occupied territory for which he would become famous had not yet gained momentum. Yet a Lieutenant Waldron of the Army Signal Corps arrived that very same day in Bishop, California to meet with Boothe along with a USFS radio technician. Together they would serve as General Arnold's advance planning team, reconnoiter the prospective route, and test at every selected campsite the radio-telephone communications required by the party for their command responsibilities.⁷

Also assigned to the mission were pilots of the Women's Air Service Patrol (WASPs), an organization of pilots initially formed as the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Service (WAFS) whose wartime duties included the transfer of recently completed aircraft from factory to military airfield, sometimes even to foreign air bases. For the coming fishing adventure, pilots were assigned to fly Stinson L-5 Sentinels, low altitude reconnaissance aircraft suitable for completing air drops of urgent military communiques directly into the pre-designated campsites.⁸

Boothe had accompanied the general on several prior mountain treks when Arnold served earlier military assignments in California. He was the first to command March Army Air Field in Riverside County, later to become March Air Force Base. Arnold was also assigned to scout for land to be used for training as a bombing range. He found it to the north in the Mojave Desert, a dry lakebed fourteen by six miles. This became Muroc Army Air Field during WWII, and afterward, Edwards Air Force Base, the USAF Test Center and Test Pilot Training School. The general's latest memo to Boothe indicated that others might join him for the fishing but specified this information must remain a protected military secret.⁹

On the day prior to the generals' expected August 24 arrival, Boothe was fully briefed by a Colonel Peterson, Arnold's aide-de-camp, and told for the first time that Army Chief of

⁶ Boothe, Roy, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," title selected for his report of a fishing trip organized on behalf of Generals Arnold and Marshal in August, 1944, culminating in Ranger Booth and his USFS colleague Joe Elliott traveling back to Washington DC with the generals.

⁷ Imagine the challenge: no satellites and only wireless radio; the wartime application of Motorola's famous 'walkie-talkie' already incorporated CDMA technology that would decades later allow for smartphones to function globally using Qualcomm's transistorized version.

⁸ Thousands of Bell Aircraft P-39 Airacobras, considered to be a defensive aircraft, were flown by women pilots across the Bering Strait into Siberia for use on the Eastern Front. Following the war, some of these women, now retired from military service, flew for California Fish and Wildlife agency, stocking mountain lakes with trout spawned at local fish hatcheries.

⁹ Southern California travelers to the Eastern Sierra during the height of the Cold War may recall seeing the sinister gray bombers of the Strategic Air Command standing on alert prepared for an early warning response. Converted from a WWII bombing range for air crews in training, the lake bed is now used for landing supersonic aircraft.

Staff George C. Marshall would be joining the party. What this meant was that two of the four principal American military leaders would be departing Washington on the prior evening of a day when it was not yet clear whether Hitler's occupying force under the command of General Dietrich von Choltitz would abide by orders from Hitler to leave Paris, City of Light, burning in the face of advancing Allied armies.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the commanders at BAAF, those in charge of the airfield as well as others commanding the various air wings committed to specialized training, were only told to expect at 0600 the arrival of a C-54 flying through the night directly from the nation's capital. What this could only mean to them was the sudden presence of ranking military brass so everyone scurried to make the base ready for a full inspection. As dawn broke, they all fell into formation and stood at attention on the runway's apron.

While the guide party ate their breakfast next morning in a Main Street cafe, Roy Boothe was first to hear the drone of heavy engines circling overhead. Racing to the airport two miles distant, they arrived just as the Douglas Skymaster touched down on time to the minute. As soon as Marshall, Arnold, and their aides descended from the aircraft, drivers were instructed to proceed directly to Mammoth Lakes and draw as little notice as possible while doing so. Meanwhile, the base commander found himself both relieved as well as a little disappointed, having received only a short wave from his superiors as they ducked into their vehicles and sped away.

Had the two 4-star Generals paused to receive a full briefing, they would have learned more about the BAAF's primary mission: advanced flight training. At an altitude of 4,119 ft., the main runway could under some weather conditions function aerodynamically as if it was at 8,000 ft. Pilots who often received their basic flying skills near sea level but later selected for high elevation assignments were brought to Bishop to learn how to take off and land safely in thinner air. The Army at that time was also helping the Navy solve a "bounce problem" affecting the new F-4U Corsair fighter with folding wings and an important innovation, a retractable tail hook designed to make carrier landings safer. Not until 400 Marine Corps pilots arrived at BAAF in the summer of 1944 to perfect a new landing protocol was the bounce taken out of the Corsair so that its hook could reliably engage a carrier deck's arresting cable.¹¹

The motorcade ascended US 395's Sherwin Grade, today a modern all-season highway but in 1944 a treacherous two-lane road often closed in winter. They passed Crowley Lake and the postwar site of a future airport that would serve what the region's pioneers considered the "high country. At the Mammoth Lakes Ranger Station, another USFS guide, Joe Elliott, joined the party. After proceeding up Lake Mary Road to the Mammoth Pack Outfit (still operated today as the Mammoth Lakes Pack Station), they

¹⁰ Hitler had established with Choltitz, when he met him on Aug. 6, the same day Lieut. Waldron first convened Gen. Arnold's advance party in Bishop, that Paris was to be considered a fortress and defended to the end, which could only mean to horrified Parisians the complete destruction of their city. Later he would demand to know: "Paris Brennt?" ("Is Paris burning?"). See Jean Edward Smith, *The Liberation of Paris*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019. P 72-76.

¹¹ Also known as the arresting hook or arresting gear, much greater strength of both hook and cable were needed as faster jet aircraft were introduced during the the Korean Conflict.

selected their mounts and departed, passing first through the former location of Pine City, a gold camp in the nineteenth century but today a public campsite, then to the top of Coldwater Canyon where they passed by the abandoned Consolidated [gold] Mining Company.¹²

At this point, the trail rose sharply from 9000 ft., passing Arrowhead, Skelton, and Barney Lakes, before reaching Duck Pass at 10, 800 ft., five miles beyond the pack station. Accustomed to protective air cover, the generals were neither surprised nor bothered by the sound of light aircraft overhead but the pack stock were noticeably disturbed. After descending to Duck Lake at 10,400 ft., their concern was absence of the “lunch mule” that had not yet caught up with them; so, there was very little to eat. They pushed on to Purple Lake where they soon caught enough fish for dinner as well as for breakfast the next morning. When the pack train arrived, a full campsite was readied and a hearty dinner prepared for a genuinely hungry party.

The next day, Lieutenant Waldron demonstrated for the general’s approval that radio communications with Bishop and the world beyond were established and secure. Then he ignited a smoke bomb to facilitate a WASP pilot’s approach and successful completion of the trip’s first mail drop. Boothe and his ranger colleagues learned that fishing would come to a halt whenever the generals retired to examine their daily mail soon after it arrived. Questions were out of order of course and most of the documents were later burned.

The following morning, they left Purple Lake bound for “Tully’s Hole,” described as a beautiful little meadow on the North Fork of Fish Creek. From there the party descended to Quail Pasture on Mono Creek at 7900 ft. where it was warmer and everybody seemed more comfortable at lower altitude. The fishing also was good so they remained there for two more days.

Problems came with the third mail drop on the morning of August 27. Arnold, in his post-war memoir, suggests that the pilot was anxious and overflew the drop zone. Not so, she insisted when Boothe queried her weeks later. She knew exactly where she was, but the mail pouch was so much heavier that day. She experienced great difficulty pushing it out of the window and so it fell to the far side of a nearby ridge. Arnold described a frenzied search for the documents. One member of the party set out on foot, periodically firing a flare gun so others would know where he was heading. Unfortunately, the flares set off small fires wherever they fell into the underbrush. The chase party had to put out the fires while a group on horseback crossed the ridge and found the missing pouch.¹³

Why might there have been more mail on that particular day? Perhaps because pivotal events in the world were generating longer reports; for example, news that in the early

¹² Any remaining excitement was taken out of the gold market with President Roosevelt’s Apr. 5, 1933 Executive Order 6102 (issued under the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917) forbidding the hoarding of gold coin, gold bullion, even gold certificates. As a result, the demand for and the price of gold plummeted well below the costs of mining extraction.

¹³ Arnold, H.H., *Global Mission*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1949, p522-523.

morning hours of August 25, the 2nd French Armored Division under the command of General Jacques-Phillipe LeClerc had successfully entered and liberated Paris with few casualties and little significant structural damage. Furthermore, the FFI (Free French of the Interior) under General Charles de Gaulle had prevailed over both the PCF (French Communist Party) and a variety of resistance organizations, all of them seeking to establish political control. Declaring himself President and asserting the continuity of France's Third Republic, he ordered a triumphant parade of victorious troops and armor down the Champs Elysees for the very next day, Aug. 26 before an ecstatic assembly of relieved Parisians.¹⁴ The historic detail of these astounding events had they been immediately available, might have filled several mail pouches dropped into the Sierra Nevada wilderness.¹⁵

From Quail Pasture the party climbed again to 10,700 ft. and fished Hilgard Creek where in Boothe's words they found "almost virgin Golden Trout fishing." Their final destination was Lake Italy at 11,200 ft. where the "big ones were known to lie" For this prospect, the generals asked their radio technicians to call for an inflatable rubber boat to be flown in for their use. Ranger Boothe later described the extraordinary scene: "A bright yellow chute came down between the granite peaks and onto one side of a canyon well below Lake Italy, the intended target. Eventually retrieved, the boat was inflated and launched, but despite its use over the span of a long day, there was no luck finding the imagined big ones. Someone speculated that the fish were probably shy of the military authority present that day."¹⁶

Despite their disappointment, the generals easily met their fishing quotas each day of their adventure. On the final day, they climbed over Italy Pass at 12,400 ft. before descending 5000 ft. on a steep and abandoned sheep trail to an operational mining road and then to Pine Creek where a motorcade awaited them. Someone might have informed the generals that they were in the midst of the active mining of scheelite, a metallic ore containing tungsten, critical for wartime production of armaments.¹⁷

Wranglers, their mounts, and all pack stock were transported back to Mammoth Lakes while the fishing party was transferred to nearby Bishop for hot showers, a change of clothes, and after a brief nap, an informal banquet at the Golden State Restaurant on Main Street. Rising to thank his hosts, General Marshall praised all of the packers including the chef for "a very creditable job." Referring to the precarious descent from Italy Pass earlier in the day, he added: "There must be trails like this one in hell."

Arnold and Marshall compensated the pack station with their own funds but weren't allowed to pay USFS guides or technicians because they were fellow government employees. Instead, they invited Boothe and Elliott to accompany them back to

¹⁴ Smith, *Liberation of Paris*, 163-182.

¹⁵ Ibid., 163-182.

¹⁶ The mark of a seasoned fisherman is to know at all times what the fish are thinking but not necessarily where they are located.

¹⁷ Tungsten with the greatest density of any metallic element and the highest melting point, is an essential component of the alloyed steel required for high velocity ordnance.

Washington, see the sites, and perhaps meet with their Department of Agriculture bosses. Boothe later mused that both he and his colleague worried all the way back about how their wilderness apparel might look in the nation's capital; neither of them had packed for such an excursion.

Soon after the war came to an end in August 1945, Bishop Army Air Field was declared government surplus and turned over to civilian operators. Functioning today as the Eastern Sierra Regional Airport, it remains a popular soaring center owned and operated by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. The U.S. Vanadium mining operation no longer exists but a ten-mile road still extends from U. S. 395 past the ghost town of Rovana, where mining employees lived during the war, then to Pine Creek where a challenging trail to the Sierra Crest still retains its hellish challenge.¹⁸

How it came to pass that military brass traveling from the nation's capital managed to endure what any Eastern Sierra local would consider an extremely strenuous high-altitude adventure? Arnold knew what he was getting into but did Marshall? New visitors to the High Sierra today are advised to acclimatize gradually to altitude exertion, for several days, in fact, before a prudent packer would take a party from sea level on a venture over similar terrain. Marshall and Arnold were equestrian-trained and accustomed to outdoor survival. But how much time had they spent adjusting to altitude? The C-54 Skymaster, which they often flew, was first placed in service in 1938, long before cabin pressurization was adopted. The aircraft routinely flew at altitudes requiring supplemental oxygen. Even if they had asked their pilot to plot a course to California at 9,000-10,000 ft. (very unlikely) and they wore no masks, a single journey would not have been sufficient for adaptation to altitude. In any event, they not only survived the experience but appeared to enjoy themselves thoroughly.¹⁹

An awareness of this little-known recreational event permits a comparison of respective wartime command policies between Axis and Allied powers. Whereas Adolph Hitler, adored by his National Socialist (Na-Zi) followers despite a recognized mediocre intellect and unbounded capacity for hatred, he was at the same time useless as a military strategist. Nevertheless, he maintained a steel grip on his general staff, often controlling their major field decisions from a distance. Instead of unseating him as they could have done easily in the beginning, they ultimately suffered the ignominy of an unconditional surrender. Those who survived the war spent the rest of their days grumbling about Hitler's tactical idiocy.²⁰

¹⁸ Rovana is a contraction of Ro- for Round Valley and -Vana for U.S. Vanadium. Now largely abandoned, it was a community established at the beginning of WWII for workers who were mining scheelite ore from higher mountain passes so that tungsten could be extracted and used in the steel alloys required for wartime production of armaments.

¹⁹ But not without restless nights and maybe a headache or two if this author's experience is characteristic.

²⁰ Among these were 1.) his decision to invade the Soviet Union 2.) declaring war on the United States and unleashing our limitless industrial capacity, and 3) withholding from battle the reserve panzer divisions capable of driving the Normandy invaders back into the sea relieving and replacing, sometimes even killing his commanding generals, as was the fate of Erwin Rommel, known to history as 'Desert Fox of the Afrika Corps.'

Stalin, unlike Churchill, was entirely lacking in personal courage and never ventured close to any combat zone. He mostly relied on the decisions of his generals in the field, those still living after the purges that took an estimated 700,000 lives in the 1930s. Nonetheless, he ensured the fate of a military multitude when in 1941 he signed Order #227 titled, “Not a Step Backward.” To do so under any condition of warfare signified a treasonous act that was punishable by death at the hands of the NKVD (secret police) positioned behind them for that purpose. Had the merciful right of strategic retreat been allowed, Soviet military losses would have been far less than 13 million soldiers.²¹

Allied forces benefitted from a more democratic form of governance that paid attention to minimizing casualties. The six Chiefs of Staff representing the respective land, sea, and air ministries of Great Britain and the United States met regularly at now historic conferences to arrive at the tactical decisions required for successful unity of command. And as it turned out, five of the six were avid fishermen. At the close of the January, 1943 Casablanca Conference and with Churchill and Roosevelt safely departed, they headed for the Atlas Mountains of Morocco to fish. And they withdrew in similar fashion to the Laurentian Mountains following the Second Quebec Conference in Sept. 1944.²²

So it should not surprise anyone aware of these habitual behaviors among WWII’s military kingpins that two among them were enjoying the lakes and streams of the Sierra Nevada at a time when the pivotal battles of World War II were already behind them: Midway and Guadalcanal in the Pacific, 2nd El Alamein in North Africa, Stalingrad on the Eastern Front and a final victory was in their sight.²³

Postscripts

- Retired Sierra packer Lou Roeser, who provided me with Ranger Boothe’s report, offers the following sidelight to the aforementioned fishing trip. Many years later, he led a pack trip of adventuring dentists, one of whom spoke of his boyhood adventures in the same region. While growing up in the Manzanar Internment Camp, he and his friends liked to slip under the fence at night and explore the nearby mountains, fishing its lakes and living free off the land. On one venture, they came as far north as Lake Italy and encountered a party wearing military uniforms. Frightened by the notion that the Army was looking for them, they beat a hasty retreat back to Manzanar.²⁴

²¹ Roberts, Andrew, *Leadership in War: Essential Lessons From Those Who Made History*, New York: Viking, 2019, 93-119. At Stalingrad alone, some 13,500, nearly a full division that included men, women, and mobilized adolescents were shot by the NKVD for cowardice after fleeing the front lines. (NKVD stands for People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs).

²² At the Casablanca Conference code named SYMBOL, the doctrine of “Unconditional Surrender” was agreed upon by all. At the Second Quebec Conference code named OCTAGON, decisions were made for de-militarization of Germany, the Allied occupation zones defined, and continuation Lend-Lease for the British approved. NB: only America’s Chief of Naval Operations, Ernest King, cared little or nothing about fishing.

²³ It is worth remembering that the pivotal battles of any war cannot be determined until long after a conflict is won...or lost.

²⁴ The range of these boys’ High Sierra adventures is all the more amazing when taking into account the 58 mile distance between Manzanar and Lake Italy.

- Postwar efforts to build an interstate highway across the middle of the Sierra Nevada were resisted by environmentalists and Eastern Sierra businessmen alike. Promoters of the road in Fresno and Madera Counties applied every possible justification, among them a Cold War need for moving ordnance from the weapons depot in Hawthorne, Nevada to coastal military installations. Author/Publisher/Anti-road Activist Genny Smith wrote to then Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall and received a prompt reply. No such mountain road was required or even contemplated to meet existing military objectives. Might he have been recalling a fishing adventure during the summer of 1944 and therefore want to preserve the wilderness beauty he enjoyed with his friend and colleague, 'Hap' Arnold?²⁵

²⁵ See Jack C. Fisher, *Stopping the Road: Campaign against another Trans-Sierra Highway*. Transporting heavy ordnance over a mountain road was a ridiculous notion anyway; there were already adequate railroad connections between Hawthorne and the California coastal port cities.