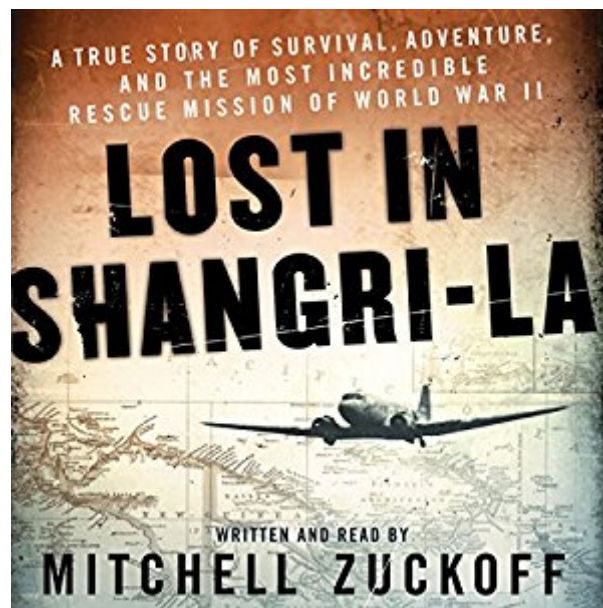


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# Lost In Shangri-La: A True Story Of Survival, Adventure, And The Most Incredible Rescue Mission Of World War II



## Synopsis

On May 13, 1945, 24 American servicemen and WACs boarded a transport plane for a sightseeing trip over "Shangri-La," a beautiful and mysterious valley deep within the jungle-covered mountains of Dutch New Guinea. Unlike the peaceful Tibetan monks of James Hilton's best-selling novel *Lost Horizon*, this Shangri-La was home to spear-carrying tribesmen, warriors rumored to be cannibals. But the pleasure tour became an unforgettable battle for survival when the plane crashed. Miraculously, three passengers pulled through. Margaret Hastings, barefoot and burned, had no choice but to wear her dead best friend's shoes. John McCollom, grieving the death of his twin brother also aboard the plane, masked his grief with stoicism. Kenneth Decker, too, was severely burned and suffered a gaping head wound. Emotionally devastated, badly injured, and vulnerable to the hidden dangers of the jungle, the trio faced certain death unless they left the crash site. Caught between man-eating headhunters and enemy Japanese, the wounded passengers endured a harrowing hike down the mountainside - a journey into the unknown that would lead them straight into a primitive tribe of superstitious natives who had never before seen a white man - or woman. Drawn from interviews, declassified U.S. Army documents, personal photos and mementos, a survivor's diary, a rescuer's journal, and original film footage, *Lost in Shangri-La* recounts this incredible true-life adventure for the first time. Mitchell Zuckoff reveals how the determined trio - dehydrated, sick, and in pain - traversed the dense jungle to find help; how a brave band of paratroopers risked their own lives to save the survivors; and how a cowboy colonel attempted a previously untested rescue mission to get them out. By trekking into the New Guinea jungle, visiting remote villages, and rediscovering the crash site, Zuckoff also captures the contemporary natives' remembrances of the long-ago day when strange creatures fell from the sky. A riveting work of narrative nonfiction that vividly brings to life an odyssey at times terrifying, enlightening, and comic, *Lost in Shangri-La* is a thrill ride from beginning to end.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a true story, but Mitchell Zuckoff does such an amazing job of telling it that reads much like a novel in that it grabs you right from the beginning, and for me, was darn near impossible to put down. Imagine going on a fly-over sight seeing tour of one of the most beautiful mountain jungle areas in the world to see an almost hidden, untouched valley and then crashing into a mountain and being one of the few survivors trying to find a way out. But getting out or back to the base isn't easy in a place with no roads or paths, just dense rain forest vegetation, a huge tree canopy and tangled vines both above and below you. Imagine being injured with open wounds and having to exist in a place that's perpetually wet and steaming with all sorts of bacteria and fungi and little to keep it out. You don't even want to think about all the bugs and critters that call this place home. Add to that the stories you've heard about spear throwing, cannibalistic natives and you wonder how these people didn't give up right then and there. Having read the description of the book and knowing that it was a rescue and reading pretty much what the outcome was, I was a little concerned that the book might not hold my attention. But, not to worry, as soon as I started reading I was mesmerized by the amount of detail and how gripping the story was. Mitchell Zuckoff notes that no liberties were taken with any of the facts, characters, dialog or chronology which must have made it a double challenge for him to put the diaries, notes, news stories and newsreels and interviews all together in a way made me feel like I was there, personally involved with these people. Besides being such a good read, it added to my knowledge of the history of WWII. With so many battles going on all over the world, New Guinea isn't a place that you read that much about in history books on the war. This book tied a lot of what was going on in that area together for me. There are lots of characters in this book besides just the survivors and Zuckoff gives us the background stories on several of the rescuers and people at the base camp as well as some of the politics of the time. He does it in such a way that it doesn't interrupt the main action, but rather adds to the insight and makes it that much more interesting. This would be a good book for any World War II buff, history lovers, action adventure enthusiasts, and really, anyone who just loves a good read. And because one of the main characters in this story is a woman who enlisted in the WAC, I think it would be equally interesting

for both men and women. Two thumbs up for this great book that left me blurry eyed this morning after "just one more page" kept me up the better part of the night to finish it.

Near the end of WWII, a plane crashed on New Guinea. A colonel based there thought he and another pilot had been the first white men to discover an Eden-like valley filled with towns of natives on the island. As a morale booster, he would send planes filled with soldiers and WACs to the valley, dubbed "Shangri-La" after the nirvana of LOST HORIZONS. One of the planes crashed and only three survive - two soldiers and one WAC. The WAC and one of the soldiers were severely injured. The account then tracks their survival, how they were found and how they were rescued. The author uses diaries, Army records and interviews to reconstruct the events. Mr. Zuckoff provides far more than a simple account, however. He provides some history of the participants. Especially interesting were the Phillipino-American soldiers who volunteered for the rescue mission and the rescue operation itself (don't want to give it away). The most fascinating aspect, though, was the study of the natives who had lived a stone age war-mongering existence completely isolated from the rest of the world, or even the rest of the island and their interactions with the Americans. What makes it so unique is that he has the perspectives from both the American side and the natives' side because he was able to New Guinea last year and interview natives who still remembered the events. Thus he was able to provide their thinking as well as the Americans'. It is frequently amusing to learn the gross misunderstandings of members of the two so different cultures. Even with these gross misunderstandings they were able to peacefully co-exist for seven weeks. The background and the retrospective perspective make this far more than just a plane crash sage. Highly recommended.

In the year 1945, on the island of what was then titled Dutch New Guinea, an Army base full of soldiers & WACS were stationed there waiting for shipment out to the Philippines. While killing time waiting for their next set of orders, they embark on mini day trips soaring the skies above the jungle canopy into the land of towering mountains and magical panoramic terrain. A native village had been sighted and those who enlisted for these special sightseeing flights were dubbed members of The Shangri-La Society. Flying over this village that was hidden deep in the valley gorges was extremely dangerous due to low visibility through cloud enshrouded mountains. Tight hairpin turns in between gorges didn't leave a whole lot for airplane maneuverability. On one such run, the airplane nicknamed the Gremlin Special, took off for a day of fun to only end in tragedy. Clouds came in swiftly blocking visibility, causing a catastrophic plane crash that killed 24 men and women instantly.

Three lucky survivors, although seriously burned, miraculously walked away. Lost in Shangri-La is the amazing story of their many months spent deep in the perilous jungle of New Guinea. Lost and alone, they were in drastic need of food, water, supplies, and more than anything, medical attention. John McCollum, Kenneth Decker, and a beautiful blonde petite WAC named Margaret Hastings were in rough shape. Maggie's legs were horribly burned, Decker's entire backside was worse, and although McCollum was able to walk away uninjured, he lost his twin brother in the flames. Walking to a nearby hillside brought the trio a little hope when the jungle walls parted and a group of frightening natives emerged, bows and arrows and spears at the ready. The story proceeds to detail the many ups and downs and daily obstacles the three survivors must endure, along with their enchantment of living amongst a lost tribe as if they had gone back in time to early civilization to visit primitive cave men. Eventually Army scouts locate them, drop supplies and follow up with a carefully planned daring rescue attempt. A dangerous mission in itself, finding a way to get their people out when no plane, boat, or helicopter can get close enough to the ground to land, puts the military to the test. I found the story of Lost in Shangri-La immensely interesting. For certain the event was a rare unusual accident for those that survived the trauma, yet lived to witness a primitive society previously unknown to man. That aspect of the book I enjoyed. However, I never really felt a great deal of intensity of hazard for what they experienced. I was not riveted or sitting on the edge of my seat. I believe that was the fault of the style of writing Zuckoff used. The execution of the story was at times very dry, almost too factual, and had a carefree attitude in the telling of these events. The writing itself, for me, didn't portray the drama that this event certainly must have had. A major gripe I had was that there was a lot of filler and fluff. Serious editing needed to be performed on this manuscript. The author detailed way too much background history on every single person mentioned in the story. Everyone's childhood, family, school, careers, was just too much information not applicable to the main heart of the story. I think if a lot of that boring data had been taken out, the book would have been more enjoyable. I found myself skipping paragraphs of this mundane minutia, wishing for additional stories of the natives themselves and the interaction between the two parties. It's a good story, but it certainly could have been better with a little more literary drama to give it some zip.

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