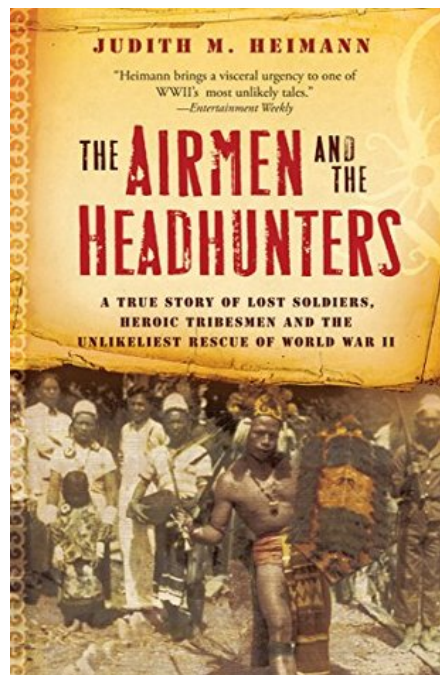




The Airmen and the Headhunters: A True Story of Lost Soldiers, Heroic Tribesmen and the Unlikeliest Rescue of World War II

Judith M. Heimann

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A true story of downed B-24s in Japanese-occupied Borneo and a native tribe that “makes us—like the airmen—rethink our definitions of civilized and savage” (*Entertainment Weekly*).

November 1944: Their B-24 bomber shot down on what should have been an easy mission off the Borneo coast, a scattered crew of Army airmen cut themselves loose from their parachutes—only to be met by loincloth-wearing natives silently materializing out of the mountainous jungle. Would these Dayak tribesmen turn the starving airmen over to the hostile Japanese occupiers? Or would the Dayaks risk vicious reprisals to get the airmen safely home in a desperate game of hide-and-seek? A cinematic survival story featuring a bamboo airstrip built on a rice paddy, a mad British major, and a blowpipe-wielding army that helped destroy one of the last Japanese strongholds, *The Airmen and the Headhunters* is also a gripping tale of wartime heroism unlike any other you have read.

The Airmen and the Headhunters: A True Story of Lost Soldiers, Heroic Tribesmen and the Unlikeliest Rescue of World War II Details

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From Reader Review The Airmen and the Headhunters: A True Story of Lost Soldiers, Heroic Tribesmen and the Unlikeliest Rescue of World War II for online ebook

J.S. says

So maybe I'm a little weird but my all-time favorite novels are stories about castaways on tropical islands, and when I read those books it almost sounds like an adventure. Okay, maybe "adventure" is a bit much, since the castaways faced plenty of hardship, but there's something weirdly alluring about the idea – for me at least. But what if your island wasn't deserted? What if your island was inhabited by cannibals or headhunters or worse?

Well, it turns out some headhunters are actually very nice and generous people. In *The Airmen and the Headhunters: A True Story of Lost Soldiers, Heroic Tribesmen and the Unlikeliest Rescue of World War II* by Judith M. Heimann, we learn of the crew of a B-24 which went down in the jungles of Borneo in November 1944 and spent eight months living with the natives. The Dayaks were headhunters who had converted to Christianity and were chaffing under the harsh treatment of the Japanese occupiers. At great personal risk to himself and his family and village, William Makahanap (the District Officer), first hid the airmen and then later organized a rebellion against the Japanese, and for a brief time headhunting was again practiced – Japanese heads only, though.

If you liked *Unbroken* and *Lost in Shangri-La* you'll probably enjoy this one, too. It's not quite as well-told as those books but it's a great story nonetheless – although I do have a few quibbles. Hopefully Mrs. Heimann's research into the most pertinent aspects of the story is sound, but some of the peripheral information is wanting. She didn't explain clearly what headhunters did with a head, which I think would have been terribly fascinating. And on page 26 she says the downed airmen didn't know "to look for water in the cups of the many pitcher plant blossoms," except it's the leaves that hold liquid, not the tiny flowers. I don't know if natives really drink from them (and she doesn't give us these details) but since the plant is carnivorous I expect you might get a mouthful of dead bugs if you tried (which might not bother you if you're that thirsty). Also, on page 10, she says "The men of the Bomber Barons, like army airmen elsewhere, loved the B-24." But I think it was *Retribution* by Max Hastings that tells of very different emotions fliers had for the B-24 and explained the extensive problems the plane was known for in the Pacific war. The B-24 "Liberator" was much more difficult to fly than the B-17 "Flying Fortress" and with less armor was more vulnerable to damage during battle. Wikipedia says it was "notorious among American aircrews for its tendency to catch fire" and was dangerous in crash landing situations where the fuselage tended to break apart. Anyway, just a few quibbles on my part but it does call some of her research into question.

But if the book sounds interesting to you please don't let my concerns dissuade you from giving it a chance, because it really is a good story.

(Originally posted on 4/28/12 on my blog: bookworm-dad.blogspot.com)

Leonard Romney says

I read all WWII stories and documentaries I can. My older brother, who has the same obsession, loaned this one to me, given him by his daughter. It is the recently researched and written story of several men who survived a forced parachute jump from their plummeting B-24 bomber. They landed in the center of Borneo,

then the uncharted domain of headhunters. The story documents their salvation by the headhunters and the insights gained by living with this highly moral and civilized society. I recommend it highly.

Ang says

Superbly written; full of interesting information, cultural detail and solid reference, this story tells not only the tale of lost airmen but also paints a clear picture of life in the remote highlands and the struggles and sacrifices all make to go toward helping fellow man in the truly troubled times of Japanese Army domination in the region.

Ten years of research and learning are rounded nicely into a fantastic tale of collaboration and survival, by an author that graciously thanks her editors and helpers - I admire. Fantastic maps too by Helen Phillips - greatly appreciated when following the story. My thanks as a reader to Mrs. Heimann for knowing the value of a good map and a great story.

Kristin says

I am writing this as a biased reader because my grandfather is one of the lead figures in this book (Phillip Corrin). I hold this book very dear to my heart because it acted as a window into a huge part of his life that I have always been curious about.

I do think that most readers will also find this book interesting and a very quick read!

Natalie says

Judith Heimann tells an incredible story of American airmen stranded in Borneo's headhunter country during WWII!

The story of these men is also the subject of an PBS documentary series Secrets of the Dead episode titled The Airmen and the Headhunters . You can watch the whole episode on pbs.org . PBS Episode Description:

This spectacular long-lost story of heroism, perseverance, and ingenuity follows the tale of lost WWII soldiers, their unlikely rescue and companionship with the Dayak tribe in Borneo, and their eventual rescue conceived by an eccentric British Major — an airway built out of bamboo in the middle of the jungle.

I haven't watched it yet, but you can bet I will now that I've finished the book!

I for one am glad Mrs. Heimann took the time to research and tell this incredible story.

Judith Heimann, historian and author -PBS

A career diplomat, Judith spent seven years living Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines including two years in Borneo where she learned to speak Malay/Indonesian. She traveled to three continents and interviewed all the surviving Dayaks and airmen in her research for this book.

She conducts over thirty oral histories many requiring multiple interviews, and does a ton of research both on the ground, in libraries, and with personal papers of those involved.

Her thoroughness amazingly does not result in a dry or academic history. Her story is alive with the people, intersection of cultures and outsized events and accomplishments that characterize many WWII stories yet she modestly says in her preface:

"We like to think of war stories from the twentieth century and earlier as straightforward accounts of derring-do, with a familiar cast of heroes and villains. There is even a subcategory of stories about how our brave soldiers managed -or died trying- to make their way home from behind enemy lines. But the circumstances of war can be more complicated. This story happened during World War II -which was truly a world war, drawing into its orbit even such normally isolated people as the headhunting Dayaks . . . This morsel of Borneo's World War II history has never before been told in its entirety. No single person knew more than a fragment or two if it."

Note to future readers: The glossary and notes on sources toward the end of the book are very well done - read that glossary first before you start and you'll be glad you did !

Mikey B. says

This is a marvelous and uplifting narrative of downed American airmen (November 1944) who were saved by Dayak tribesmen in the wilds of the Borneo jungle.

Page 71 (my book) John Nelson

"The first part, when you leave the plane, is like stepping off of a porch. Next you hit the slipstream and then you realize what it is like being in a 150-mile-per-hour windstorm. '...Once he [John Nelson] recovered from the shock of his chute opening, he experienced "a moment of silence and loneliness such as I have never had before or since."

The airmen were fed and protected by the Dayak. There were still many Japanese troops on the island of Borneo – and they were known to torture and kill any American airmen. Without the generosity of the Dayak these American airmen would not have survived the jungle – an environment where they were totally helpless. The airmen came to admire, respect and love the Dayak.

But there is also the gruesomeness of war. The Dayak became ruthless to their Japanese occupiers (the title of "Headhunters" is not there for nothing).

This is a touching story of an inter-cultural meeting between two vastly different peoples. The Dayak thought nothing of aiding these downed airmen who had little to offer in return. The author brings out well the humanism of both of these two groups.

The entire world of the U.S. airmen was turned upside down when they parachuted into Borneo. The experience was something they would never forget and always carry with them.

Page 255

Dan Illerich was asked to speak at the Presbyterian church of Sacramento, which had sponsored the Boy Scout activities he had taken part in as a child. "They wanted to know if my Eagle Scout training had helped, and I said we hadn't known what to do. The food wasn't easy to find and it was not what we knew to eat."

Finally, I said that if it had not been for the Dayaks we would not have survived. I think they were disappointed to hear that, but it's true." Dan, like Jim and all the others I spoke to, had come home with an enormous respect and liking for the Dayaks and a more questioning approach to Americans' implicit assumptions that everything we did was best.

Paul Brandel says

This is one of the best books on WW2 I've read. It's a pleasure to read about an unknown story of survival and a daring rescue. How the tribes of Borneo, though primitive, were quite courageous. Of I can't forget the bravery of our airmen either.

Jarrold says

This was a book I received from my brother and sister in law for Christmas. I enjoyed the tale about the airmen that crashed on Borneo and lived with the natives and fought against the Japanese (beheading most of them!). This is basically a story of one plane crash and the crew's survival once they stumble upon the tribesmen. It's a good addition to any World War 2 library and is a quick read thoroughly documented and researched.

Meri says

Gleaned from countless interviews from surviving airmen, headhunters, and their family members, this is the story of stranded American soldiers who survived in hostile territory during World War II thanks to the help of Dayak tribesmen. The title is not pejorative; the Dayaks were indeed headhunters, though their humanity and compassion was evident in the way that the separated airmen were all taken in, fed, and protected by different tribes. The Dayaks went so far as to hunt Japanese soldiers to defend the airmen, and actually formed a force to help the Allies following their ill treatment by the Japanese. All in all, an uplifting story about how people from completely different worlds can support each other in times of crisis.

Carl Theaker says

Received this as a birthday present and I thought the title sounded hokey, but it is a good read.

The story of a B-24 crew shot down over Borneo while it was occupied by the Japanese and how they hid out in the jungle for several months with the help of the natives who were indeed headhunters.

For various reasons, and at great risk, the natives decided to help the flyers. When you read a tale like this you can't help but think about being in their place, what would you do, how would you handle the jungle?

The descriptions of when the headhunters are in action could easily be used in a Stephan King horror story.

Debra Pawlak says

This was an incredible story of World War II. When an American plane was shot down over Borneo by the Japanese, the stranded soldiers were taken in by a group of headhunters. While the Japanese were searching for the men, they were being sheltered, fed and tended to by 'savages'. In reality, the tribesmen were anything but savage. They were fine people who risked their lives trying to help the airmen. Language barriers and cultural differences aside, these soldiers soon realized that without these headhunters, they didn't have a chance to survive in the unfamiliar jungle. The problem with this book was that the author often went off into tangents, discussing things that had little to do with the story itself. The distractions took away from the real story, which was remarkable in and of itself.

Shelley says

I gave this book a high rating because the story is so great, not so much for the writing. I'm surprised this has not been made into a full length movie. The characters are remarkable, the airman who survive the wilds of Borneo in the 1940's during WW II, and the wonderful natives who took care of them and joined the war. It really is a great, true story.

GoldGato says

World War II. Borneo. Downed Plane. Headhunters.

Yes, I think this is a story for me!

The war in the Pacific was raging as the Yanks were doing the island-by-island conquering when a plane of Army airmen was shot down by the Japanese while flying over the third largest island in the world. Would the men make it out safely? Would the enemy find them? Page-turner.

The first part of the book looks at the soldiers, describing each member of the crew, their role on the plane, and how they fared when the plane crashed (not all good news). These were *young men*, even the officers, so young that some of them didn't even shave on a daily basis. They grew up quickly. Their parachute rides landed them in different spots and they had to look for safety. But they knew they were in the high mountains of Borneo, where the infamous headhunters lived. Would the natives be friendly to the lost men or turn them over to the Japanese?

The Dutch and British colonial overseers had not treated the islanders well, which resulted in the Muslim communities turning to the Japanese invaders as 'liberators' while they helped the enemy hunt down innocent civilians. The description of the various tortures and atrocities committed by the Japanese as a way to keep tight control over their lengthening empire made me a bit queasy. This is where the second section of the book shines, as it shows us the local hero who walked a fine line between helping the Americans while deceiving the Japanese. Once the enemy realized what was happening, the bloodshed started.

The third part centers on the Australian (yea! Aussies!) rescue mission under their charismatic British leader. The action really gets rolling here and it's almost impossible to put the book down. Oh, and there's *another* plane that gets shot down, this one containing American Navy men. What will happen to all of them?

When I started the book, I didn't turn the pages very quickly, as the author had to explain the background leading to the adventures. But the last third turned out to be enthralling, lending an extra "star-rise" to my final rating. Judith Heimann is very careful to relate the facts and one of them is that the Japanese troops in that area continued to fight even after the war had ended. What those young men went through, what those un-selfish natives endured, and what the rescuers had to achieve makes for splendid storytelling.

Book Season = Summer (stay out of the jungle at night)

Ellie Franzmeier says

The first part about the American airmen was kind of meh, but the second part about the native-led guerilla resistance against the Japanese?? Riveting! It was equal parts an exciting spy thriller and an interesting glimpse into a culture I knew nothing about.

Patrick says

Airmen and the Headhunters

If you've watched LOST, then you know that the last place you want your plane to crash is over a remote Pacific island peopled by hostile natives. Well, that's exactly what happened to a crew of American Airmen when their B-24 took a hit during a bombing run on a flotilla of Japanese Navy ships.

The good news was their pilot had the presence of mind to steer the plane away from the coast which was crawling with Japanese. The bad news was the interior Highlands where they ended up where a blank spot on the map - all the Airmen knew is what they'd been told by the Australian soldiers during jungle survival training (which turned out to be useless, since the training was in Papua, which has totally different flora/fauna to Borneo): that the natives in the interior of Borneo were notorious headhunters.

But in real life, just like in LOST, nothing turned out quite as you'd expect. The vicious natives turned out to be friendly, curious, and sympathetic to the Airmen, taking them in to their Longhouses, feeding them, hiding them from the Japanese, and taking care of them for months while the airmen struggled with illness, malnutrition and culture shock.

Heimann does a great job at telling this true story. The writing is simple and direct; she sticks to what facts are known, and avoids speculation. She does a nice job giving a little background on all the personalities involved, including a lot of the Dayak tribesmen. And there's a lot of really fascinating background detail on Dayak culture and ritual, which is just what I wanted for my upcoming trip! The story at times reads almost like a

thriller, with some great tense episodes as the Dayaks shuffle the airmen about while trying to keep them hidden from the Japanese soldiers who come looking for them.

What's really interesting about this story is that it's the Dayak tribesmen who become the heroes. The airmen are often so sick with malaria and other tropical diseases that they can do little other than hide in the jungle. Their main contribution is just the act of arriving in this area and becoming the catalyst for the tribal uprising. Because after the initial cat and mouse game with the Japanese, the Dayak decide enough is enough, and soon enough Japanese heads start to decorate the local longhouses in increasing quantities. So when the British send in special forces led by Tom Harrisson to lead a guerilla war against the remaining Japanese, Harrisson finds that there is already a very healthy guerilla resistance in place, making his job a whole lot easier.

A great, if not well known story, that serves to remind us that WWII really was a global war that reached to some very remote corners of the planet indeed.
