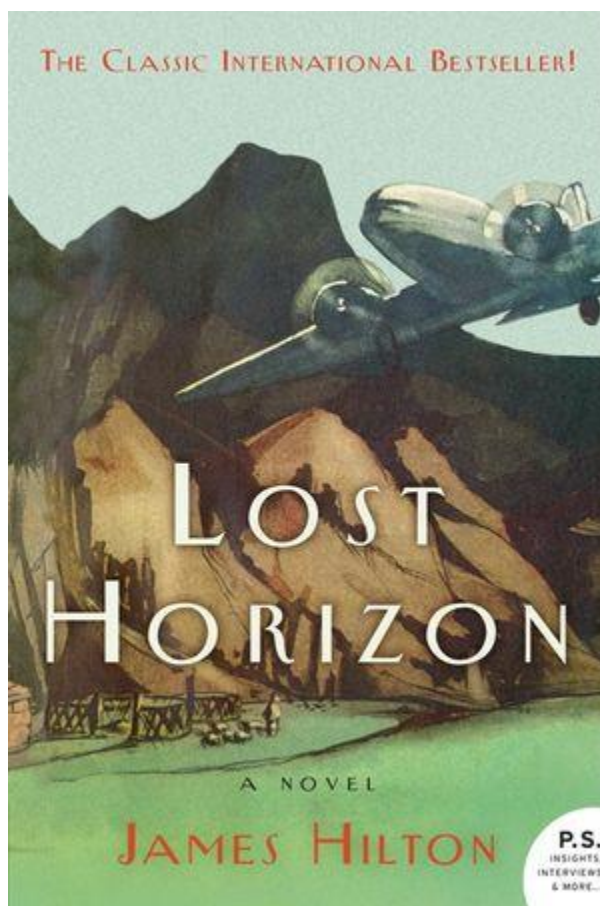


1945 June 25-July 1

Rescue in Shangri-La

James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* introduced the world to the mythical place called Shangri-La. A group of travelers is stranded in the Himalaya Mountains after a plane crash, and they are taken in by residents of a monastery named Shangri-La. The inhabitants of this idyllic land preach and practice moderation in all things. Frank Capra adapted the book into a 1937 movie of the same name.¹



(harpercollins.com)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the name Shangri-La for his mountain retreat in Maryland, but it is better known today by its current name of Camp David. When General Jimmy Doolittle's bombers attacked Japan on April 18, 1942, from the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Hornet*, Roosevelt, in a bit of whimsical misdirection, said the bombers had launched from Shangri-La.²

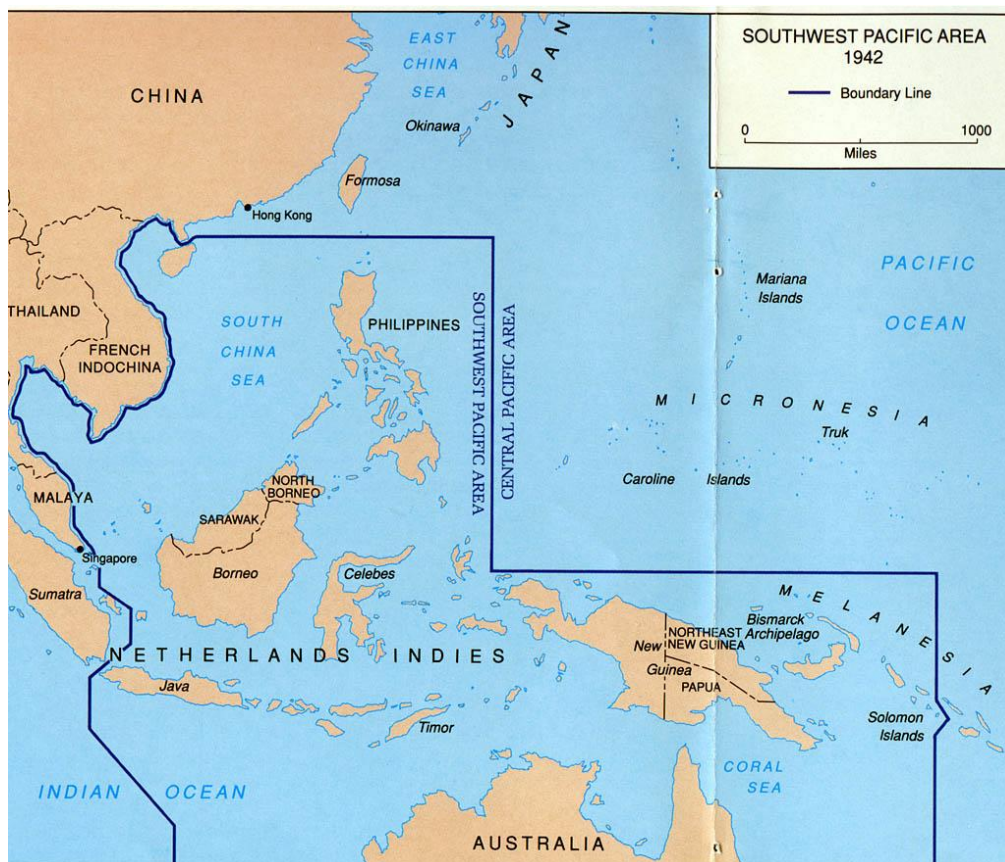
The name Shangri-La came up again during World War II because of one of the most complicated and daring rescue missions ever attempted. One of the participants in this mission was an Army Air Force

pilot named **Captain William G. McKenzie** from La Crosse, Wisconsin. His mother lived at 1639 Prospect Street during the war.³



Captain William G. McKenzie
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25, page 9)

This drama played out on the Southwestern Pacific tropical island of New Guinea. New Guinea is about 1,500 miles long and about 400 miles wide giving it a land area of 317,150 square miles; it the world's second-largest island behind Greenland. Its major geographic features are a continuous mountain range extending from the northwest to the southwest and a large swampy plain in the south. Yearly rainfall ranges from 40 inches to 160 inches in different parts of the island. The original Papuan inhabitants speak about 700 different languages. The Dutch laid claim to the western part of the island until it was annexed to Indonesia in 1969 as Papua and West Papua. The eastern parts of the island were claimed by Germany, Great Britain, and Australia through the years, until it became the independent country of Papua New Guinea in 1975.⁴



(Army Center of Military History)

The Japanese landed on the northeastern coast of [New Guinea](#) in March 1942. Their goal was to advance to the strategic port of Port Moresby on the southern coast and threaten Australia. General Douglas MacArthur commanded a joint force of Australian and American troops that fought the Japanese on this rugged, malaria-infested island until mid-1944 when the Japanese forces were effectively eliminated.⁵ New Guinea then became a rear area in the Southwest Pacific theater of operations. Even though there were still isolated Japanese soldiers in the jungles, the main fighting moved on to the Philippines and later the Netherlands Indies.

In May 1944, Major Myron Grimes of the Army Air Force was on a reconnaissance flight over New Guinea when he happened upon a large, previously-unknown valley in the mountains that he dubbed "Hidden Valley." A week later, while flying with his commander, Colonel Ray T. Elmore, on a mission to find a place to build an airfield, he guided Elmore into the valley for a closer look. Although the valley proved to be unsuitable for an airfield, they were intrigued by the terrain and the villages that held thousands of native people. Elmore's report and descriptions of the valley sparked fanciful stories of a lost civilization high in the mountains. Colonel Elmore made many flights back to the valley to take photographs. Two war reporters, George Lait and Harry E. Patterson, were on one of those flights. It was they who dubbed the valley as "Shangri-La," taking the name from the Hilton novel and the Capra film. The exotic name added accelerant to its growing legend.⁶

On May 13, 1945, Colonel Peter Prossen flew a C-47 transport plane loaded with Army men and women on what was to be a three-hour sightseeing tour of Shangri-La.⁷ Twenty-four people were on board: nine Army officers, nine members of the Women's Army Corps, and six enlisted men.⁸



C-47A Skytrain
(Air Mobility Command Museum)

The plane crashed against the side of a mountain adjacent to the valley, killing 21 Army personnel, including eight members of the Women's Army Corps. The only survivors were 30-year-old WAC [Corporal Margaret Hastings](#) of Owego, New York; Lt. John B. McCollom of Trenton, Missouri; and Sgt. Kenneth W. Decker of Kelso, Washington. McCollom's twin brother, Lt. Robert McCollom, was one of those killed. The wreckage and the three survivors were spotted by a search plane three days later. Eight Filipino paratroopers and a medical assistant parachuted in to contact the survivors. Two of the paratroopers made it to the site within an hour and a half; the others had to hike three days to get there. Food and medical supplies were parachuted in, as well as a walkie-talkie. On May 26, planes dropped twenty crosses and a Star of David before a funeral service was conducted by clergy in a circling aircraft.⁹

Now that the survivors had been found, the next problem was how to get them out of an inaccessible mountain valley in inhospitable terrain.

Army Air Force officers devised a plan to clear a landing area in the valley big enough to accommodate [a glider](#), and then use a C-47 with a "grab-line" to pull the glider out of the valley.¹⁰ It was a complicated and risky maneuver that would require a lot of preparation, skillful flying, and precision execution.



Waco glider
(National Air and Space Museum)

Lt. Henry Palmer volunteered to pilot a glider into the valley. Because gliders have no engines, another plane would have to snag it and pull it out of the valley. Major William J. Samuels of Decatur, Illinois, a former United Airlines pilot, volunteered to pilot the C-47 that would snatch the glider from the valley and tow it back to the airfield at Hollandia. Captain William G. McKenzie of La Crosse, Wisconsin, was Samuels' copilot.¹¹ Both Samuels and McKenzie were members of the 374th Troop Carrier Group of the 332nd Troop Carrier Wing.¹²

William G. McKenzie was born in La Crosse on February 27, 1917. His parents were John A. and Grace (Peterman) McKenzie.¹³ McKenzie had entered the Army Air Force on May 26, 1942. He received a lieutenant's commission in August 1943 and was sent overseas in October 1943.¹⁴

McKenzie flew transport planes in Australia, New Guinea, Hollandia, and Manilla. Once over Manilla, anti-aircraft fire "blew a 'few holes in his plane'" before he returned safely to his base. He was promoted to captain in May 1945. By the end of the war, McKenzie had racked up 2,500 hours of combat flying.¹⁵

Samuels and McKenzie flew over the valley to select an area suitable for a glider landing strip. "'What do you think, Mac?' Samuels asked. 'Well, Bill, we'll never know 'til we try,' McKenzie replied."¹⁶

While Samuels and McKenzie practiced the mission on the island of Biak, the Filipino paratroopers and the three survivors made their way down the mountain and hacked through the jungle for three days to reach the valley floor. There they set up camp to await their rescue. About 100 natives helped the group carry supplies to their camp.¹⁷ Planes from Hollandia, 150 miles away, flew over the camp daily with

food and rescue equipment. Hastings was noted as "a sharp trader" who was able to exchange seashells with the natives for pigs.¹⁸

The rehearsals for the mission were almost as perilous as the rescue itself. Special equipment had to be brought in from Manila. The first and second "snatch" cables broke on practice runs, and two men ended up in the hospital. The third cable held and was used in the mission.¹⁹

Besides mechanical failures and lack of equipment delaying the rescue, the mission was also imperiled by warfare between tribes in the valley. Captain Cecil Walters, commander of the rescue party on the ground, reported that unfriendly natives from the other side of the valley had attacked the tribe near their encampment. He reported seeing lots of dead natives after the fighting.²⁰

In addition to Major Samuels and Captain McKenzie, there were other pilots involved in the rescue. Captain Charles J. Scholl of Seattle and Captain George Allen of Salem, Oregon, towed the glider to the valley. Lt. Henry E. Palmer of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was the glider pilot.²¹

On June 27, 1945, forty-six days after the plane crash, Hastings, McCollom, and Decker, as well as part of their rescue party, were evacuated from the valley by the C-47 piloted by Major Samuels and Captain McKenzie.²² Their C-47 roared in just 20 feet off the ground, and it snatched the glider's cable that had been elevated by poles. The thinner air at that elevation made controlling the aircraft a tricky proposition. Even so, Captain McKenzie modestly said later, "It wasn't much. Just routine."²³

Once the plane and glider were near the airfield at Hollandia, the glider disconnected its tow ropes so it could land on its own.²⁴ A new glider landed in the valley the next day to take out more of the rescue party in the same fashion. Captain McKenzie was also part of that mission, which brought out four Filipino paratroopers and Dutch cameraman Alexander Cann.²⁵ The third and final group of four was taken out on July 1.²⁶

Alexander Cann had parachuted into the camp, and he [filmed the rescue](#) of the first group. His video shows the plane, piloted by Samuels and McKenzie, snagging the glider and pulling it airborne.

McKenzie said he did not get a chance to talk to any of the people he rescued, but he did keep the names of the men who took part in the rescue mission.²⁷

Hastings, McCollom, and Decker landed in California on July 9. Margaret Hastings took the opportunity to correct some previous news reports by stating that the natives had not offered to make her queen of the tribe, and she had also not formed any "romantic attachments" with the two male survivors.²⁸ She did come back with a bundle of arrows given to her by the natives.²⁹

[Mitchell Zuckoff's book](#), *Lost in Shangri-La*, gives a detailed account of this story and the later lives of those involved, but the book has only a few brief mentions of Captain William McKenzie.

McKenzie married Mervonne L. Gilbert in Onalaska on April 20, 1946. They had a son and a daughter. He retired from the United States Air Force as a Lt. Colonel. McKenzie became a mechanical engineer and worked for Walker Manufacturing Co. and Racine Hydraulics before retiring in 1982 from Erie Manufacturing. He died on March 21, 1991, in Racine, Wisconsin, at the age of 74. He was buried in West Lawn Memorial Park in Racine.³⁰

William McKenzie's obituary simply stated that he "had served during WW II in the Pacific Theater of War."³¹ As with nearly all veterans' obituaries, there is so much more to the story. William McKenzie had the unique distinction of being a key player in "the most incredible rescue mission of World War II" at a real place called Shangri-La.

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Jeff Rand
Adult Services Librarian
La Crosse Public Library
jrand@lacrosselibrary.org

Sources & Notes:

¹ James Schellenberg, "Challenging Destiny: Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews," 2004 February 17, <https://www.challengingdestiny.com/reviews/losth.htm>.

² Don McCombs and Fred L. Worth, *World War II Super Facts* (New York: Warner Communications, 1983), 536. An aircraft carrier named the *U.S.S. Shangri-La* was launched in 1944. Ironically, there was a bar named The Shangri-La Tavern, operated by Don Powers and Howard Marshall, at 1542 Rose Street in La Crosse at the same time the rescue in New Guinea's Shangri-La was taking place (*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 28, page 5).

³ "McKenzie Pilots Special Plane For Rescuing Crash Survivors," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 20, page 1.

⁴ "New Guinea," *Britannica*, accessed 2020 July 5, <https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Guinea>.

⁵ Louis L. Snyder, *Louis L. Snyder's Historical Guide to World War II* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 476-477.

⁶ Mitchell Zuckoff, *Lost in Shangri-La: A True Story of Survival, Adventure, and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 19-30.

⁷ Zuckoff, 32.

⁸ Zuckoff, 43.

⁹ "Plan Rescue of 3 Survivors Of Plane Crash Which Killed 21," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 8, page 1. This article incorrectly shows "Becker" instead of "Decker" as the name of one of the survivors. It also incorrectly states that seven Women's Army Corps personnel were killed in the crash. The total number killed varies from 20 to 21 in various newspaper articles written at the time. Zuckoff (page 297) states that the official number killed was 21; Zuckoff (page 35) puts the number of Women's Army Corps personnel killed at eight. The 1945 June 8 article also incorrectly states that the mountainside crash site was 17,000 feet above sea level. According to Zuckoff (page 223), the tallest mountain in New Guinea is 15,000 feet.

¹⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 8.

¹¹ Zuckoff, 262-265.

¹² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 20.

¹³ "William G. McKenzie," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1991 March 21, page A-5.

¹⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 20.

¹⁵ "Calls Glider Rescue Of Wac, 2 Soldiers In Wilds Of New Guinea 'Just Routine' Activity," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 November 25, page 9.

¹⁶ Zuckoff, 265.

¹⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 20.

¹⁸ "Wac A Sharp Trader With Native Tribe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 23, page 6.

¹⁹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25.

²⁰ "Civil Strife In Shangri-La Complicates Rescue of Wac, 14 Escorts in Guinea," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 26, page 1.

²¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25.

²² "Shangri-La Natives Weep As 'Big Bird' Snatches Their Guests," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 1, page 2.

²³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25.

²⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 1.

²⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25.

²⁶ Zuckoff, 298.

²⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 November 25.

²⁸ "Three Survivors Of New Guinea Plane Crash Reach U.S.," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 9, page 3.

²⁹ "Wac Corp. Margaret Hastings," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 10, page 1.

³⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1991 March 21.

³¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1991 March 21.