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Lost Among Cannibals

When a US military plane crashed in a remote valley, the survivors discovered that they now faced a new and grislier form of mortal danger: cannibals—spear-toting primitives who had been so completely cut off from civilization that they had never seen white men. Although a search plane located the survivors, they were so isolated that the only way to save them was via a dramatic, never-before-tried rescue operation. But would the rescue team even have enough time to reach them...?

Passengers peered out the windows of the airplane, hoping to catch a glimpse of the cannibals reputed to occupy the valley below.

It was around 3:00 in the afternoon of May 13, 1945. A group of 24 soldiers and officers flew in a large C-47 transport plane named *The Gremlin Special* on a trip to visit the valley of Shangri-La. This was an isolated region in New Guinea ringed by hills and only recently discovered during a military exploratory expedition through the mountains.

The pilot, Colonel Peter Prossen, had just given control of the plane to the relatively-inexperienced co-pilot Major George Nicholson, so Prossen could mingle with the staff and passengers. It would be Prossen's first time viewing Shangri-La. Conversation centered on the primitive tribes whose world had remained unchanged for millennia.

The trip to Shangri-La was particularly dangerous for several reasons. First, the plane had to maneuver itself between two gigantic mountain peaks. Second, in order to get a good look at the natives, the plane had to drop to merely 100 feet above the valley floor.



Co-pilot Major George Nicholson, who piloted *The Gremlin Special* on its fateful last flight.



Huts in the valley of Shangri-La.

Nearly an hour after taking off, *The Gremlin Special* descended to give its passengers a good look. From their vantage point in the craft, they saw a small village made up of huts surrounded by carefully worked fields. Inexplicably, there were no humans around.

Lieutenant John McCollom was among those enjoying the spectacle. When he turned for a second to the cabin, though, he was shocked. The pilot's view through the front window was almost completely blocked by thick clouds. Peeking through the clouds, he could clearly see a carpet of dark green. The plane was flying straight into a tall hill!

McCollom, himself an experienced pilot, immediately realized the danger and shouted into the cabin, "Pull up! Let's get out of here!"

Nicholson did not need anyone to tell him what to do. He was already pulling back the throttle to create more lift and avoid crashing into the mountainside.

Most of the passengers were viewing the village below and failed to recognize the immediate danger. Their pilot, Colonel Prossen, chatted with them calmly as he stood between the two rows of seats. Even if he had been aware of the danger, there was no time to make it back to his seat.

From the pilot's cabin, the mountain loomed larger and larger and larger...

For a moment, *The Gremlin Special* brushed against the treetops and then... BOOM!



A village leader in Shangri-La climbs up a guard tower.

The air was filled with the deafening noise of metal crashing into shattering trees. The plane's wings and the tail were ripped off. Then the walls of the plane's fuselage imploded.

As the wrecked aircraft came to a halt, sparks flew all over, igniting the fuel. Flames shot up from the debris and small explosions echoed through the valley.

To this day, it is still not clear exactly what happened. Perhaps the inexperienced Nicholson became disoriented while flying among the tall mountains. Or maybe a strong gust suddenly dropped the plane toward the ground.

Whatever the case, the tragedy of *The Gremlin Special* was just beginning.

A Land out of Time Discovered

One year earlier, in May 1944, Colonel Ray Elsmore, commander of the US Army Air Transport forces for the entire Southwest Pacific, flew a C-60 transport airplane on an exploratory expedition over the mountains that run the entire length of the island of New Guinea, located approximately 1,500 miles from Australia.

New Guinea was one of the islands where the Allies fought the Japanese during the island-hopping campaign to reclaim the Pacific in the latter part of World War II. In April 1944, General Douglas MacArthur's troops invaded New Guinea and set up a massive base on its northern shore, near the



The stunning scenery in the valley of Shangri-La.

port city of Hollandia. The Japanese troops in New Guinea who survived the Allied invasion retreated into the jungles and hid among the hills.

The purpose of Colonel Elsmore's flight that day was to locate a flat area suitable for an airstrip. This would permit planes to land there on their way between Hollandia—which was at the far eastern end of the island—and Merauke, an Allied base on the far southern shore of the island.

While flying through the mountains, Elsmore suddenly spotted an amazing scene



Pilot Colonel Peter Prossen was not at the controls during the sweep through the valley.