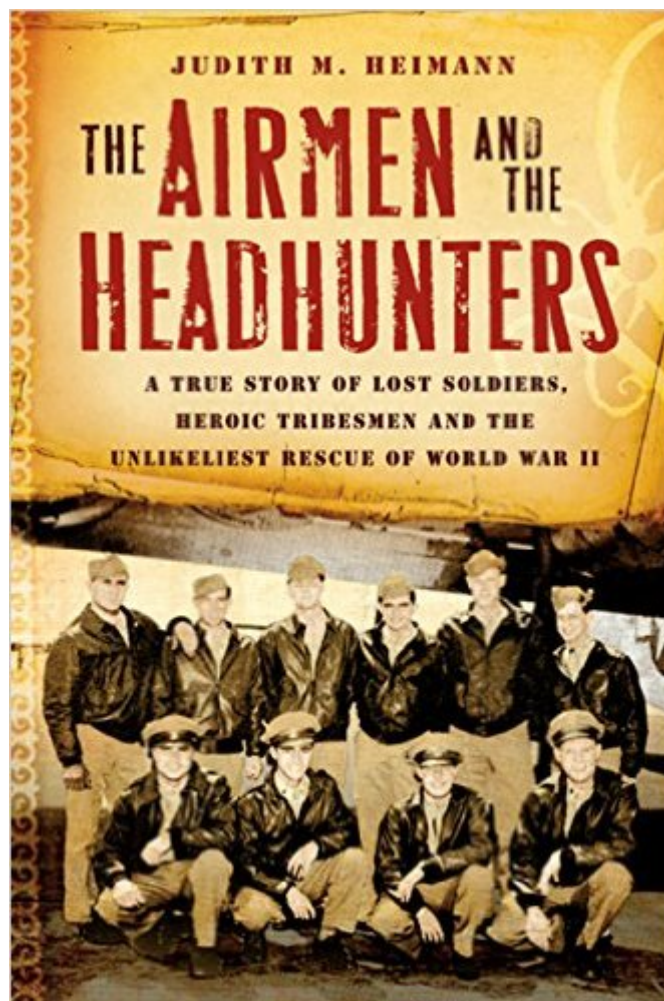


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# The Airmen And The Headhunters: A True Story Of Lost Soldiers, Heroic Tribesmen And The Unlikeliest Rescue Of World War II



## Synopsis

November 1944: Army airmen set out in a B-24 bomber on what should have been an easy mission off the Borneo coast. Instead they found themselves unexpectedly facing a Japanese fleet "and were shot down. When they cut themselves loose from their parachutes, they were scattered across the island's mountainous interior. Then a group of loincloth-wearing natives silently materialized out of the 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? The tribal leaders' unprecedented decision led to a desperate game of hide-and-seek, and, ultimately, the return of a long-renounced ritual: head-hunting. A cinematic survival story that features 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 a gripping, you-are-there journey into the remote world and forgotten heroism of the Dayaks.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a truly gripping tale (Hollywood should snap it up!) and only a writer with Judith Heimann's unique mix of experience and determination could have uncovered it. The native eyewitnesses were fast disappearing when Heimann travelled (twice) to Borneo where, reviving her knowledge of Malay/Indonesian from seven years living in the area, she tracked down and interviewed in their homes more than a dozen Dayak tribespeople directly involved. She also found and interviewed five of the eleven American airmen involved (of whom only one is still alive today) and collected papers, photos and diaries from the widows of still others. The book tells the story of American airmen whose

two Liberator bomber planes -- one Army, one Navy -- were shot up in the last year of WW II over the jungles of Borneo, which was totally uncharted territory about which the airmen knew nothing except that the natives had been famous as headhunters. Although the airmen could not have expected it, the local Dayak tribespeople were willing to befriend them. The Yanks would surely have starved without the Dayaks' food and shelter, humble and unfamiliar though it was. Even so, the Yanks' survival borders on the miraculous. They suffered from numerous tropical ailments for which their "survival kit" proved woefully inadequate. Their clothes and boots rotted away and they walked barefoot many miles up and down steep, wet, leech-filled mountainsides during their seven-month stay in this strange world. Heimann fleshes out the details she recovered into a narrative with descriptive passages that let you share in the experience. Why did the Dayaks risk the wrath of their pitiless Japanese occupiers to protect these American strangers? It seems that this was at least in part thanks to the good will earned by North American Christian missionaries who had behaved with tact and courtesy towards the Dayaks from the 1930s up till 1942 when the Japanese took them away and murdered them, their wives and their children. In addition, for those Dayaks who had not converted to the new faith or who longed for the thrill of the headhunting raids that had been central to the old faith, the opportunity to take heads again -- even though only Japanese ones -- had strong appeal. Heimann relates her many-sided tale with great clarity, in spite of a dauntingly vast and various cast of characters that includes not only the airmen and the westernized Indonesians from other islands who were serving in Borneo as district officers and acting pastors, but also brave Dayak men and women, both Christianized and pagan (whose way of life was entirely unknown to this reader), as well as a handful of Chinese shopkeepers, daring Aussie special operations paratroops and pilots and a mad British Major! Furthermore, for once, there are decent maps that help you follow the plot, thanks to months Heimann spent with a mapmaker entering the names and river courses of this poorly charted region. Altogether an exciting and surprisingly upbeat story from a world few of us know anything about!

Reviewed by Jan Warren  
The Airmen and the Headhunters is a true account of eleven young American crewmembers of a B-24 bomber, Lucky Strike, shot down over an unexplored mountainous region in Northern Borneo during WWII. It is also a touching story of heroism by not only the airmen, but of those who risked everything to protect and care for them during the six harrowing months before the survivor's liberation by Australian special forces. Because of the torturous cruelty of Borneo's Japanese invaders and their determination to find and kill the airmen and any who aided them, the Lun Dayeh tribe was forced to return to the gruesome ritual of

headhunting against their Japanese enemies. As I read the airmen's vivid accounts of trudging exhausted, starving and sick through the dense Borneo jungle with their feet and legs covered in leeches and bug bites, I felt their hopelessness and pain. The deeper I delved into the story of the unimaginable hardships of these brave men and those of Borneo's jungle inhabitants, I found myself giving thanks for even the simple comforts I usually take for granted, like clean running water and a comfortable bed. If you are looking for a true story that will stir your emotions, then I can recommend *The Airmen and the Headhunters*. Heartfelt gratefulness may rise within you, as it did me in honor of all of the heroes who suffer for the cause of freedom past and present. The author, Judith M. Heimann spent ten years compiling the detailed information before writing this book. Included are maps of the places in Borneo mentioned within the story, photos, acknowledgements, a detailed glossary and index, all of which are impressive. I would rate this non-fiction book PG-13 not only because of the intense subject matter but for the occasional "colorful" vocabulary used by those who lived through it. *Armchair Interviews* says: Yet another stirring story of WWII events and the people who survive them.

Author Judith Heimann provided intriguing glimpses of this unusual story in her previous work on Tom Harrison, a Britisher living in Borneo in World War II who, despite being "The Most Offending Soul Alive", managed to organize Dayak tribesmen (an indigenous, loosely affiliated group of tribal groups) in Borneo armed with deadly blow-pipes into a small but effective army against the Japanese, eventually being credited with killing over 1,500 of the enemy. Her new book, *"The Airmen and the Headhunters"*, is an outgrowth of her book on Tom Harrison (who coincidentally was a neighbor of hers many years ago in Borneo - he died in 1976). It is a well-written and engaging account of 11 Yankee airman who survive a crash-landing of their B-24 "Liberator" bomber in November 1944 only to find themselves surrounded by Dayak tribesmen who agree to help them escape from and evade capture by the Japanese, an adventure which takes a harrowing six months. The result is an unexpected gem of a story of survival in which the airmen (untrained and unable to survive in the wilds of Borneo) are saved by a peoples who had nothing to gain and everything to lose (through the vengeance and retribution of the Japanese) by helping them out.

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