

**LOST**  
IN THE PACIFIC, 1942

**NOT A DROP  
TO DRINK**

**TOD OLSON**

Scholastic Inc.

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*For Richard and Estie,  
who made sure I did not get lost*

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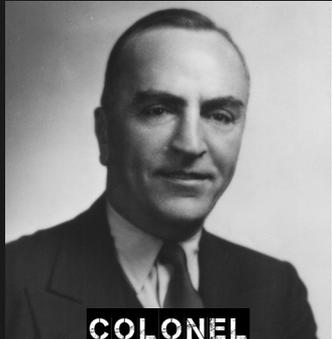
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## THE CASTAWAYS



**COLONEL  
EDDIE RICKENBACKER**

**The VIP**  
World-famous pilot, war hero,  
and race car driver.



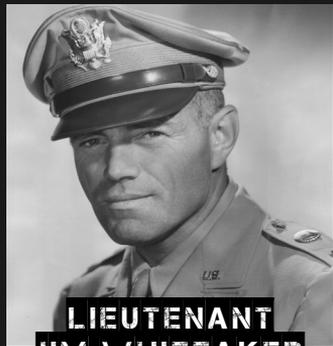
**COLONEL  
HANS ADAMSON**

**The VIP's escort**  
Rickenbacker's old friend,  
and a journalist in civilian life.



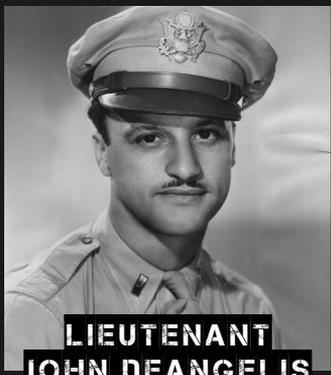
**CAPTAIN  
BILL CHERRY**

**The Pilot**  
Raised hogs on a  
ranch in Texas.



**LIEUTENANT  
JIM WHITTAKER**

**The Copilot**  
Ran a construction  
business in California.



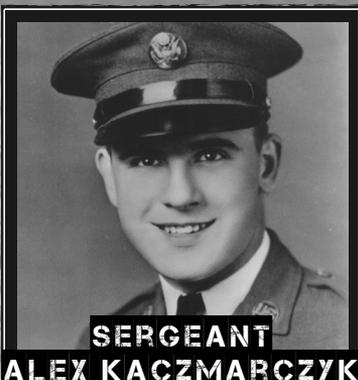
**LIEUTENANT  
JOHN DEANGELIS**

**The Navigator**  
Drove a truck in Pennsylvania  
and loved to dance.



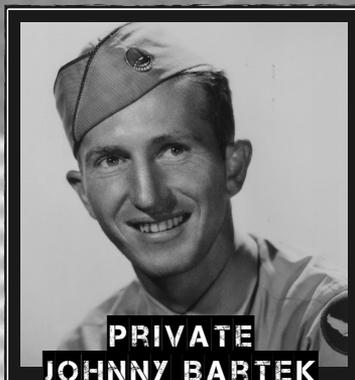
**SERGEANT  
JAMES REYNOLDS**

**The Radioman**  
Grew up on a ranch  
in California.



**SERGEANT  
ALEX KACZMARCZYK**

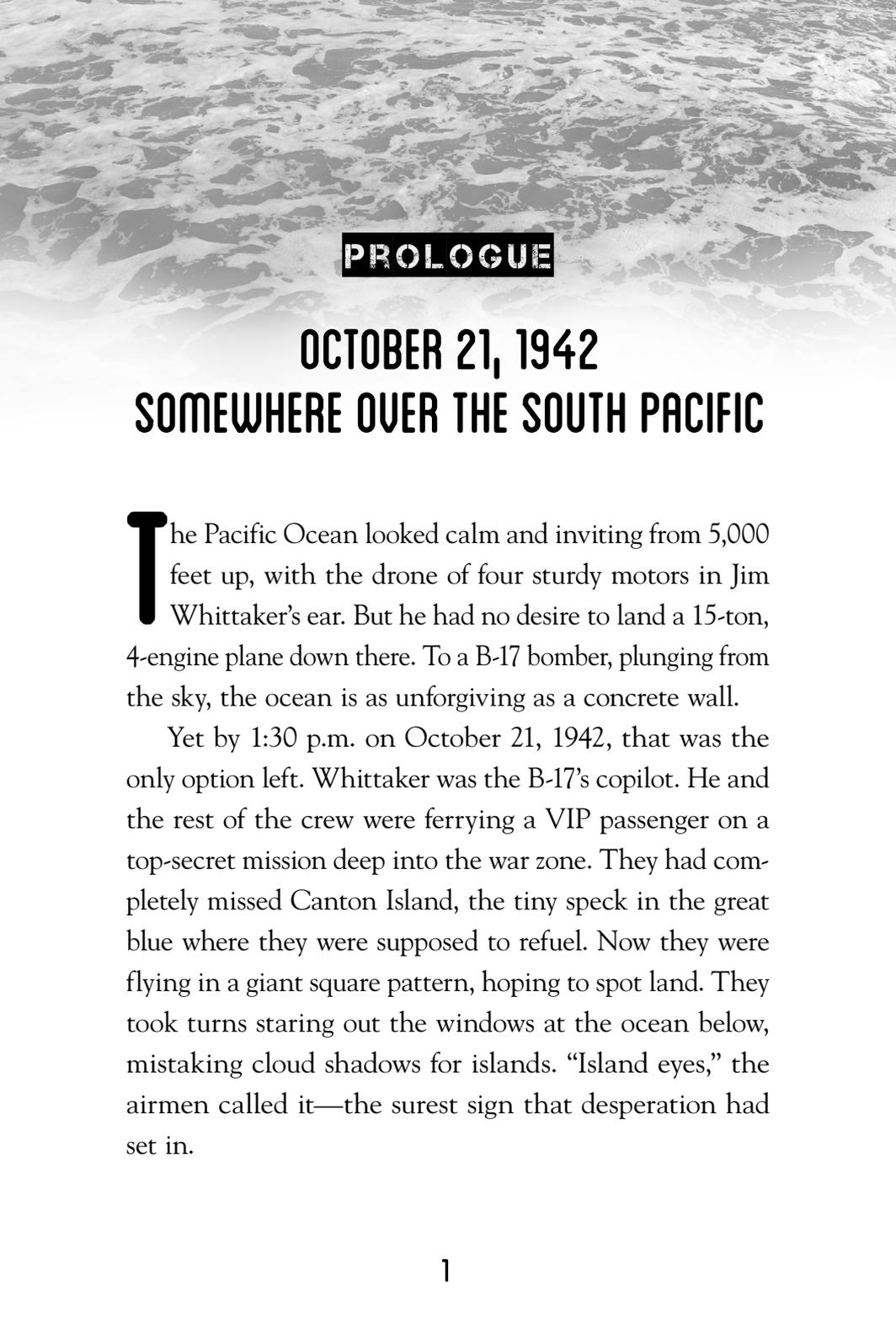
**The Engineer**  
Loved music and worked in a  
gas station in Connecticut.



**PRIVATE  
JOHNNY BARTEK**

**The Other Engineer**  
Dropped out of high school and  
wanted to be a photographer.





## PROLOGUE

# OCTOBER 21, 1942 SOMEWHERE OVER THE SOUTH PACIFIC

**T**he Pacific Ocean looked calm and inviting from 5,000 feet up, with the drone of four sturdy motors in Jim Whittaker's ear. But he had no desire to land a 15-ton, 4-engine plane down there. To a B-17 bomber, plunging from the sky, the ocean is as unforgiving as a concrete wall.

Yet by 1:30 p.m. on October 21, 1942, that was the only option left. Whittaker was the B-17's copilot. He and the rest of the crew were ferrying a VIP passenger on a top-secret mission deep into the war zone. They had completely missed Canton Island, the tiny speck in the great blue where they were supposed to refuel. Now they were flying in a giant square pattern, hoping to spot land. They took turns staring out the windows at the ocean below, mistaking cloud shadows for islands. "Island eyes," the airmen called it—the surest sign that desperation had set in.



The Plane: A 15-ton, 4-engine B-17.

The fact was they were lost, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific. They were nearly out of fuel, and the only landing strip they had was a vast tarmac of water.

No one knew exactly how they had lost their way. Maybe the tailwinds were stronger than the weathermen had predicted. Maybe the compass had taken a hit when they nearly crashed taking off in Hawaii. Either way, the navigator had finally given up trying to figure out where they were. He was a young guy named John DeAngelis who had gotten married just two days before they were called away. Now he was probably wondering if he would ever see his wife again.

“Do you fellows mind if I pray?” he shouted to the crew over the roar of the engines.

Pray? Whittaker thought. How about keeping your mind on the task at hand: surviving an impact with the Pacific Ocean.

Whittaker decided not to say a word. DeAngelis could swan dive into the ocean and it wouldn't matter. Their lives were in Bill Cherry's hands now—the twenty-seven-year-old pilot from Texas who sat next to Whittaker with the controls in his hands.

Cherry and Whittaker began to talk strategy. It had been ten and a half months since the United States was drawn into World War II. In that time, plenty of bomber crews had ditched in the Pacific. Not one, as far as they could remember, had escaped without casualties.

If the surface of the ocean were flat, it would be one thing. But today, the water rose and fell in treacherous swells. If you came in across the current you would have to time it exactly right. Scrape the crest of a swell and the nose would dip, sending the plane plummeting to the depths. Avoid one crest and you could ram the plane into the next one, shattering the entire craft into pieces in an instant.

There was only one way to do it, Whittaker and Cherry agreed. Come in parallel to the swells and set the plane down in a trough. That, of course, was easier said than done. The troughs were a moving target, and the wind blew across your flight path, making it hard to hold a line.

Hitting a landing spot just right would still take perfect timing, expert piloting skills, and a whole lot of luck.

While Cherry and Whittaker worked out a strategy, their top secret passenger took charge of the crew behind them. And if luck really had anything to do with their fate, maybe he would tip the scales in their favor. He wasn't some desk-bound politician or stuffy diplomat. The VIP on board was none other than Eddie Rickenbacker.

For anyone who cared about flying—and for most everyone else—that was all the introduction he needed. Aside from Charles Lindbergh, he was the world's most famous pilot. He hadn't flown in combat since 1918, when World War I ended. But to millions of Americans, his heroics against the Germans were unforgettable. He had shot down more enemy aircraft than any other American pilot.

Now Rickenbacker was a businessman—president of Eastern Air Lines. But he had a well-known reputation for surviving close scrapes. He had first become famous as an auto racer, driving primitive cars at breakneck speeds. As a fighter pilot, he nearly had his plane shredded by German bullets several times. Then, in the spring of 1941, he had been a passenger on one of his own airliners when it crashed in a Georgia forest. Trapped in the wreckage, he managed to direct rescue efforts with broken ribs, a



The Ace: Rickenbacker in France near the end of World War I.

shattered elbow, a fractured skull, and an eyeball torn loose from its socket. He was in such bad shape that the famous radio commentator Walter Winchell reported his death on the air. When Rickenbacker heard it from his hospital bed, he picked up a water pitcher and threw it at the radio.

A year and a half later, Rickenbacker still looked frail from the crash and walked with a cane. But now, with another crash looming, he seemed determined to survive one more time. Rickenbacker grabbed the young sergeant, Alex Kaczmarczyk, and pried open the bottom hatch in the B-17's tail. Then he and Kaczmarczyk lightened the plane's load to save fuel and lessen the impact when they went down. Out went the cots, tool kit, blankets, empty thermos bottles, and luggage. Sacks full of high-priority mail sailed into the wind, soon to be a soggy, unreadable mess of good wishes that would never make it to the soldiers on the front lines.

Cherry announced he was starting his descent, and the water outside Whittaker's window looked more distinct by the second. Back in the radio compartment, the men piled essential provisions by the hatch: a few bottles filled with water and coffee; emergency rations in a small metal box; a two-man raft rolled into a tight package. Once they landed, they might have as little as thirty seconds to get

out before the plane went under—assuming they were still alive.

The men stacked mattresses in position, padding the aft, or rear, side of the walls that separated the compartments of the plane. They all took their positions. Three men—Kaczmarczyk, DeAngelis, and Rickenbacker’s military escort, Colonel Hans Adamson—lay on the floor, braced against the mattresses. Rickenbacker sat near them, belted into a seat near a window. Johnny Bartek, the engineer, sat just behind the cockpit. The plane had two inflatable rafts packed into compartments on the outside of the nose. It would be Bartek’s job to release them just after they ditched. James Reynolds, the radio operator who went by Jim, sat at his desk in the center of the plane. He tapped out SOS after SOS, hoping that someone out there would register their location before they hit the water. There was nothing but silence from the other end.

“How much longer?” someone asked.

“Not yet,” Rickenbacker answered, peering out the window.

In the cockpit, the altimeter showed they were 500 feet above the sea. Cherry cut two of the engines to save fuel. Whittaker grabbed cushions from the seats behind them and stuffed them under their safety harnesses.

“It’s sure been swell knowing you, Bill,” he said, offering his hand.

Cherry gripped his copilot’s hand for a second, and then said in his Texas drawl, “You’re going to know me a long time yet, Jim.”

In the back, someone asked again, “How much longer?”

“Fifty feet!” said Rickenbacker. Then, right away, “Thirty feet!”

Cherry was staring into the waves, trying to pick a trough to aim for. The swells looked towering—twice the height of a man.

“Twenty feet!”

They were coming in at 90 miles an hour, but to Whittaker the plane seemed strangely still—the roar of the engines muffled, the whoosh of the wind against the fuselage fainter than it should have been. And then there was the radio, whining its lonely signal into the sky.

“Ten feet!”

Bartek reached above them and loosened a set of bolts. The wind snatched the door of the cockpit escape hatch and sent it hurtling to the sea. A rush of air howled through the opening.

“Cut it!” yelled Cherry.

Whittaker pulled a switch, and all electrical power on the plane went dead. Cherry pulled back hard on

the wheel, lifting the nose and ramming the tail into the water.

Back in the radio compartment, the noise was deafening. Pieces of equipment that had been bolted down a moment ago flew through the cabin like shrapnel from a bomb.

And then the belly of the plane hit the water.

Whittaker exploded forward, and the safety belt tried to slice him in half. Pressure filled his head. His eyes strained against their sockets. He couldn't see a thing. He began to lose consciousness.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the pressure released. The belt went slack against his chest. His vision returned.

They had gone from 90 miles an hour to a dead stop in less than 50 feet. He couldn't be sure who had survived and who had not. The Pacific Ocean was pouring fast into the plane. And no one in the big, broad world knew where they were.