

CHAPTER 2

Luckiest Men in the Pacific

During a surprise encounter with a Flying Fortress, Superior Airman Sugita Shoichi pressed his attack so close into the underside of the great bomber that he collided with it. Two extraordinary tales of survival followed.

Beyond any doubt the two luckiest airmen in the Pacific on 1 December 1942 were Fortress tail gunner Corporal Joseph Hartman and Zero pilot Superior Airman Sugita Shoichi. Extreme misadventure resulted in these two becoming miracle survivors of a chance mid-air collision. Hartman subsequently spent 67 days in tropical isolation before he returned to Guadalcanal. During his recovery he painstakingly documented the incident, from which we know precisely what happened on that fateful day. Although Hartman's tail gunner position permitted only a rear view, he could hear his comrades' radio chatter through his headphones. For nine of the ten Fortress crew however, it was their final journey. Aside from details in the relevant unit log, the Japanese perspective is provided via the memoirs of the No. 204 *Ku buntaicho*, Lieutenant Kofukuda Mitsugu.

The Fortress in which Hartman flew was named *Omar Khayyam* in honour of the Persian philosopher born in 1048 AD. Its arrival in theatre was somewhat errant. First assigned to Lieutenant Edwin McAnelly and crew, they launched from Hamilton Field for a Pacific crossing to Australia on 5 September 1942. However, they were instead assigned at Plaine des Gaiacs airfield in New Caledonia to serve with the 11th Bombardment Group. After a furtive conference among themselves, and having anticipated female company in Australia, the crew snuck a take-off the next day on a pretext of checking their compass. They flew directly to Eagle Farm airfield in Brisbane instead, thence the next day to Charters Towers, where *Omar Khayyam's* crew was welcomed by the 43rd BG, Fifth Air Force, which was their original assigned unit.

A subsequent series of robust telegraphic messages from New Caledonia soon followed them, however, and they were ordered back. Upon return to the French outpost, *Omar Khayyam* was reassigned to the 431st BS and flown onwards to Guadalcanal. For the Americans there in late 1942 it was still a dark time on the island, where the Japanese had yet to be dislodged. Several major Japanese pushes had threatened Henderson Field itself, and a major US ground campaign was in the making to eliminate Japanese Army units holed up in the hills behind the field. Complemented by night-time artillery and aircraft bombardments, life for Americans based on "The 'Canal" was hard. Whilst most Fortress missions from there were bombing ones, they also conducted aerial supply drops to US troops. Solo shipping searches and weather reconnaissance missions to remote northern sectors were also on the cards.

Against this grim backdrop, on 1 December 1942 *Omar Khayyam* was tasked to conduct a lone search and photographic mission to Bougainville, some 350 miles distant. On the way the crew would also reconnoiter the Japanese airfield being built at Munda, New Georgia. Departure