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Operation Napoleon



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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #17168 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-10-07Sorti le: 2010-10-07Format: Ebook Kindle

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur1945: a lost German bomber crashes on the Vatnajkull glacier in Iceland.Inexplicably, in the midst of World War Two, there are both German and American officers on board. One of the senior German officers sets off, a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, never to be seen again.1999, the US Army is secretly trying to remove an aeroplane from the Vatnajkull glacier. Two young Icelanders become involved but end up paying with their lives. Before they are captured, one of the two contacts his sister, Kristin. Her quest to discover his fate takes her on a long and hazardous journey in search of the key to the riddle about Operation Napoleon.WINNER OF THE CRIME WRITERS' ASSOCIATION GOLD DAGGER.Extrait1945A blizzard raged on the glacier.He could see nothing ahead, could barely make out the

compass in his hand. He could not turn back even if he wanted to. There was nothing to go back to. The storm stung and lashed his face, hurling hard, cold flakes at him from every direction. Snow became encrusted in a thick layer on his clothes and with every step he sank to his knees. He had lost all sense of time and had no idea how long he had been walking. Still cloaked in the same impenetrable darkness as when he had begun his journey, he could not even tell whether it was day or night. All he knew was that he was on his last legs. He took a few steps at a time, rested, then carried on. A few steps. A rest. A few more steps. A rest. A step. Rest. Step. He had escaped almost unscathed from the crash, though others had not been so lucky. In an eruption of noise, the plane had skimmed the surface of the glacier. One of its engines burst into flame, then vanished abruptly as the entire wing sheared off and whirled away into the snow-filled darkness. Almost immediately the other wing was torn away in a shower of sparks, and the wingless fuselage went careering across the ice like a torpedo. He, the pilot and three others had been belted into their seats when the plane went down but two of the passengers had been gripped with hysteria at the first sign of trouble, leaping up and trying to break into the cockpit in their panic. The impact sent them ricocheting like bullets off the sides of the cabin. He had ducked, watching them slam into the ceiling and bounce off the walls, before being catapulted past him and landing at the back of the plane where their cries were silenced. The wreckage ploughed across the glacier, sending up clouds of snow and ice until it gradually lost momentum and ground to a halt. Then there was no sound but the howling of the storm. Alone of the passengers, he was determined to brave the blizzard and make for civilisation. The others recommended waiting, in the hope that the storm would blow itself out. They thought everyone should stick together, but he was not to be stopped. He did not want to suffer being trapped in the plane; could not endure it becoming his coffin. With their help he wrapped himself up as well as possible for the journey, but he had not walked far in the relentless conditions before he realised he would have been better off inside the plane with the others. Now it was too late. He tried to head south-east. For a split second before the bomber crashed he had glimpsed lights, as if from houses, and now he headed off in what he believed to be the right direction. He was chilled through and his footsteps grew heavier and heavier. If anything, the storm seemed to be growing more intense. He battled on, his strength failing with every step. His thoughts turned to the plight of the others who had remained behind in the aircraft. When he had left them the snow had already begun to drift over the wreckage, and the scar left by its progress across the ice was filling up fast. They had oil lamps but the oil would not last long, and the cold on the glacier was unimaginable. If they kept the door of the plane open, the cabin would fill with snow. They were probably already trapped inside. They knew they would freeze to death whether they stayed in the aircraft or ventured out on to the ice. They had discussed the limited options. He had told them he could not sit still and wait for death. The chain rattled. The briefcase was weighing him down. It was handcuffed to his wrist. He no longer held the handle but let the case drag on its chain. The handcuff chafed his wrist but he did not care. He was past caring. They heard it long before it swooped over them, heading west. Heard it approaching through the screaming of the storm, but when they looked up there was nothing to be seen but winter darkness and stinging, wind-driven flakes. It was just before eleven at night. A plane, was their immediate thought. War had brought a fair amount of air traffic to the area as the British had a base in Hornafjrdur, so they knew most of the British and American aircraft by the sound of their engines. But they had never heard anything like this before. And never before had the roar been so close, as if the plane were diving straight for their farm. They went out on to the front step and stood there for some time until the roar of the engines reached its height. With their hands over their ears they followed the sound towards the glacier. For a split second its dark body could be glimpsed overhead, then it vanished again into the blackness. Its nose up, it looked to be trying to gain height. The roar gradually receded in the direction of the glacier, before finally dying away. They both had the same thought. The plane was going to crash. It was too low. Visibility was zero in the appalling weather and the glacier would claim the plane in a matter of minutes. Even if it managed to gain a little height, it would be too late. The ice cap was too close. They remained standing on the step for several minutes after the noise had died away, peering through the blizzard and straining to listen. Not a sound. They went back inside. They could not alert the authorities to the course of the plane as the telephone had been out of order since the lines came down in another storm. There had not been time to reconnect it. A familiar nuisance. Now a second blizzard had blown up, twice as bad. As they got ready for bed, they discussed trying to get through to Hfn in Hornafjrdur on horseback to report the plane once the weather had died down. It was not until four days later that the conditions finally improved and they were able to set off for Hfn. The drifts were deep, making their progress slow. They were brothers and lived alone on the farm; their parents were dead and neither of them

had married. They stopped to rest at a couple of farms on the way, spending the night at the second, where they related the story of the plane and their fear that it had almost certainly perished. None of the other farmers had heard anything. When the brothers reached Hfn they reported the aircraft to the district official, who immediately contacted the Reykjavk authorities and informed them that a plane had been seen south of the Vatnajkull glacier and had almost certainly crashed on the ice. All flights over Iceland and the North Atlantic were monitored by air traffic control at the US army base in Reykjavk, but they had been unaware of any aircraft in the area at the time the conditions had meant traffic had been at a minimum. Later that day a telegram from the US military headquarters arrived at the office of the Hfn district official. The army would immediately take over investigation of the case and see to it that a rescue party was sent to the glacier. As far as the locals were concerned, the case was closed. Furthermore, the army banned all traffic on the glacier in the area where the plane was believed to have gone down. No explanations were offered. Four days later, twelve military transport vehicles rumbled into Hfn with two hundred soldiers on board. They had not been able to use the airstrip in Hornafjrdur, as it was closed during the darkest winter months, and Hfn was cut off from the capital to the west by the unbridged rivers of the Skeidar sands. The expedition force had had to circumnavigate the country in six-wheeled vehicles equipped with snow-chains, driving first north, then south along the East Fjords to reach Hfn. The journey north had been arduous, as the main road was little more than a dirt track, and the expedition had been forced to dig their way through heavy drifts all the way across the eastern desert of Mdrudalsraefi. The troops were soldiers of the 10th Infantry Regiment and 46th Field Artillery Battalion under General Charles H. Bonesteel, commander of the US occupying force. Some of the men had taken part in the army's winter exercises on the Eirksjkull glacier the previous year, but in practice few of them could even ski. The expedition was led by one Colonel Miller. His men pitched camp just outside Hfn in barracks built by the British occupation force at the beginning of the war, from where they made their way to the glacier. By the time the soldiers arrived at the brothers farm, almost ten days had elapsed since they had heard the plane, days in which it had snowed without respite. The soldiers set up their base at the farm and the brothers agreed to act as their guides on the ice cap. They spoke no English but with a combination of gestures and sign language were able to show Miller and his men the direction of the plane, warning that there was little chance of finding it on or near the glacier in the depths of winter. Vatnajkull is the biggest glacier in Europe, they said, shaking their heads. Its like looking for a needle in a haystack. It did not help that the snow would have obliterated all signs of a crash-landing. Colonel Miller understood their gestures but ignored them. Despite the heavy going, there was a passable route to the glacier from the brothers farm and in the circumstances the operation went smoothly. During the short winter days, when the sun was up only from eleven in the morning until half past five, there was little time for searching. Colonel Miller kept his men well in order, though the brothers quickly discovered that most of them had never set foot on a glacier and had scant experience of winter expeditions. They guided the soldiers safely past crevasses and gullies, and the men set up camp in a depression at the edge of the glacier, about 1,100 metres above sea level. Millers troops spent three weeks combing the s...
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