

SAR Stories of the U.S. Coast Guard

Lt. John A. Pritchard and His Epic Story of Search and Rescue on the Greenland Ice Cap in 1942

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There are countless Coast Guard Academy graduates whose devotion to duty has put them in harm's way and many of them have sacrificed their lives in the line of duty. Lt. John A. Pritchard sacrificed his life in the frozen wilderness of Greenland and he and his crew remain missing in action to this day.

John A. "Johnny" Pritchard began his military career in the U.S. Navy and was honorably discharged from that service to accept an appointment to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. He graduated from the Academy in 1938 and earned his wings at Pensacola Naval Air Station in 1941. His initial tour of duty began in Miami before he was re-assigned to World War II's Greenland theater of operations, also known as the Greenland Patrol. Not long after joining ice-breaking cutter Northland off the east coast of Greenland, Pritchard volunteered to lead the search party for three Royal Canadian Air Force aviators that had crash-landed on the Greenland ice cap. On 23 November 1942, Pritchard led the search party 2,000 feet up the coastal mountains to the ice cap and traversed the heavily crevassed ice at night using only a flashlight to guide him to the exhausted Canadian flyers. Pritchard received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for leading this search and rescue effort.

Earlier that same month, a U.S. Army Air Force C-53 transport aircraft went missing on the ice cap. That aircraft and crew would never be found; however, on 9 November, a B-17 Flying Fortress took to the skies in an effort to find the downed C-53. Poor visibility caused the B-17 to crash on the ice cap and, for the next two weeks, the bomber and its crew of nine became the subject of a second search and rescue effort.

On 28 November, within days of his successful rescue of the Canadians, Pritchard and Radioman 1/c Benjamin Bottoms departed Northland to search for the downed bomber in the cutter's J2F Grumman "Duck." Within a few hours, Pritchard and Bottoms had located the crash site and landed on the ice cap near the Flying Fortress. While Bottoms stayed with the J2F to man the radio, Pritchard hiked the two miles back to the B-17 testing the heavily crevassed ice with a broomstick. Pritchard took two injured B-17 survivors back to his small amphibious biplane planning to evacuate the rest of the bomber's crew two at a time in a series of roundtrips to the cutter. When he returned to the cutter that evening, Northland had to use its searchlight to light the way for his water landing.

On the morning of the 29th, Pritchard and Bottoms took to the air and, using the amphibian's floats as makeshift skis, completed another successful ice landing near the B-17. By coincidence, an Army rescue party using motor sleds approached the crash site at the same time as Pritchard. Before the Army party reached at the crash site, one of the motor sleds broke through a snow bridge carrying an officer into the deep fissure below.

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Meanwhile, fog began to close in and visibility grew worse, so Pritchard decided to return to Northland for men and equipment to help rescue the lost Army rescuer. One of the B-17 survivors climbed on board the Grumman Duck and the three men flew up into the fog.

That was the last that anyone saw of Pritchard and his crew. As dense fog and blowing snow closed in, Radioman Bottoms' radio signals grew weaker until they were heard no more. Once again, the rescuers became the subject of a large search effort as Northland sent out search parties on foot for the next month. Four months after Pritchard's disappearance, an Army aircraft located the crash site of Pritchard's J2F, but it failed to spot the crew's remains. Treacherous ice and weather conditions postponed evacuation of the B-17's crew until the spring of 1943, but a Navy PBY Catalina flying boat repeated Pritchard's daring feat of landing an amphibious aircraft on the ice cap and it retrieved the remaining B-17 survivors.

For his daring air rescue of the B-17 crewmen, Pritchard posthumously received the Distinguished Flying Cross; however, records indicate that the Army supported a recommendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor. The lives, equipment and time invested in this rescue effort testify to the incredible sea, air and land conditions experienced by all Coast Guard personnel that served in World War II's Greenland Patrol. Pritchard's particular story exemplifies the Coast Guard's core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty.