

Russell Johnson and the Cult of John Frum

[\[The Day After Ragnarok\]](#)

The Cargo Cult religious movement is not very well known outside of its home base of Melanesia; anthropology is one of those disciplines that has become horribly underfunded since the Serpentfall. To sum it all up **very** briefly, there is a religious movement running through much of Oceania that believes that a god or culture hero named 'John Frum' would appear and provide Western goods to the faithful in the form of 'cargo.' This belief was reinforced during World War II; the American military funnelled vast amounts of equipment and materials through that part of the world, giving credence to the belief system. Many adherents went so far as to build replica airstrips and bases out of local materials, in hopes that this would result in 'cargo' deliveries.

All of this was complicated by the Serpentfall, which (among other things) dumped a **lot** of envenomed mana into most of the world's magical systems. Fortunately, in Melanesia itself the effects were reasonably benign. Islands that honored John Frum would find themselves regularly rewarded with flotsam from ships destroyed in

the war, or from supply planes that developed mechanical trouble and had to actually *land* on the airstrips. The John Frum cult quickly decided that any American personnel that arrive with cargo needed to be treated with the dignified respect due to Frum's servants; some of the castaways eventually repatriated themselves to the US Navy, some decided to stay where they were and rusticate, and a few ended up filling a niche.

Enter Lt. Russell Johnson, USAAF: he's one of the ones who are filling a niche. Johnson was the navigator for a supply plane when its engines flamed out above a John Frum island; the crash put Johnson out of commission for months with two broken ankles, so the rest of the crew (at Johnson's urging) set out on a local boat to get help. They *should* have been back two years ago; Johnson stopped waiting for pickup a year after that, and has unaccountably forgotten to try to get back on his own.

The Cargo Cult fascinates him, you see. Johnson is not exactly an initiate -- he doesn't really *believe* in John Frum, although like most US military personnel in the Pacific Johnson is careful not to antagonize those who do believe in him; he's also a good, and good-natured actor -- but he finds amazing all the little details that the Cult tries to put into its simulated military bases. He finds the

symbolism of the cult very intuitive, to the point where he can now produce the ritual items used by the cult as if they were made by the cult's clergy themselves.

Indeed, the items Johnson makes are prized for their innovation (and later refined, by actual priests). It's the difference between trying to make a fake radio out of sisal fiber and coconut shells when you've never even seen a radio close up, and trying to make a fake radio when you've used one every day for five years. The priests are also quite certain that Johnson's artifacts **do** increase the quality of the cargo they receive. Sometimes, Johnson suspects that they might be right.

Then again, where's the harm? The stuff was washing up before he showed up on this boat, and it'll be likely washing up afterward, too. He's not really hurting anybody, here, and the locals are friendly and appreciative of what he does. Besides, it's not like Johnson can really leave on his own: the Cult is pretty insistent that if Americans wish to leave, they have to do so via their own efforts, using whatever washes up from the sea.

And: for all his vaunted ability to make authentic-looking military artifacts out of coconut fiber, Russell Johnson doesn't have the first clue about how to patch a boat.

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