In 1989, Cameron, an American in his late 20s, is an English-language consultant at The Jakarta Post. Though having worked at a newspaper in his native Kansas, he is not allowed to report stories, only to correct (or rewrite entirely) articles by the Post’s Indonesian newsroom staff. But one day, Managing Editor Sabam Siagian tells Cameron that his assigning him to write the copy for the advertising supplements the Post has decided to produce. Since he will not be writing news, only public relations copy, the dreaded Department of Information, which controls all mass media outlets in the nation, will not object.

Cameron interviews George R, a former Air Force officer who pioneered air transport to remote regions. After describing his current plans for expansion, which includes the major purchase of sophisticated aircraft for use in remote regions, George tells the romantic early days of the Indonesian Air Force, especially the successful efforts to construct serviceable aircraft from, literally, spare parts such as motorcycle engines. George then tells Cameron that such resourcefulness would be valuable when operating an aviation company in remote areas, where mechanics could service simple aircraft on location. Instead, he is being pressured to purchase aircraft using advanced technology, which would certainly be unreliable, and perhaps dangerous.

Cameron tells Sabam of his conversation with George, and wants to write a story highlighting Georges concerns. Sabam refuses, and instead tells Cameron to go to the newly opened national library and read a book about the history the Air Force.

At the library, Cameron is directed to the rare books section. Julia, an interning post-graduate history student, finds the book, Recruit to Revolution, and tells Cameron that he can cannot take it out of the reading room. Cameron leafs through the pages, and is introduced to the remarkable story of Bob Freeberg.

The following day, Sabam sends Cameron to interview his friend Petit Muharto, an retired Air Force officer who flew with Freeberg on RI-002. Muharto tells about his experiences setting up the blockade runs, his time stranded in Manila with Bob, and his adventures as co-pilot of RI-002. He ends with a mournful recounting of his wedding in October 1948. Bob would have been the guest of honor, but had disappeared, along with RI-002 and a ton of gold, three weeks before.

Muharto’s expression as he finished his reminiscences shows that he regarded Freeberg as a close friend, and is seeking closure about his mysterious disappearance.

Cameron is intrigued by Muharto’s adventures on RI-002. He uses this as an excuse to revisit the library and meet Julia again. He tells of meeting Muharto, and asks for her help in finding research material. Julia says she knows just the person who can help, and introduces Cameron to an older man, disheveled but still dignified, who is at a reading table. He is Victor, a former journalist.

Victor explains that during the struggle for independence he was a journalist for the Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, the leading newspaper in the Dutch East Indeis. He tells of almost comical interviews with Dutch officials, who were driven to distraction by Freeberg’s blockade runs. He says that he also was intrigued by the disappearance of RI-002, but was stonewalled by the Dutch officials, who insisted they knew nothing.

Victor believes that General Simon Spoor had launched a secret operation to intercept RI-002 and steal the gold to fund a military coup. In this, Victor believes, the Dutch had found common cause with the communists, who also wanted to see the new Republic fail.

Cameron believes that this story could make a career. Victor promised to help by using his wide network of contacts to arrange interviews. The two journalists, one beginning, and other ending his career, vow to uncover the truth at whatever cost.

During the next weeks, Cameron and Julia interview air force veterans, who recount their youthful exploits with great enthusiasm. A long letter from Dave Fowler, a former blockade runner and good friend of George who stayed on after independence, tells of Bob and of the third blockade runner, a swashbuckling near criminal named Richard Cobley. From these interviews, Cameron also learns that Bob was under increasing financial and emotional pressure, as the rebellion wore on.

The pressure was intensified when RI-002 flew the body of Ining, a Filipino commando who died under mysterious circumstances, back to Manila. The Dutch accused Freeberg of being complicit in a disastrous gun-running operation, and Spoor vowed to shoot RI-002 down. Two months later, the stress on Bob was ratcheted up again when he was told to fly cargoes of opium from Jogja to Bukittinggi in perilous nighttime flights through the mountains.

Cameron, Julia, Petit Muharto, and his wife Ani travel to Jogjakarta. While Ani takes Julia on a tour of Jogja, describing the vicissitudes of surviving in the besieged capital flooded with refugees, Muharto takes Cameron to the slopes of Mount Merapi volcano to visit his spiritual advisor, placed there by the royal palace to placate the spirit of the active volcano. After a strenuous hike up the slopes, followed by chanting and meditation, they return to Jogja and visit the Aviation museum. Muharto falls into trance while holding a dynamo taken from the RI-002 wreckage. He is transported to the aircraft seconds before impact.

In Jakarta, Cameron and Muharto visit the mother of Santoso and her son Hadi, who tells of stealing his father’s necklace from a casket of remains before the burial. As Muharto holds necklace, he is transported to right-hand seat of RI-002. But he can not see who is in captain’s seat before the crash.

As the interviews of Air Force veterans continue, Sabam grows concerned. Deppen has learned of Cameron’s activities, and an official phones Sabam to delivered a veiled warning about keeping his foreigners on a tight leash. He tells Cameron to stop interviewing veterans, and concentrate on his copy editing tasks.

Cameron then receives a packet of clippings form his former newspaper in Kansas, hinting at American involvement in Freeberg’s disappearance and the unexplained reluctance of a Kansas senator and friend of the Freeberg family to investigate.

Cameron meets an American academic at a party, who has studied the history of US government involvement in the revolution. He reveals that George has been suspected of being a communist, and complicit in Ining’s death. Cameron passes this information on to Victor.

Julia finds issue of 1948 BN showing RI-002 on an airfield seemingly guarded by a KNIL soldier. Victor says he knows it is not Batavia, Palembang, or Medan. But it might be Karangendah.

Sabam says that the newspaper has been given free domestic air tickets as part of a promotion package. He offers two tickets (one for Julia, his “research assistant”) to anywhere he wants. Cameron suggests Palembang. Sabam raises his eyebrows, expecting Cameron to ask tickets to Bali.

In Karangendah, Cameron and Julia, as expected, are denied access to the base, now an Army tank-training facility. The seek out Agus, a friend of a friend of Victor. Agus has worked on the base for decades, and routinely sneaks food and fuel out by secret pathways. He takes Cameron and Julia inside, check if the runway is similar to the old photo. Enough of the runway remains to confirm the location.

Back in the village, Agus tells them of overhearing a discussion among the detained crew of RI-002. Santoso says they should keep to the original mission and fly to Bengkulu, and then to Bukittinggi. But Bambang knows that if they go to Bukittinggi, one of the foreign pilots would then be asked to fly RI-002 back to Jogja. Bambang insists that they fly back to Branti, then to Jogja, where he can land in triumph.

After their return to Jakarta, Julia discovers that Victor has been using Cameron to get evidence that George had been a communist and implicated in both the death of Ining and in transmitting the itinerary of the last flight of RI-002 to Spoor. An official with the Department of Transportation wants to blackmail George into approving the purchase of the advanced, unsafe aircraft at a marked-up price, and will give Victor a “commission” for his service.

The army identifies Cameron as the base intruder. A friend in military intelligence calls Sabam to warn him that the army is now looking into the activities of the Jakarta Post. The next call he receives is from Deppen, informing him that Cameron’s work permit and visa have been revoked.

On his way to the airport, Cameron drops by Muharto’s house to say goodbye. He shows Muharto their photos of the runway, which match the photo of RI-002 in the BN newspaper. Cameron repeats what Agus said about seeing the crew in detention, and that Bambang was at the controls when RI-002 crashed.

Muharto asks if Agus had seen saw Bob. Cameron pauses for a moment, then lies to his face, asserting that Agus had seen Freeberg being taken away in handcuffs, his face bruised from a beating. Muharto sits back in his chair, his face reflecting his relief that Freeberg had not betrayed his friendship or the revolution.