

THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE KWAI



From
Death-camp
Despair
to
Spiritual
Triumph

ERNEST
GORDON

THROUGH

the

VALLEY

of

THE KWAI

THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE KWAI
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Ernest Gordon

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At the special request of my children, Gillian Margaret and Alastair James, this book is dedicated to those who were my comrades in the prison camps of the Railroad of Death

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And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

Isaiah 35:8

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The Death House

I WAS DREAMING, AND I WAS HAPPY WITH MY dreams. Within myself I heard the raucous cry of sea gulls circling above the fishing boats as the fishermen sorted their catch. I felt the touch of a salt-laden wind upon my face; I smelled the clean freshness of old-fashioned carbolic soap; I tasted the sweet bitterness of heavy Scottish ale.

I sensed the many things that were calling me to life. Most happily, in my dreams, I was appreciating the cozy luxury of freshly-ironed sheets on my bed at home, and the friendly flicker of warm shadows my bedroom fire cast upon the wall.

In the bewildering no-man's land between the *was* and the *is* the pictures began to fade; the comfort departed; the crisp, clean smells of wholesomeness were overpowered. My waking senses, struggling up reluctantly from their pleasing rest, experienced anew the smells of my existence as a prisoner of war of the Japanese in the jungles of Thailand. These were the corrupt smells of dying things—of dying flesh, of dying men.

Turning my head in the direction of sounds that distracted me, I saw a small light lurching and staggering as if carried over uneven ground. I heard strained breathing and the irregular thud of bare feet on bare earth. Two British medical orderlies reached my end of the Death House with a body on a stretcher swaying between them in unsteady rhythm.

"Here you are, chum," said the first orderly, as they dropped their load upon the ground. "We've brought another one to keep you company."

The yellow glow of the makeshift lamp gave enough light for me to see my comrades of the night. They were ten dead men dressed in their shrouds of straw rice sacks. It was hard to tell that they were corpses. They might have been bags of old rags or old bones. The uncertain light and the position from which I was looking at them—the ground—made them seem longer and heavier and more important than they were. Even if they had been more clearly discernible as bodies—as forms emptied of their humanity—I would not have minded. Corpses were as common among us as empty bellies.

I was lying in the morgue end of the Death House. Being on slightly higher and therefore less muddy terrain, this end was the most desirable section of the long, slummy bamboo hut which was supposed to be a hospital but had long since given up any pretense of being a place to shelter the sick. It was a place where men came to die.

"I hope no more shuffle off tonight," I whispered.

"Don't worry," said the orderly, "this one's probably the last. There are two R.C.'s ready to go; but like as not they'll hang on till morning. The priest gave them absolution last night, so they're all right. You know what they call that priest?"

I shook my head.

"The Angel of Death. Every time they see him come in, the R.C.'s wonder which of 'em is due to go. Some of the chaps don't mind knowing, but some are still too sensitive.

"'Nothing much you can do about it,' I says to 'em. 'He has his job to do and I daresay he doesn't like it any better than anyone else.' Cor, I bet he was never kept half so busy in Blighty. If he was to be paid a quid for every one he sees off, he'd be a bleeding millionaire."

The orderlies rolled the corpse onto the ground and began fitting it with two rice sacks.

"How old was he?" I asked.

"Oh, about twenty-one," the first orderly replied. "He was in the Service Corps with the Eighteenth Division. Only came into Chungkai about five days ago."

They went about their task like old hands, pulling one sack over the head and the other over the feet. While they were pulling up the lower sack the left hand flopped over on the ground. As it lay there, uselessly, hopelessly, it seemed the most significantly dead thing about the body. Queer, how dead it looked. It was good for nothing. The hand could work no more, nor be raised in protest, nor point to something worthy of attention, nor touch another gently. Its stillness seemed to shout, "See, I'm dead!"

The hand was stuffed into the sack, both sacks were tied together with pieces of atap grass, and the body was stacked along with others about two feet from where I was lying.

"Might as well have a rest," said the first orderly.

"It's been a long night," observed his mate. They sat down beside me.

"The only ambition I have," the first one said after a bit, "is to die of old age. Cor, it would be nice to have a son or two. Watch them grow up under your eyes; and then when you've had your life, see that they come round to keep you company. It would be a bit of all right, it would."

He sighed.

"All this here death is so useless because it's at the wrong time," he continued. "It's death for nothing. The time's been mucked up. Everything is mucked up here. A man should have a bit of dignity for himself, even in death. But that's what we haven't got."

The orderlies picked up the stretcher, ready once more to play their part as hosts in the House of the Dead.

They made their way back down the hut, taking their lamp with them, leaving me in darkness. I was now so thoroughly awake that I couldn't go back to sleep. I resented this, for sleep was the most precious thing I could experience. It wasn't that I minded lying on the ground; my body had practically no feeling left in it. Since nature had anesthetized it, why couldn't it have done the same with my mind and granted me peace?

I could not say as Odysseus did, "Be strong my heart: ere now worse fate was thine"—it was hard to imagine a worse fate. However, I could say, as Achilles did to Odysseus in Hades, "Don't say a word in favor of death; rather would I be a serving man in a pauper's home and be above ground than be a king of kings among the dead."

To all intents the advantage still was mine. I was alive. I could think. I existed.

The dawn came suddenly and harshly, bringing with it bright light, sharp shadows, and stifling heat. The hut looked more like a Death House than ever—filthy, squalid, and decayed.

Through the gaps in the atap walls I could see open latrines, and beyond them bamboos touching bamboos in an endless mass that reached out for a thousand miles to where freedom lay—and also reached in to hold us fast.

Yes, I knew where I was; I was in a prison camp by the River Kwai. I knew who I was; I was a company commander in the 93rd Highlanders. And yet I wasn't. I was a prisoner of war, a man lying with the dead, waiting for them to be carried away that I might have more room.

Fingering my black beard, I wondered why I had to end up in such a place. What a contrast this was to the way my ill-starred odyssey had begun—a beginning associated in my mind with summer in a civilized, or comparatively civilized, world.

It was a good summer, that summer of 1939. I had hurried from the University of St. Andrews to my home on the Firth of Clyde in time to take part in an ocean race to the south of Ireland and back on the old Clyde Forty *Vagrant*.

The summer had a stormy beginning, for a northeaster dispersed the fleet on the homeward leg and we had to limp into Dublin for repairs.

But from then on, life was a series of gay regattas and long, happy cruises. Skies were blue, winds fair and warm. The Firth was saturated with beauty. Each day, each event, each incident seemed better than the one before. I had very little money, but I lived like a millionaire on what small skill I had as a yachtsman.

In July, I skippered a yacht on a cruise up the Scottish west coast, seeking harbor at night in lochs protected by hills ancient with wisdom and offering a rare serenity to those ready to receive it.

That cruise over, I sailed from Sandbank to Cowes in my favorite yacht, the *Dione*. It was a "couthy" sail, the whole seven hundred miles of it. My crewmates had a hearty lust for life. The four of us were on a spree, conscious perhaps that we had to make the most of all that was clean and dignified. Although I sailed continuously, there was always time for a girl in most ports. The more interesting the girl, the more favored the port.

There was, however, an ominous undertone. Perhaps my foreboding was due to a feeling that I was living on borrowed time. I'd had a spell of duty in the Royal Air Force, terminating in an accident that left me with a fractured skull and spine. While recovering I sensed that the drums of war were already sounding. I decided that before going to battle I would spend time at the university to read history and philosophy more for my own enjoyment than for anything else.

My disablement had granted me a pleasant respite from

the profession of arms. The future was so uncertain that I did not worry much about preparing for any other career. In my own fashion I was bent on savoring the delight of living. Today was mine, tomorrow could wait.

Fair winds and noble yachts, good companions and bonnie lassies, happy times and laughing days, seldom last as long as we would like. So busy was I in pursuit of my favorite sport that I paid no attention to what was happening on the international scene.

On August 23, Germany signed a nonaggression pact with Russia while I was taking part in an inter-varsity regatta. I did not learn this until I returned to my lodgings in Clynder at the close of the day's racing to find a telegram for me lying on the hall table. It was from my parents, telling me that my brother had been called up in the Royal Engineers and suggesting that it was time I returned home. The halcyon days were over. A long, fearsome struggle confronted us all.

I had made up my mind I would not pass it "flying a desk." If I couldn't fight in the air I would fight on the ground. Back home, I picked up the telephone and called the secretary of our local Territorial Association in Dunoon to inquire if there were any vacancies for commissions in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I was told there were and if I rushed over I could have one fairly soon.

I was posted first to one of the Territorial Battalions and then, after a month or so, to the Second Battalion—the 93rd Highlanders.

This battalion originated during the Napoleonic Wars when the Duke of Sutherland was urged to raise a regiment in his own county in the northeast corner of Scotland. Those he sought to recruit were so independent that at first they refused to accept the king's shilling. They came around eventually when they were allowed to serve under fellow highlanders rather than English officers and to take their own kirk to war

with them as part of the regiment. After the battle of Balaclava the battalion became known as the "Thin Red Line" because it had halted the Russian cavalry charge. In the reign of Queen Victoria it was united with the 91st or Argyllshire Highlanders to form the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The 93rd made up the Second Battalion. At the outbreak of World War I the regiment was the first to land in France and the first to see action.

Although we were a highland regiment, most of our officers came either from south of the Highland Fault Line or south of the border. Our Jocks (G.I.'s) came from the industrial belt stretching between the Forth and Clyde Rivers: from Edinburgh, Falkirk, Motherwell, Hamilton, Clydebank, Greenock, Gourock, Port-Glasgow, and Stirling.

They were in the army for a variety of reasons: because soldiering was in their blood, tales of martial glory having been imbibed with their mother's milk; because the glamor of a soldier's uniform offered a cheerful contrast to the squalor of the slums; because it provided a means to stay alive; or because they were running away from something.

After I was mobilized I visited St. Andrews to fetch some books and see friends. I went straight to the bar of the Imperial Hotel, a popular students' haunt, to show off my fine new uniform with its bright Glengarry bonnet, its badger's head sporran, and green-and-blue box-pleated kilt. The bar was almost empty except for a traveling salesman and a fellow student of pronounced Marxist views. The student, lounging against the bar, surveyed me.

"What the hell are you doing in that uniform? Don't you know it will all be over by Christmas? You're just wasting your own time and the taxpayers' money."

His remark shocked me. But it was to take many shocks to shake us from our complacent belief that all would soon be back to normal.

In early November, 1939, I was given a week's embarkation leave, my first and last in what was to be a long war. This was a disappointing experience. It rained all the time. I went around to say good-by, but those I knew had already scattered. I had hoped to receive a hero's farewell from my girl friends. But they, too, had gone to serve king and country in one or another of the services. I slept for the last time in the comfort of my own bed, bade a sad farewell to my parents, my sister Grace and my brother Pete, and caught the train for regimental headquarters at Stirling Castle.

To the north of Glasgow, halfway between the Rivers Clyde and Forth, the castle stands with its turrets thrust aggressively skyward, as though conscious of its role as sentinel on the route to the highlands.

On a misty gray Saturday afternoon several weeks later, I paraded on the square with a small detachment of first-line reinforcements. At the far end stood a contingent of national service men newly arrived and still wearing their civilian clothes. They eyed us with awe, conscious of the fact that we were soldiers and on our way to war. Among them, I recognized Gordon Shiach, a friend of my boyhood from Dunoon. We had no chance to speak. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

The orderly sergeant of the day took the roll call of my men, and handed them over to me as "all present and correct." Hurriedly, I inspected them and gave the order to slope arms. Then, with a "right turn" and a "quick march" we were off. The sentry at the main gate came to attention, and presented arms in salute as we marched from that high, stark fastness.

There is only one way out of Stirling Castle and that is down. Downhill we marched, down the steep brae, past the Castle Inn where the "other ranks" drank their beer, down past the Red Lion where the officers sipped their scotch, down the cobbled main street that led to the railroad station.