

A TRUE STORY
ABOUT THE WILL TO SURVIVE
AND THE COURAGE TO FORGIVE

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TO END ALL WARS

ERNEST GORDON

Formerly titled *Through the Valley of the Kwai* and *Miracle at the River Kwai*

A TRUE STORY
ABOUT THE WILL TO SURVIVE
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*At the 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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INTRODUCTION

1 February 2000, Wampo, Thailand

It was a pleasant morning – not too hot. A brief downpour had left everything smelling sweet and fresh, and the ground was still steaming. My son Alastair and I had arrived the previous night after a flight from New York and a long drive north from Bangkok. We had come to Thailand to participate in the filming of a movie called *To End all Wars*, based on the story of this book. A section of the original rail line is still operational and we walked along a viaduct made of rough-hewn logs high above the river. We stopped for a rest in the cool shade of a cave and looked out over the bending Kwai Yai River. I was surprised to see how beautiful a river it was, with its steep cliffs and wild bamboo reaching into the muddy waters. The cave now serves as a local shrine and the golden statue of a Buddha sits serenely in the deepest recess.

Ironically, this area has become a popular tourist attraction. They come on package tours, take elephant rides along the river, watch native dances. Some come to lay wreaths at the war cemeteries at Chungkai and Kanchanaburi. Others come to visit a place that never really existed. They go in droves to Tamarkan and walk across the so-called ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’ because they have seen the great, if inaccurate, movie by British director David Lean. Historical fact and Hollywood fiction come together in a surreal mix. Sometimes it is hard to tell them apart. Once a year, there is even a *son lumière* re-enactment of the bombing of the bridge by Allied bombers in June 1945 – all in a festive day’s outing.

There were moments on this trip when the movie version of the River Kwai seemed more tangible than the ‘real’ story. It certainly felt odd to be here in a place that was still haunted by such human misery, with everything so pleasant and children selling slices of pineapple. A busload of tourists arrived in Wampo shortly after we got there. They stepped into the parking lot, took pictures of one another hanging over the ledge, bought postcards from a little souvenir hut. Some walked along the viaduct and peered into the cave where we were sitting, but they didn’t stay long. As soon as a horn honked, they went scurrying back to their bus and headed off to another site.

I vaguely remembered the name of the place, Wampo, but at first I didn’t recognize much about it. Then the landscape triggered a sequence of memories. There were two oddly shaped hills in the distance, almost like the stylized mountains you see in Chinese landscape paintings. I remembered the eccentric silhouettes of those hills, and then everything else fell into place. I had been here 58 years ago as a prisoner of war under the Japanese. I had lain here by the edge of the jungle; I had scrambled along this steep embankment, and waded into the muddy water where the river makes a double curve on its way south towards Kanchanaburi. I had worked with other Allied troops clearing back the jungle, helping to lay the railroad tracks that would eventually carry Japanese troops and supplies all the way to the Burma front. Today there are still a few clumps of bamboo growing here and there on the steeper hillsides, but most of the jungle has been cleared away.

Wampo was one of the first station stops on the Burma–Thailand railway, the infamous Railway of Death, so called because of the tragic toll it incurred. Its 415-kilometre route passed through dense rainforest and malarial swamps, over mountains and across rivers. We were exhausted, sick from tropical diseases and starvation, overworked, injured, dying off at a preposterous rate. Sixty thousand Allied prisoners of war were forced into slave labour as well as 270,000 Asian workers. More than 80,000 died during the railway’s construction. That’s approximately 393 lives lost for every mile of

track laid – a hideous cost.

Now I recognize a spot just down the river – a sandy shoal that protruded into the current. That was where our camp had been set up when we worked on the viaduct. I also remembered the cave and how four of my fellow POWs had taken refuge there during an escape, but they were rounded up by Japanese guards and dragged back to the camp. During morning roll call the men were tied to posts and executed by a firing squad. An officer fired his pistol into the backs of their heads just to make sure they were dead. I remembered the sound of the four shots. It was a sickening spectacle intended to serve as a warning: anyone attempting to escape would be executed.

A few days later we arrived at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery in a mini-van. The movie crew were busy setting up their equipment. Production assistants were hurrying around, placing reflectors and adjusting the boom microphones. It was already hot – one of the hottest days of our trip. The director, a young man in a baseball cap, was finally ready for the shot. I was told to walk through the marble arch of the entry gate and come forward at a leisurely pace towards the middle of the cemetery to meet Nagase Takashi, a former Japanese officer who served as an interpreter in the camp along the Burma–Thailand railroad.

I walk forward. Mr Nagase shakes my hand and makes a formal apology for the atrocities committed by his fellow Japanese. I acknowledge his apology and then we walk together to the soldiers' monument at the far end of the cemetery, where we lay a wreath of flowers. We are asked to do this several times. The shot is not quite right. Mr Nagase isn't speaking loudly enough. I am standing in the wrong place. We do it again – my approach, the handshake, his apology, my acknowledgement, smiles, bows, etc. – repeating ourselves for the camera. It is getting hotter and the midday sun is beating down, making us all a bit queasy. Assistants run out after each shot to hold umbrellas over our heads and give us bottles of spring water.

To be sure, the moment was orchestrated, but the emotions were real. I was overcome by the sense of loss, the hatred, the senseless brutality of those years. Here in this tranquil place of manicured lawns and flowering shade trees, we walked past row after row of small headstones marking the remains of 6,982 Allied soldiers. So many brave men lost. I read some of their names out loud. There were young Scottish soldiers I had known as a captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and so many others: English, Australian, Dutch, men who would be in their eighties now, just like me. I thought of the ones who helped to lessen the suffering of others, the ones who guided me through my own time of suffering, the ones I describe in this book. My experience in the POW camps of Thailand changed my life. I survived where so many others died, but not a day has passed when I have not thought about them, my comrades, my friends, the ones who were left behind in this tropical land.

We all find ways to live with the past, to make peace and find our own reasons for carrying on. I wrote this book as a way of coming to terms with an impossible truth.

Ernest Gordon

Alastair Gordon

23 April 2000

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

IN MEMORY OF ERNEST GORDON

On 16 January 2002, after a long illness, my father, Ernest Gordon, died. He was remarkably tough and resilient – the consummate survivor who cheated death several times. But the last few months were difficult ones. He was hospitalized for a collapsed lung and other complications that even he couldn't overcome.

My father's message and mission could be summed up in the word *fellowship*, a concept that guided him throughout his life. During his three-and-a-half years of captivity in the POW camps in southeast Asia, he learned the hardest lesson of all: to forgive – and even love – one's enemies. They weren't allegorical opponents from biblical times, but modern men of the twentieth century. While so many of his comrades were consumed by anger, he discovered a sustaining belief in God and the capacity for love – even in a death camp. 'Selfishness, hatred, jealousy, and greed were all anti-life,' he later wrote. 'Love, self-sacrifice, mercy, and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. These were the gifts of God to men.'

After his conversion in the camps, my father had a clear mission. He learned to shape his painful experiences into a narrative structure, first telling parts of his story in articles, lectures and sermons, then finally the whole account in this book. When first published in the United States by Harper Row (1963) it was called *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. A year later it was published in Great Britain by William Collins as *Miracle on the River Kwai*. Now, in conjunction with the film, it is called *To End All Wars*.

But whatever the book's title, the significance of its content remains unchanged. And in today's global climate, its message seems more relevant than ever as it shows the need for tolerance, forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation in a world fractured by hatred and war.

Alastair Gordon
21 February 2002

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 remembered life. Voluptuously, in my dreams, I was savouring the cosy luxury of freshly ironed sheets on my bed at home, and the friendly flicker of warm shadows that 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 snug comfort evaporated; the crisp, clean smells of wholesomeness were engulfed. My waking senses dragged reluctantly from their drowsing 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 decaying flesh, of rotting men.

Turning my head in the direction of the sound that had plucked me back to consciousness, 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 crude stretcher swaying between them in unsteady rhythm.

'Here you are, chum,' said the first orderly, as they dropped their load upon the ground. 'Another one to keep you company.'

The yellow flicker of the makeshift lamp gave just enough light for me to make out my comrades of the night. They were ten dead men wrapped in shrouds of straw rice-sacks. It was hard to tell that they were corpses. They might have been sacks of old rags or bones. The uncertain light and the perspective from which I was looking at them made them seem longer and heavier and more important than they were at other times to me. Even had they been plainly discernible as human carcasses, forms emptied of their humanity – I would not have minded. Corpses were as common amongst us as empty bellies.

I was lying at 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 pretence 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 is probably the last. There are a couple of RCs on the edge 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 RCs wonder which of ’em is due to go. Some of the chaps don’t mind knowing, but the others can’t take it. “Nothing much you can do about it,” I tells ’em. “The padre’s got his job to do, and I dare say he doesn’t like it any more than you do. Cor, I bet he was never half so busy in Blighty. If he was paid a quid for every one he sees off he’d be a bleedin’ millionaire.’

As he talked, he and his companion rolled the corpse on to the ground and began to fit two rice sacks over it.

‘How old was he?’ I asked.

‘Oh, about twenty-one,’ the first orderly replied. ‘A Service Corps bloke with the 18th Division. Only came to Chungkai about five days ago.’

They performed their task with the deftness of 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, helplessly, it seemed the most significant dead thing about the body. Curious how dead it looked. It was good for nothing. It would never work again, nor be raised in protest, nor point to something exciting, nor touch another gently. Its stillness seemed to shout, ‘This is death!’

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

‘Might as well take a breather,’ said the first orderly.

‘It’s been a long night,’ observed the other. They sat down beside me. For a few moments there was silence.

‘The only ambition I’ve got,’ said the first one, reflectively, ‘is to die of old age. Cor, it would be great to have a family – a couple of sons, say. Watch them grow up; then, when you’ve had your life, see them come round to keep you company. That’d be a bit of all right, that would.’

He sighed.

‘All this here death is so pointless – because it’s at the wrong time. It’s so bloody stupid – death for nothing. The time’s been mucked up. A man ought to have a bit of dignity for himself, even when he’s dead. But that’s just what we haven’t got.’

‘Our trouble is,’ said his mate, ‘we were born at the wrong time and in the wrong country.’

They were silent again for a moment, then rose and picked up the stretcher, ready once more to play their part as hosts in the House of the Dead. As their lamp receded down the hut, darkness shrouded me again. I was now so thoroughly awake that I couldn’t get 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 for my body had practically no feeling left in it. Since nature had anaesthetized it, why couldn’t she have done the same thing 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 favour of death; rather would I be a slave in a pauper’s home and be above ground than be a king of kings among the dead.’

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

The dawn came suddenly and harshly, bringing with it stifling heat, stark light and sharp shadows. The hut looked more like a Death House than ever – filthy, squalid and desolate. Through the gaps in the atap walls I could see open latrines, and beyond them bamboos touching bamboos in an infinite pattern that stretched out for a thousand miles to where freedom lay – and also reached in to hold

fast in a green prison.

Yes, I knew where I was; I was in a prison camp by the River Kwai. I knew who I was; I was 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 so that I might have more room.

Ruffling my black beard, I wondered why I had had to end up in such a place. What a contrast that was to the way in which 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 one of 1939. I had hastened back 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 had a stormy beginning, for a nor'-easter dispersed the fleet on the homeward leg and we had to limp into Dublin for repairs, although we finished third out of a large fleet. But from then on the season was a series of gay regattas and long, happy cruises. Skies were blue; winds were fair and warm. The Firth was saturated with beauty. Each day, each event, each incident, seemed more delightful 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 west coast of Scotland, seeking harbour by night in lochs protected by hills ancient with wisdom and offering a rare serenity to those ready to accept it. That cruise over, I sailed from Sandbank to Cowes in my favourite yacht, the *Dione*. It was a 'couth' sail, the whole seven hundred miles of it. My crew mates had a hearty lust for life; the four of us were on a spree, conscious perhaps, with war looming up, that we had to make the most of all that was joyous, clean and open-hearted. Although I sailed so continuously, there was always time for a girl in most ports. The more interesting the girl, the more favoured the port.

There was an ominous undertone, however, to the gaiety of that summer. Possibly my foreboding came from a feeling that I was living on borrowed time. I'd had a spell of duty in the Royal Air Force which ended with an accident that left me with a fractured skull and spine. While recovering, I sensed that the drums of war were already sounding, so before going to battle I went to the university to read history and philosophy, more for my own enjoyment than for anything else.

My disablement had gained me a pleasant respite from the profession of arms. The future was uncertain that I did not worry much about preparing for any other career. In my own leisurely fashion I was bent on savouring the delight of living. Today was mine; tomorrow could wait.

Fair winds and stately yachts, good companions and bonnie lassies, laughing days and carefree nights, seldom last as long as we would like. So busy had I been pursuing my favourite sport that I had paid no attention to what was happening on the international scene.

On 23 August, while I was taking part in an inter-varsity regatta, Germany signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. 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 that I wouldn't spend the war 'flying a desk'. If I couldn't fight in the air I would fight on the ground. On my return home, I telephoned the secretary of our local Territorial Association in Dunoon to ask if there were any vacancies for commissions in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I was told that there were and if I rushed over I could have one fairly quickly.

I lost no time, and was posted first to one of the Territorial battalions and then, after a month or so

to the 2nd Battalion – the 93rd Highlanders. This battalion, a proud body with a noble tradition originated during the Napoleonic Wars when Major General Wemyss raised a regiment in the county of Sutherland in the north-east corner of Scotland. Those he tried to recruit were so independent that first they refused to accept the king's shilling. They came round 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 Argyllshire Highlanders to form the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The 93rd made up the 2nd Battalion, and at the outbreak of the First World War the regiment was the first to land in France and the first to see action.

Although we were a Highland regiment, most of the officers came from south of the Highland Foothill Line or south of the border. Our Jocks 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 they had imbibed tales of martial glory with their mothers' milk and so soldiering was in their blood; because the glamour of a soldier's uniform offered a cheerful contrast to the squalor of the slums from which they had come; because it was a way of earning a living; or simply because they were running away from a past.

After I was mobilized I visited St Andrews to retrieve 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 its green-and-blue kilt. The bar was almost deserted except for a travelling salesman and a fellow student, of pronounced Marxist views. The student lounging against the bar, looked me up and down.

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

His remark came as something of a shock. 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 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 goodbye but the men I knew were already scattered. I had hoped to receive a hero's farewell from my good friends. But they, too, had gone to serve king and country in one or other 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, half-way 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 grey Saturday afternoon in the late autumn of 1939 I paraded on the square with a small detachment of first-line reinforcements. At the far end stood a knot of newly arrived recruits, eyeing us with awe. They were very conscious that we were soldiers – already on our way to war.

The orderly sergeant of the day took the roll-call of my men, and handed them over to me as 'at present and correct'. Hurriedly I inspected them and gave the order to slope arms. 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 whisky, down the main cobbled street that led to the railway station.

The scene in Stirling was like that on any other Saturday. Housewives dragged reluctant husbands along – or left them standing while they paused to gossip with passing friends – standing and thinking wistfully of the soccer games they might have been following on the wireless. They paid no attention to us as we marched by. This was not yet the day of the soldier.

Downward our way continued – all the way down the world; down through England; down through France by stages; down through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean by troopship; down through the dripping jungle of Malaya on foot; down through the mud and the blood in the heart-breaking retreat to the last stand in Singapore; until all that was left of our thousand-strong battalion was a battered remnant of one hundred and twenty.

In keeping with the regimental tradition of being first in action and last out, the Argylls were the last troops to cross from the Malayan mainland to Singapore Island. We sauntered over the Causeway while our last two pipers played 'Highland Laddie', the regimental march. Also in line with our tradition, the battalion commanding officer, Lt Colonel Iain Stewart, his batman and myself as regimental company commander were the last across. No sooner had we set foot on the island than the Causeway was blown up behind us to seal in Singapore's inhabitants on 30 December 1941.

On down through the island our remnant fought – until only thirty were left – until the defending forces ran out of drinking water, ammunition, land and hope. And even after that my own way continued, down across the Straits to Sumatra, by commandeered ferry. It came to a halt in a coastal city called Padang.

SOLDIERS AT SEA

The last British warship taking off refugees had sailed from Padang a few days before I got there. The whole of Sumatra was about to fall. I knew that I must plan a way of escape, and that I'd have to do it at once if I was to do it at all, for the enemy was already closing in on the city. Australia, India and Ceylon were the nearest countries free from Japanese domination. But they were all a long way from Sumatra.

I was walking down the main street one morning, pondering ways and means, when a familiar voice hailed me. I turned to encounter a colonel of the India Army Service Corps whom I recognized at once. He was one of those whom two fellow officers and I had passed through the escape route we had been operating from Tambilihan on the Indragiri River on Sumatra's east coast.

'I thought you'd be on your way to India by this time,' I said as we shook hands, 'on board one of those cruisers that picked up the last loads.'

He shrugged fatalistically.

'No such luck. I followed your example and stayed to organize a transit camp a little upriver from you. I got into Padang two days before you did. I heard you were here and I've been hunting for you ever since. May I have a word with you?'

'Certainly,' I said, curious to know what he had on his mind.

He led the way to a coffee-house with a few iron tables set out on the street under a canopy. Two Malays in black sunkas (brimless caps), white bajus (open-necked shirts) and bright sarongs were paying their chits and getting up to leave.

The waiter brought us our coffee. When he had moved away the colonel said to me in a matter-of-fact voice, 'I'm forming an official escape party. Would you care to join it?'

I stared at him dumbfounded.

'Of course I would! What's the plan?'

He leaned closer across the table.

'One of the last messages we received from General Wavell's HQ said that if no help arrives an attempt to escape should be made by a group of officers. And it's very unlikely now that any help is going to get through to us before the Japs take over.'

I nodded. 'I agree. Worse luck.'

'As senior officer here, it's my responsibility to see that the order is carried out. I've been in touch with the Netherlands Government chaps in Padang. They say they don't want to do anything official if the Japs found out they'd take it out on them.'

'What exactly is your scheme, then?' I said, trying to curb my impatience. But he was determined to come to the point in his own way.

‘Unofficially, however, the Dutch have given me some money; they say it’s none of their business what I do with it. They’ve also loaned me two cars, to be returned when I’ve finished with them – and no questions asked. I’m told there’s a chance we may be able to buy a sailing-boat at a fishing village called Sasok, about a hundred miles north of here.’

It sounded too good to be true. I must have betrayed my incredulity.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it won’t be quite what you’re used to at the Royal Singapore Yacht Club. But she’ll have sail – and she’ll float. The south-west monsoon’s due to break in May. With a bit of luck we may get the benefit of its winds a little earlier than that and make Ceylon comfortably.’

‘It’s possible,’ I said, ‘Ceylon can’t be more than twelve hundred miles away.’

The colonel frowned. ‘But it won’t be all that easy – not with the Jap Navy and Air Force all over the Indian Ocean.’

‘Who are going?’ I asked.

‘I’ve worked out a list of nine. You may know some of them. There are three navy types: Crawley, do you remember him? He sailed up to HQ in Tambilihan in a junk. And two from the Royal Malayan Navy Reserve. Then there’s a major from the Sappers and a captain from the Signals. Including myself and you – that’ll be ten altogether.’

‘Could you take two more?’ I asked. ‘I’d like Rigden and MacLaren to come along. They were with me on the escape boat.’

He shook his head.

‘Sorry, old boy. I’m afraid it just isn’t possible. Rigden has been assigned as dockmaster, you know, in case a warship should come in. And MacLaren has been put in charge of the troops and a sergeant-major.’

I felt that I was letting my friends down. ‘Are you sure we can’t change that?’ I pleaded.

‘Absolutely. We’ve got to get cracking. Besides, we’d be doing them a pretty doubtful favour. That’ll be a risky business. If we’re caught we’ll almost certainly be executed.’

This eased my conscience somewhat.

‘When do we leave for Sasok?’

‘At dawn, day after tomorrow.’

‘Anything I can do meanwhile?’

‘Don’t think so, thank you. I’ve got the Malayan Volunteers picking up as many tins of food as they can find. The New Zealand naval officer is out hunting up navigational instruments and a book of nautical tables. The sapper is putting together a first-aid box – and I think that’s about it.’ Then he added, ‘I’ll tell you what, though. You might invest in some cigarettes. They’d come in handy as barter.’

‘Right. Now what about clothing?’

‘Take what you’ve got. I dare say it isn’t much.’

‘What I have on – plus a spare pair of shorts, a shirt and a tooth-brush. What about weapons? I know where I can put my hands on some sub-machineguns.’

‘No, I don’t think that would be a good idea. We’ll be dealing with natives, and it might put them wind up them if they saw us armed to the teeth. Take your side-arms, that’s all.’

The colonel drained his last drop of coffee, lighted a cigarette and lounged back comfortably in his chair. He was ready for chit-chat.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘how did you get away from Singapore?’

‘Someone at Command conceived the brilliant notion of running a ferry service between Malaya and Singapore to bring in supplies. I was to be in charge. But, of course, it never began operation because it was based on the erroneous assumption that Singapore would hold out indefinitely.’

‘What happened then?’

‘As you know, everything was in a state of utter confusion after the collapse. On Friday morning that was the Black Friday of 13 February – I was ordered to go to one of the islands off Changi that was garrisoned by the Second Dogras. I was to take them off on ferry-boats and then land them behind the Jap lines on the west sector of Singapore Island.’

‘But it would have been about three days too late by then, surely?’

‘It was. When I reached the Dogras’ HQ I learned that the whole deal was off. The next morning I discovered that a ferry-boat had arrived the night before, commanded by Sergeant-Major MacLaren. He sent a signal to Command HQ telling them that I was on my way in the ferry. HQ replied that I was to proceed on my own. We made it back to Keppel Harbour. As we were entering, a Jap battery shelled us, so we moved out into the Straits and lay there until Sunday.

‘All that day we kept picking up boatloads of escapees. Around midnight we came across four men in a canoe. From them we learned that the show was over – had been over since eight-thirty the evening before.’

‘That’s about the time the CO sent his last message, saying that, because of losses from enemy action and the lack of supplies and ammunition, he could continue to fight no longer,’ the colonel mused. ‘It was the sign-off. Too bad I didn’t bump into you then. I might have had a more comfortable trip.’

I laughed.

‘Don’t be too sure about that. I had no charts and I didn’t know where the mine-fields were. But we got the ferry through somehow and sailed up the Indragiri to Rengat. There we found everything in a real bonnie mess. I’d picked up Tom Rigden on the way over. When we heard about the nurses, women and children who were left behind on the islands we decided to stay and run an escape service for the ones who were stranded after the Japs attacked the last convoy from Singapore.’

‘That was a bad business, wasn’t it? I heard the whole convoy was sunk.’

‘Yes, that’s true. We picked up quite a few of the survivors. The nurses put up a terrific show.’

‘Was there anyone at Rengat trying to organize things?’

‘Oh yes, there was an Intelligence major named Campbell who was doing his best. He suggested that I should go back to Tambilihan and run things from there. As a matter of fact, he gave me the chit. He had the idea that we could get cooperation from the Dutch and put together some kind of resistance movement.’

I produced a slip from my wallet and read from it: ‘This is to say that Captain Ernest Gordon of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders is empowered to act on behalf of His Majesty’s Government. Any assistance given to him in the form of money, arms or equipment will be paid for at a later date. Any bills incurred by him as military representative in Sumatra will be honoured.’

A gleam lit up the colonel’s eyes.

‘Keep that!’ he exclaimed. ‘It may be very useful.’

I folded the chit carefully and returned it to my wallet. It did not occur to me that, far from proving useful, it might put my life in jeopardy.

The colonel pushed back his chair and looked at his watch.

‘About time I moved along,’ he said. ‘I’m meeting the British Acting Vice-Consul at noon.’

He lowered his voice.

‘Morning after next. Be outside the school by 0500 hours. No later. Goodbye.’

The first suggestion of dawn was paling the sky behind the palm trees as shadowy figures began materialize in the school-yard. Introductions were brief. The borrowed cars had been carefully packed the night before. With a minimum of fuss and delay we took our places.

The colours of the buildings around us were beginning to show as the wheels crunched on the gravel of the driveway, and we set off, heading north for Sasok.

‘It’s a long haul to freedom,’ I thought to myself as I listened to the music of the wheels on the road. ‘But at least we’re on our way.’

At Fort De Kock we encountered the headquarters of the Dutch forces. The officers informed us that the Japanese were advancing rapidly, and that to proceed farther would mean certain capture. We chose to take that chance.

When we passed their forward positions we began to appreciate the wisdom of their advice. We crossed a bridge. A few minutes later we heard a muffled *boom*. It had just blown up. At the first opportunity we turned off the main highway on to a single-track road that wound and twisted up into the hills. We were in the nick of time. From the top of the first rise we saw the dust of a Japanese column rising from the road we had just left.

The mountain track was breath-taking, coiling like a snake around steep hills, crossing roaring torrents on shaky bridges, and slipping through dark cavernous jungle until it left the hills behind and entered the low-lying coastal area. Before long we came upon a fair-sized village where the controller or district officer had his headquarters. He received us warmly, handed us a letter to his assistant at Sasok and sold us a welcome case of beer.

It was late afternoon when we reached Sasok, a fishing village at the mouth of a river. We were pleased to see two fairly sea-worthy-looking craft, of a Malay type called prahu, tied up along the bank. With the help of the assistant controller we opened negotiations with the natives, and finally bought a ship for two thousand dollars. From the smiles on the faces of the onlookers we judged that the Malays had had by far the best of the bargain.

Our purchase was named the *Setia Berganti*. She was about fifty feet overall and rather broad in the beam. Her deckhouse, thatched and canted like the roof of a hut, ran almost the length of the ship, leaving only a short deck space fore and aft. Her unusually long bowsprit, lending a rakish air, was her only saving grace. Her hull, however, appeared to be sound, and her bottom was copper-sheathed. She was not exactly a thing of grace and beauty, but she was our Argosy of fortune.

‘Puts you in mind of Noah’s Ark, doesn’t it?’

A well-set-up man, with fair complexion and an easy manner, was standing by my side, looking at the prahu over. He was Edward Hooper, former harbour-master of Singapore and member of the Royal Malay Naval Reserve, who was to be our skipper. In his spotless white naval shorts and shirt, his white knee-length stockings and white shoes, he was the picture of smartness and efficiency. He seemed to have little in common with the dowdy craft.

The skipper identified a small kiosk on the port side of the fore-deck as the wood-burning galley and a big box suspended overside from the starboard shrouds as the combined bathroom and head. The vessel had one drawback as far as comfort was concerned – she had no sleeping quarters. Her Malay crews, Hooper said, slept on the copra cargoes. I looked at her rig.

‘Queer set-up,’ I noted. ‘It’s a ketch, but I don’t like the way the main boom runs abaft the mizzenmast. We’ll need to top it up every time we go about. Heaven help us if we ever have an accidental jibe.’

‘Wouldn’t be the best thing to happen,’ the skipper agreed. ‘Perhaps we’d better have a closer look at the sails.’

We walked up the short gang-plank and went aboard. He fingered a fold of sail.

‘Not much better than butter muslin.’

‘A bit on the gossamer side,’ I said. ‘Think we’ll ever get to Ceylon with those?’

‘Touch and go,’ the skipper replied. ‘Perhaps you’d better scout around the shops and lay in a few bolts of cloth in case we have to make repairs. It’d be a good idea to get plenty of rope, too.’

By the time I returned with some bolts of cloth it was getting dark. The headman offered to let us spend the night in the one-room school, and we gladly accepted. But we were so excited at the prospect of escape that we had trouble in settling down for the night. We kept up a running cross-fire of conversation.

‘Golly, these floors are hard,’ moaned Limey, the British naval officer who was to be our cook. He had been badly hurt in the shoulder by a fragment of high explosive in the naval battle on Black Friday, and was threshing about trying to make himself comfortable.

‘Not so hard as the floors in a Jap prison,’ retorted Anzac, the New Zealand type. ‘I’ll take them any time. We’re still free and we’ve got a chance of making a getaway. I wonder how those poor jokers in Singapore are making out.’

‘Hard to tell, Anzac,’ the Colonel sighed. ‘There’s been no word. But one thing you can be sure of – they’re having no picnic.’

‘You can say that again,’ the skipper put in. ‘If we set sail as quickly as possible we’ve a pretty good chance of not knowing what it’s like being a prisoner of war.’

‘And keep going at all costs,’ said Limey. ‘It’s me for the girls and the high times in Ceylon. I’m sure to know some girls there. I know girls everywhere.’

‘Stow the girls,’ the Colonel growled. ‘We’ve a tough job ahead tomorrow. We need our sleep.’

At dawn we were awakened by a babble of voices. Outside our quarters Malays were streaming from all directions, laden with foodstuffs. They had come in response to our request. A regular market began to take shape, with baskets of limes, eggs, pineapples, sweet potatoes, yams, pawpaws, pomeloes, dried fish and bananas spread out on the ground.

Limey attended to the victualling, while the rest of us carried out our assigned tasks. All that day we worked, loading ballast, stores, and water, overhauling the rigging and splicing rope. Toward evening, order began to appear. With a grateful sigh, we lugged the last of our supplies aboard.

Our water was stored in six oil-drums of fifty-five-gallon capacity each, and ninety four-gallon petrol-cans open at the top. This gave us six hundred and ninety gallons, which we believed to be enough to last us for at least thirty days, even allowing for wastage.

Provisions, too, were reasonably adequate. We had two baskets of tinned goods and two full sacks of rice. We hard-boiled a number of duck eggs and took along all the green fruit we could buy. In our pile of green coconuts we had an emergency reserve of both food and liquid. We stowed everything in the hold and covered it with the split bamboo to serve as a kind of deck.

That afternoon the village headman gave us a farewell party. A throng of children came to the prahu to escort us back to the village centre. Mountains of fried chicken and rice and fresh fruits were

provided for us by the headman. One old man waved his arms up and down and blew lustily with his mouth, thus wishing us in pantomime a successful sea voyage.

Ralph Salmon, our interpreter, made a speech of thanks and farewell to which the headman replied with courteous formality: 'We are sorry that you cannot stay to enjoy our company. We have liked you. Now that you must leave us, we salute you and wish you good fortune on your long journey. May friendly winds take you quickly to your own people, and away from your enemy, the Japanese. When the war is over, and you have defeated them, come back to see us and we shall have another feast.'

Blessings and good wishes were lavished on us all the way to the prahu. The former crew insisted on coming aboard and setting the sails for us. Then they cast off and began poling us across the bay. The four Malay sailors were a picturesque sight as they worked silhouetted against the last light of the day, swinging their poles in rhythm to a weird melody of quartertones. Full ahead the sun in all its fiery glory was descending into the sea.

The skipper and I were lounging by the deckhouse, relishing the fresh evening breeze.

'This would be a bit of all right – if we didn't have the Japs breathing down our necks,' the skipper said.

I nodded.

He glanced down at the Malays.

'I'll bet you never started on an ocean race like this before.'

'I'll tell you this,' I replied. 'I never set out on one where the stakes were so high.'

The skipper's tanned face was serious.

'Yes – freedom and our lives – those are high stakes, all right.'

A little way down the deck, Limey was leaning his elbows on the rail. Suddenly he began to recite

Sunset and evening star

And one clear call for me:

May there be no moaning at the bar

When I put out to sea.

'He's thinking of all those unpaid chits at Raffles bar in Singapore,' said Anzac with a grin.

'I'll bet he left a few of those behind,' the skipper chuckled.

There was a burst of laughter. The tension, which had been building up with our departure, eased.

We were over the bar now. The Malays lifted their poles, lashed them to the side of the deckhouse and climbed over the rail to their dug-out canoe which the prahu had been towing behind. They cast off and stood up, bidding us farewell in an elaborate pantomime that combined good wishes with sharp sallies.

'Whoever heard of soldiers sailing their own boat?' their gestures seemed to say. 'Now you have only wind and water to fight. But since you must fight them – fight well!'

Quickly it became night. A gentle zephyr eased us out to sea. We were on our way.

At the tiller, the skipper puffed silently at his pipe and gazed contentedly over the Indian Ocean. After a time he called us together to set the shipboard routine. To Anzac, also a master mariner, he gave responsibility for the navigation. I was to be second mate. The colonel and Ralph Salmon were assigned to my watch. The skipper was to have the first watch, I the middle watch and Anzac the morning watch. Since Limey was not fit for heavier work, he was made paymaster and cook.

The skipper looked me over, taking stock of my large frame and ruddy Scottish complexion.

~~‘You’re a healthy-looking type,’ he said. ‘I’m going to call you Rosie.’~~

In the chaotic conditions that followed the fall of Singapore men from all the services, from all the nations of the Commonwealth, were thrown together for a brief time and then parted. We seldom knew a man’s full name. We gave one another generic nicknames and the nicknames stuck. A Londoner was given the tag of ‘Limey’; an Australian was known as ‘Aussie’; and so on. Thus I became known as ‘Rosie’.

Soon a singing wind came from the east, speeding us on our course. When I was called at midnight to take my watch I found that the wind had increased. We were making a good seven knots. No moon shone, but the silver brilliance of the stars lighted the white foam of the waves to a glow. The quietness around us was so different from the abrupt silence which had come sometimes in the middle of battle. It was the quietness of a pleasing symphony – a symphony of wind and waves and water gurgling in friendly fashion along the humming hull.

All went well through the next day. But the following dawn our kindly wind left us and we were at the mercy of an awkward sea. Sharp puffs came from every quarter, only to die down again.

It was my watch below, but I could not sleep. In the hold every sound from above deck was greatly amplified – the flap of the sails, the crack of booms, the rattle of the blocks. Suddenly there was a steep, heavy lurch. With it came the heart-breaking sound of canvas ripping. On deck all was chaos.

The accidental jibe I had dreaded had taken place. In the course of it the mainsail had been caught by the mizzen, and it was rent from head to foot, clew to throat, leech to luff. In place of the bellying sail that had been hurrying us along, a pitiful bundle of shreds hung lifeless from the mainmast.

No one spoke, but each one thought, ‘Does this mean that we’re not going to make it?’ Everyone put on a good face, however, and gathered in the tatters. All was not quite lost. The jib, staysail and mizzen were still set. To these we added a spare jib which we set on the mainmast.

Throughout the day, while we sailed slowly under our sparse canvas, we sewed furiously, hard pressed to it to keep our balance as we wallowed in a heavy sea. With the patience of despair, we pieced together a jigsaw from the rags that remained. At last we hoisted it, hardly daring to breathe. It held together. We allowed ourselves a faint cheer.

Later that night the wind steadied and freshened enough to take us along at four knots. We were off the move again, conscious that every mile of our wake meant a mile nearer safety.

About half-way through my watch I thought I saw something. My eyes were tired, so I rubbed them to make sure. No doubt about it. Two islands were coming up fast on the starboard bow.

The presence of any islands was enough to make us uneasy. They were likely to be coral reefs whose sharp teeth could chew into our hull. We had no charts of these waters. Our navigational aid was on a par with those of early sailing-ship days, consisted of a compass, a school atlas in Dutch (which none of us could read) and a naval book of nautical tables. We calculated our position daily by means of our day’s work. That is, we averaged our course, distance and leeway, and worked out our position with the aid of the log tables. At any given date we knew only roughly where we were.

The islands passed by to starboard. I could hear the southing of the waves embracing them.

My watch came to an end, and, still worried about our position, I turned in. I had hardly dropped off to sleep when the thump of running feet jerked me awake. What alarmed me more than the sound of the crew was the noise of booming surf smashing against a lee shore. I rushed on deck and through the pitch dark made out a mass of frothing foam, much too near us. Then I heard two splashes. The men on watch had let go both anchors and were paying out the hawsers. I joined in. We made the

fast to the bits and waited. The anchors held. We were safe for the time being.

Within an hour dawn came. Our pulses slowed at what it disclosed. On all sides of us waves were breaking into white bubbles over atolls and coral reefs. But we were afloat and in calm water. Miraculously, we had sailed into a lagoon. As the day strengthened, a beautiful scene emerged from the darkness: a succession of green, palm-fringed islands bordered with white beaches rose from the emerald-and-sapphire sea.

We lowered over the side the eleven-foot dug-out canoe lashed to the foredeck for just such an emergency. The Colonel, Salmon and I got in, and paddled along the lagoon until we came to an inlet where we could see a cluster of palm-leaf huts. Beaching the canoe, we went ashore to meet a large family of what appeared to be fisherfolk who had come out to greet us. Through Salmon we learned that we were on an island called Pini. This was only a small settlement, however; the head village was four or five miles away. The skipper decided that I should take Salmon and go to ask the headman for help in getting us out of the lagoon. Two of the fishermen volunteered to paddle us over.

One of them, a memorable character who was a kind of patriarch, had only one eye. We nicknamed him Nelson. He used his empty socket with devastating effect, turning it full upon us whenever I questioned our intelligence, which was often. Age, sun and sea had made his face a thing of wrinkled splendour. A permanent leering grin rounded off his character, giving him a lusty, villainous mien. While we paddled, I struck up a conversation with him through Salmon.

‘Have you lived here most of your life?’

‘All of my life, naturally.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I fish. What else would I do?’

‘Do you like working at sea?’

‘Oh yes. I know all about the sea. I understand it. I can get fish from it. We get on well together.’

He bobbed his head and screwed up his one good eye wisely as he said this.

‘Foolish man,’ he seemed to be implying. ‘Can’t you see I know my trade? See how I paddle this canoe! See how I can tell the ways of the water! The ocean and I are one!’

After crossing a brilliant blue bay we could see the village. The headman was already moving gracefully down the beach towards us. His white baju and sarong blended with the glistening sand, white in the sunlight, so that he seemed only face and arms and legs and feet. We shook hands without ceremony, in an act of friendship.

‘Come to my hut,’ he said, ‘and I will refresh you.’

The hut was spacious and clean, with the few furnishings neatly in order. The headman’s wife brought us clear coffee in glasses and a basket of small sweet bananas. We were describing our predicament when she returned, bearing a delicious meal of fried chicken, fried fish, steaming rice and a tray of empty bowls.

This was an enchanting interlude. Our host and hostess treated us with friendly courtesies, anticipating our every want. We made no attempt to hurry our conversation. We told them about the war, how we were escaping from the Japanese, how we had ripped our mainsail, repaired it as best we could and how we had miraculously found our way through the reefs into the placid waters of the lagoon.

‘What we need most of all at this moment is sails, rope and a pilot,’ I told the headman.

‘I cannot give you rope or sails,’ he said, ‘but shall be delighted to pilot you to Tana Masa, another

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