

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

Now a Major  
Motion Picture  
Starring

Golden Globe  
Winner

Kiefer  
Sutherland



# TO END ALL WARS

ERNEST GORDON

ZONDERVAN

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

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ABOUT THE WILL TO SURVIVE  
AND THE COURAGE TO FORGIVE

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**ZONDERVAN™**

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We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to us in care of [zreview@zondervan.com](mailto:zreview@zondervan.com). Thank you.

*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*

**ZONDERVAN™**

*To End All Wars*

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Ernest Gordon asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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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 in 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 et 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 camps 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 2001

*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 of southeast Asia, he learned the hardest lesson of all: to forgive – and even love – one's enemies. These 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