

THE LAST TREK

Again we received orders to move. We were to be separated from the other ranks and confined to a camp for officers only. Why, after three years, did the Japanese want to make such a change? The signs of uneasiness amongst them increased; there was something in the wind.

I learned that we were heading back to Kanburi, about sixty miles to the west of our present location. This was familiar territory. Near Kanburi had been the marshalling base for supplies to build the original bridge over the River Kwai; it was at this spot that I had boarded the barge which took us the few miles upriver to Chungkai. I wondered what Chungkai was like today. Did any prisoners still remain? Had the jungle reclaimed its own?

As the train clacked along its jungle track old memories stirred. In perspective, I could see that what I had experienced had been extraordinary – both at Chungkai and later at Nakawm Paton.

At first both had been places dominated by sickness and despair. Yet I had seen a Power at work to renew many of us. Men were still men, so I had seen selfishness. But I had also seen love. This love and the church without walls were related. The church, with all its imperfections, was the only visible earnest or guarantee of something greater. It set our feet on the way of an eternal pilgrimage and pointed us towards an unchanging goal – to the source of life and the City of God.

I recalled what Dostoevski had said in *The Possessed*:

The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great they will not go on living and die of despair. The Infinite and the Eternal are as essential for man as the little planet on which he dwells.

We had been at Kanburi only a few days when a guard informed us gleefully that Franklin D. Roosevelt was dead and that Winston Churchill was seriously ill and not expected to live. The Allied war effort was thus doomed to failure, and an Axis victory was imminent.

To counter this propaganda we had the evidence of our senses. The sight of Allied bombers overhead was no longer a rare occurrence. They appeared in the sky every day, scorning the chatter of the ack-ack battery mounted near the bridge. One morning the sirens sounded. This time the planes came in low and pattern-bombed the bridge. At the edge of our camp a train was standing. From the air the train made the area appear to be a legitimate military target. The fliers then pattern-bombed Kanburi, killing about forty men. The rest of us crouched in hastily made slit-trenches.

The bombing continued for several days. Although damaged slightly, the bridge was not destroyed. About a week later a rumble of thunder announced the approach of another raid. At the sound of the motors our guards dived for the nearest place of shelter. The squadron was well organized and thoroughly efficient in its task of destruction. As it zoomed overhead, two bombers detached themselves and swooped down on the ack-ack battery, silencing it in their first run. Then the formation broke up. Each plane, one at a time, made a run over the bridge. Against the blue skies the

bombers were a pleasing picture as they circled to await their turns.

A plane passed and dropped its stick of bombs. A span of the bridge disappeared. Another plane and another dropped their loads. This went on until every span was smashed. Each time bombs hit a span, a cheer went up from the crowd of emaciated men, despite their own danger from the bombs.

None of us had any love for that bridge. It had become a hated symbol – a symbol of Japanese power and ruthlessness. Prisoners of war had been driven to build it against their will. And as officers we had been forced to take part.

We watched the heavy beams as they floated downstream from the site of the bridge to us at Kanburi. Many remembered how they had waded in with those timbers on their shoulders, fighting to keep from being swept away by the furious current. They remembered the makeshift piledriver and the impossible demands it made on their exhausted bodies as they lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped, its heavy weight.

They remembered their determined attempts at sabotage; the sawing of the bolts half through when the attention of the guards could be diverted; the unscrewing of nuts that had been passed as 'OK' and the smashing of their threads. They remembered one prisoner with an inventive turn of mind, who had gathered queens of the white ant, a large jungle termite, and buried them beside the timbers in the hope that they would eat away the supports.

The last span floated past. A belly-based cheer went up from Kanburi.

'Hey!' a voice beside me cried. 'What if the Nips make us build it all over again?'

'Don't worry,' said another consolingly, 'they haven't the heart for it.'

I could only hope he was right.

Nothing remained now of the bridge over the River Kwai

but a mass of wreckage, already far downstream. The bombers came over again to take a last admiring look at their handiwork. The sound of the engines died away into quiet, but not for long. Our guards, having crawled out of their hiding-places, reacted from fear with shouts and curses and threats.

No other such incidents occurred to break the monotony. But the work load was not heavy, and life might have been supportable except for the sadistic character of the camp commandant, who rightly belonged in a mental institution. He was a snarling misanthrope, a scowling, vicious sadist, ever on the look-out for trouble. He hated us, although we never knew why. He went out of his way to create situations he could use as an excuse to torment us. He regularly baited prospective victims into making statements which he could interpret as a reflection on the Emperor.

On one occasion a British interpreter went to the assistance of an officer who was being tortured, and recklessly protected him with his own body. Guards held the interpreter while the crazed commandant beat him with a heavy ruler. Still alive and bleeding profusely, the offender was thrown into a slit-trench. The commandant ordered him to be kept there. Only his strong will enabled him to survive until his release.

It was hard to love such a man as the commandant.

The tension in the camp increased. At almost any time of day or night the Japanese continued to spring their surprise raids. They kept us standing on parade while they searched our sleeping-places. But now we had so little that there wasn't much they could find. Many items, nevertheless, remained safely hidden; compasses, maps and knives. One officer even had a dachshund which he had kept with him all the way from Singapore.

The behaviour of our guards puzzled us. Were they planning to massacre us? We had to face that possibility. If so, I decided to make a bid for freedom — even if it turned out to be no more

than a bid. I undertook a rigorous toughening-up programme. I was feeling better, apart from my periodic attacks of malaria, than at any time since my imprisonment. Every morning before reveille a friend and I did our exercises. We also volunteered to join a team operating the hand pump that gave the Japanese their water supply. This was hard work, but hard work was what we wanted.

Orders were then given for the whole camp to be moved, a few men at a time, to a new area north-east of Bangkok. Weary of Kanburi and its sour smells, I put in for one of the first parties to leave. Each consisted of about two hundred officers divided into three companies. One of my responsibilities as section commander was the distribution of equipment that had been allotted to us to carry, consisting of large, heavy dishes of awkward size, shovels, picks and hammers.

The spiritual growth which I had been witnessing for the past year or so had been mostly manifest among the other ranks. I had seen that attitude so well described by Lt-Gen. A. E. Percival in a letter written after the war:

Every Sunday the Churches were filled, and where there were no churches and no chaplain, services were held in ordinary buildings or in the open air, and were conducted by the prisoners themselves. Inspired by faith, the British soldiers in these camps displayed some of the finest qualities of their race. Courageous under repression and starvation, patient through the long years of waiting, cheerful and dignified in the face of adversity, they steadfastly resisted all efforts of the Japanese to break their spirit and finally conquered.

I had been impressed by those same qualities. I had faith in our Jocks. I had watched their developing concern for one another. But, not having had the same experience with my brother

officers, I wasn't so sure about them. Had the love of God touched them as well?

My doubts were soon dispelled. I was surprised to see how eagerly they accepted assignments and wanted to do what was best for the group as a whole. In fact, one band of officers came to me and offered to perform any especially unpleasant chores.

Eastward we travelled through Banpong towards Bangkok. All along the track we could see the damage done by the Allied air forces. Railway junctions and marshalling yards were in ruins. Often the train was switched to a temporary track, bypassing sections that had been wiped out. Occasionally we would wait while a train passed loaded with reinforcements bound for Burma. The troops looked woefully young. We even saw a cavalry regiment ride along the road. It had come all the way from China. Goodness knows how many months it had taken them to get this far. The ponies were scrawny; the leather in the reins and saddles was patched and broken.

Further on, we were shunted on to a siding for a lengthy stay. We found ourselves on the same track with several carloads of Japanese wounded. They were on their own and without medical care. No longer fit for action, they had been packed into railway trucks which were being returned to Bangkok. Whenever one of them died en route, he was thrown off into the jungle. The ones who survived to reach Bangkok would presumably receive some form of medical treatment there. But they were given none on the way.

They were in a shocking state; I have never seen men filthier. Their uniforms were encrusted with mud, blood and excrement. Their wounds, sorely inflamed and full of pus, crawled with maggots. The maggots, however, in eating the putrefying flesh, probably prevented gangrene.

We could understand now why the Japanese were so cruel to

their prisoners. If they didn't care a tinker's damn for their own, why should they care for us?

The wounded men looked at us forlornly as they sat with their heads resting against the carriages waiting fatalistically for death. They were the refuse of war; there was nowhere to go and no one to care for them. These were the enemy, more cowed and defeated than we had ever been.

Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their ration and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands went over to the Japanese train to help them. Our guards tried to prevent us, bawling, 'No goodka! No goodka!' But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. Grateful cries of '*Aragatto!*' ('Thank you!') followed us when we left.

An Allied officer from another section of the train had been taking it all in. 'What bloody fools you all are!' he said to me. 'Don't you realize that those are the enemy?'

'Have you never heard the story of the man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho?' I asked him. He gave me a blank look, so I continued, 'He was attacked by thugs, stripped of everything and left to die. Along came a priest; he passed him by. Then came a lawyer, a man of high principles; he passed by as well. Next came a Samaritan, a half-caste, a heretic, an enemy. But he didn't pass by; he stopped. His heart was filled with compassion. Kneeling down, he poured some wine through the unconscious lips, cleaned and dressed the helpless man's wounds, then took him to an inn where he had him cared for at his own expense.'

'But that's different!' the officer protested angrily. 'That's in the Bible. These are the swine who've starved us and beaten us. They've murdered our comrades. These are our enemies.'

'Who is mine enemy? Isn't he my neighbour? God makes

neighbours; we make enemies. You know full well that is where we excel. Mine enemy may be anyone who threatens my privileges – or my security – or my person – as well as those poor wretches who know no better. If they don't we, at least, should. Whether we like it or not, we are the ones who create the enemy and lose the neighbour. Mine enemy is my neighbour!

He gave me a scornful glance and, turning his back, left me to my thoughts.

I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into their hands. Now these same men were dressing the enemy's wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace, there in those blood-stained railway cars. God had broken through the barriers of our prejudice and had given us the will to obey His command, 'Thou shalt love'.

The words of Jesus came to me: 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father who is in heaven.'

The reply Reason made to such a command was, 'But we have to be practical because we live in a practical world. It doesn't pay to love – particularly your enemy.'

Now Faith answered, 'Quite true. One need but to look at the Cross to see this demonstrated. But – there is no other way to love. "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone."'

Our experience of life in death had taught us that the way to life leads through death. To see Jesus was to see in Him that love which is the very highest form of life, that love which has sacrifice as the logical end of its action. To hang on to life, to

guard it jealously, to preserve it, is to end up by burying it. Each of us must die to the physical life of selfishness, the life controlled by our hates, fears, lusts and prejudices in order to live in the flesh the life that is of the spirit. This is a basic law that cannot be broken except at great cost.

We were beginning to understand that as there were no easy ways for God, so there were no easy ways for us. God, we saw, was honouring us by allowing us to share in His labours, aye, in His agony – for the world He loves. God, in finding us, had enabled us to find our brother.

A whistle blew. A train with a light load came along, picked up our cars and we were on our way. We found the bridge over the River Tachin had been knocked out – not so thoroughly as the one over the Kwai, but thoroughly enough. Juggling our kit and tools, we shuffled across on a single plank high above the water.

Once on the other side, several of us were conscripted to load barges ferrying supplies across the river. It was hard coolie work performed under acute pressure and in scorching heat. I tried to take a drink of water, but it made me froth at the mouth. A work-mate gave me a pinch of salt and I was myself again. The urgency with which the Japanese drove us had its cheering aspect – it could only mean that they were suffering reverses in Burma.

In Bangkok we were to be transferred from one railway station to another. We were marched along a picturesque canal, where a highly decorated barge made a graceful picture as it cut through the reflection of the gilded Wat Arun pagoda. Friendly Thais in their white suits and bright sarongs lined our path, shouting and cheering as we went by, obviously trying to tell us something. They held up their fingers in a V-for-Victory sign. We were familiar with the V-sign, but we had no idea what they were attempting to convey by it now. Did it express no more than partisan enthusiasm? Or did they have hopeful

information? Mystified, but appreciating their gesture, I returned the salute.

Suddenly the smiling faces disappeared in a blaze of blackness. The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground, looking up at a guard standing over me ready to strike another blow. The indignant exclamations from the crowd, however, had their effect. After he had stormed at me for a while he lowered his rifle and allowed me to stagger to my feet. I considered the blow a fair price to pay for the friendship of the crowd.

When we reached the other station we were told that there would be an all-day wait for the train. Some POWs were working in the yard. I recognized two of them as Argylls. Jumping up quickly, I ran to meet them. But I was stopped short by a guard. Communication between different groups of prisoners was not tolerated.

I sat down in the shade of a warehouse close to the gang working under the watchful eye of a supervisor. Gradually I inched my way along without rising from a sitting position. After about an hour I reached the corner opposite the men. I gave a quick, low whistle. One of the Argylls glanced up, looked around, and was about to resume his work when he saw me sitting in the shadows.

‘Come over towards me,’ I called in a loud whisper, ‘and we’ll have a wee chat.’

He nodded to show that he had heard me. Then, keeping his back towards me, he pushed his hand-truck in my direction. He threw a box on the ground. As he stooped to pick it up, he said, ‘We’ll have to be awfully careful. The Nips are keeping a tight guard on us.’

‘That’s not a bad sign,’ I replied. ‘It must mean they’ve got the wind up. Do you have any news?’

He threw another box on the ground.

‘Not even a rumour. We’re a small camp – run by a Nip

warrant officer. He's a regular bastard. We're always being beaten up and having our rations cut.'

'Cheer up,' I said. 'We passed through Bangkok a while ago. The Thais look happy about something. I'm sure the news must be good. By the way, could you use any money?'

'Could I? Me and two other Argylls are mucking in together. One of them is pretty sick. The rest of us try to keep him going. If I could buy some food -'

'How can you buy food if the Nips won't let you speak to the Thais?'

'Nothing to it. We bribe the guards.'

He glanced over his shoulder. 'The Pig has his eye on me. I'd better finish this load.'

The guard was coming in his direction. He moved the handcart nearer the truck and lifted his last box. Picking up the handle of the empty cart, he passed near enough to whisper, 'I'll be back.'

The Pig was now quite close and stood berating him. He was facing the sun so he couldn't see me in the shadows. I sat there without moving, waiting for the Argyll to come back. After a long ten minutes he returned, pulling an enormous stack of boxes.

'You'd think I was a bloody donkey, wouldn't you?' He brought the cart to a stop. Then he said, 'You'd better hop it or they'll beat the life out of you.'

'Dinna worry,' I replied, 'they'll not do that.' I fumbled at my waist, where I had over fifty bahts of my pay tucked. 'I'm putting this money under a stone. When you've finished, pick it up.'

I held up the stone for him to see; then I placed it on top of the bahts.

'Best of luck. Give my love to the boys.'

'That I'll do. And thanks for the cash.'

'Goodbye, Jock. God bless you.'

'Goodbye, sir. And God bless you.'

Under the watchful eye of the Pig, he resumed loading more energetically than before, while I inched my way back along the shadows to rejoin my party.

It was well after dark when our train came. We rode all night standing up, and at dawn were dumped by a roadside and ordered to march. We found ourselves in the midst of paddy fields stretching away into nowhere. We began to march. As the sun climbed, the heat became stifling, for it was about the hottest part of the year. At noon we were halted briefly and allowed to boil some water to drink. There was nothing left to eat, as our journey had taken longer than expected.

As we took the road again, a big car drove up. A Japanese officer glared at us, glanced at his watch, told our guards to hurry us up, then drove away. The heat grew so intense that the metal of our tools and utensils blistered our fingers at the touch. Again we had no water or salt. The afternoon seemed unending.

With the coming of night the temperature dropped and it seemed chilly by contrast. Then the skies opened and it began to rain with sudden tropical ferocity. The road was a quagmire and the whole countryside was a swamp. Our packs took on the weight of lead. At every step the suction of the mud dragged us down. Some faltered and could not go on. Their burdens were shouldered by others. With our arms around the flagging ones, we made it into Camp Nakon Nyok at about four in the morning. It had taken us almost twenty-four hours to march the forty miles.

We were assigned space in a half-completed hut and fell asleep as we were, drenched and caked with mud. At six I was awakened with a shake and ordered to produce four officers at once for a work party. I thought this was barbarous and said so at once. But no one paid attention.

Taking note of our surroundings, we found that we were

right in the middle of a military position the Japanese were preparing for their defence. It was apparently intended to block an invasion following a possible Allied landing on the coast near Bangkok. We were at the base of the foothills. Between us and the shore there was nothing but a great flat plain of paddy fields. Troops came and went. We could hear big guns being moved into place. On a steep hill above us we could see an observation post being constructed. Here the Japanese were apparently making ready for a last desperate stand.

We had to admit that our prospects did not look bright. Japanese officers scowled at us as they rode by on horseback. The air crackled with tension. The camp commandant, the same one we'd had at Kanburi, appeared and was immediately more demanding and nastier than ever. Every day there was a cluster of prisoners staked to the ground in front of the guard house. We had no news of the war's progress, but we could feel that something important was in the wind.

One morning we had gone to work as usual. This time we were to carry rocks down the hill to ballast the road we were building. About mid-morning our guards disappeared. We took advantage of their absence by lying down to rest. After several hours they returned drunk. They motioned us to pack up and go back to the camp.

'This is it!' I said excitedly to Blondie, a friend of mine, as we started back to camp.

'What do you mean?'

'The Japs are licked. The show is over. They've thrown in the sponge.'

Blondie was more conservative. 'Take it easy, don't get your hopes up,' he said. 'Tell me what you've got to go on.'

We were marching past the guard house. The ground in front of it was empty.

'What do you make of that, Blondie? Where do you suppose the poor blighters are who were staked out there this morning?'

He refused to be impressed.

'Oh, I dunno. Perhaps they've been released.'

'You can bet they've been released. Tell me – when do you remember seeing that piece of ground free of prisoners? And they're not the only ones who'll be released. Wait and see.'

'Oh, I dunno,' he said. 'I dunno about that.'

About the middle of the evening, news spread through the tense, expectant huts that the Japanese commandant had sent for Lt Colonel Toosey, the British senior officer. I was sitting in our hut with John Leckie and several other old friends, wondering what was happening. We hadn't long to wait for an answer. Word flashed from one end of the camp to the other. In the dim light of the palm-oil lamp faces shone. Silently we shook hands.

Someone started singing. Then everyone was singing with all his power. The song was quickly taken up; it resounded from hut to hut. From everywhere it came – the words of Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance':

*Land of hope and glory,
Mother of the free,
How shall we extol thee,
Who are born of thee?*

*Wider still and wider
Shall thy bounds be set;
God who made thee mighty,
Make thee mightier yet!*

Next we sang 'God Save the King', 'Jerusalem the Golden' and the 23rd Psalm. We sang and we kept on singing. It was hearty singing – the singing of free men.

We noticed that our guards had all melted into the night. There was a reason for this. The Japanese military had been

accustomed to singing war-chants to nerve themselves for battle. When they heard our hearty singing they concluded that we were preparing to slaughter them, so they took to the hills.

It was late before the camp was allowed to return to silence.

Before reveille I was outside the hut, doing my exercises, when I sensed that I was being watched. Turning round, I saw a guard standing at attention about ten yards away. When he caught my eye he bowed and kept on bowing. I thought at first he must be trying to imitate me. But his bows weren't deep enough for that.

Not knowing what else to do, I smiled at him. He smiled back.

'Okayga?'

'Okayga.'

Without waiting for further word, he streaked for the hills. Presumably he had been chosen to find out what we planned to do. The Japanese soon afterwards returned to their quarters, one or two at a time, keeping their distance. Though we now held the power, it never occurred to us to raise a hand against them.

The moment of grace by the railway siding was no temporary experience. The same situation held true in other camps. The liberators were so infuriated by what they saw that they wanted to shoot the Japanese on the spot. Only the intervention of the victims prevented them. Captors were spared by their captives. 'Let mercy take the place of bloodshed,' said these exhausted but forgiving men. 'Not an eye for an eye, a limb for a limb.'

Like faith and forgiveness, freedom isn't something just to be talked about. It has to be enacted. After breakfast, John Leckie and I felt that on this our first morning of freedom we had to climb the hill behind the camp. While we made our way to the top, we saw that others had had the same impulse. There were scattered groups of men, some ahead of us, some behind

us, going up in silence. We reached the top. Stretching out before us, as far as we could see, was the brown-and-green patchwork quilt of the paddy fields. We stood in quiet reverence, gazing out over those fields to the horizon, towards Chungkai, where our friends had died, and we spoke the words of Psalm 121, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.'

Freedom burst out all over. When the Japanese commandant had read the order granting POWs permission to fly their flags and to play national anthems they were only carrying out a formality. They did not expect these things to happen. At a nearby camp, however, within minutes of the reading of the order, an enormous Union Jack was fluttering bravely from the flagpole. That banner had been carried through the death camps of the railway for that very moment by an Argyll who never doubted that the day of victory would come. The Japanese had not found it, for he had made his blanket into a sleeping-bag with the Union Jack lining it.

At our own camp a flag was quickly found and hoisted. As we looked at it waving proudly, we saw it as a symbol of our liberty – our liberty founded on the Cross; for the Union Jack is composed of three crosses, the Cross of St George, the Cross of St Patrick and the Cross of St Andrew.

Soon afterwards, a fellow Argyll, David Boyle, had the pleasure of going to the Japanese commandant and demanding a battery to operate our wireless. The commandant stared at him. 'Battery? Wireless? But you can't have a wireless!'

'We've had one here for quite a while,' David informed him.

'But how? How did you get it in?'

'You brought it in for us.'

'No. I wouldn't do that.'

'You did, though. You brought it in from Kanburi – with that loot you had in your baggage.'

The commandant was speechless. David went on, 'We knew your searches were so thorough that we hadn't a chance in hell

of smuggling the wireless into camp unless we sent it in with you.'

'But . . . but . . .' The commandant was still nonplussed.

David spelled it out for him. 'Remember the squad you detailed to load your baggage for you? They slipped the set in . . . Another squad slipped it out again after you got here . . . Now, how about that battery?'

'Certainly, certainly,' said the commandant, coming to attention and bowing. 'You shall have it right away.'

'Quite,' David said crisply. He turned his back on the commandant and walked out. The list of this officer's crimes was so long that he was sentenced by his own superiors to life imprisonment. Soon after that he was tried again by the Allied tribunal and received the death sentence.

We put our wireless into operation at once. We learned then that Russia had declared war on Japan, and that the atom bombs had been dropped. But we also learned of the Japanese directive ordering that if Admiral Mountbatten landed troops in Thailand all officers in prison camps were to be killed. At the same time we learned that our new camp had been observed and was presumed to be a location for Japanese troops. Therefore it was scheduled to be bombed by the RAF. The Mountbatten landings were set for 28 August, the RAF bombings for 17 August. Since the day of liberation was 16 August, we had a very narrow margin of safety. Had the war continued for two more weeks, we would have copped it one way or another, at the hands of friend or foe.

We stayed on in camp to await orders. The Japanese quarter masters released Red Cross parcels to us. Our faces fell when we saw that they were marked 'September 1942'. We found their contents completely unusable.

Whatever entertainment there might be we had to provide for ourselves, but we were old hands at it by now. Willing workers quickly erected a stage on which was produced a

Liberty Revue, including a Victory Can-Can danced and sung by a chorus of 'the short and the fat and the tall'. Ponies were confiscated from a Japanese cavalry unit for a genuine Liberty Derby.

Our first visitor from the outside world was an American paratrooper who had lost his way and wandered into our camp. We wondered what he must have thought as he was seized by a yelling crowd of skinny, bronzed, bearded, half-naked savages who bore him on their shoulders through the camp. For hours we bombarded him with questions, while he recounted, step by step, the entire course of the war, regaling us with everything that had happened during our three-and-a-half years of silence. To us he was the living embodiment of the freedom we had longed for all that time.