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Alistair Urquhart, *The Forgotten Highlander My Incredible Story of Survival During the War in the Far East* Little, Brown £10.99 (Hardcover)

Compensation for the suffering under Japanese maltreatment is the underlying concern to this book. Why did the British government wait until 2000 to offer £10,000 to the survivors of the POWs captured in the Far Eastern theatre of war which ended in 1945 – a gap of 55 years? Was forcing POWs to keep silent about Japanese war crimes a betrayal of the men and women from both the Commonwealth and ‘native’ nations who saw and experienced the barbarity at first hand? Would having witnesses talking about the actual impact of atomic bomb blasts have weakened British governments in achieving the strategic policy of using such weapons to counter the nuclear threat from the USSR?

Alistair has received a strong response from the media with articles in the Daily Mail and interviews on radio. He had kept to himself what he personally experienced for more than 60 years, to dampen down his post-traumatic stress and to hide from family and friends the full extent of the barbarous treatment of the POWs. The book overall is well written and presented in chronological order of Alistair’s pre-War life as a warehouseman and a lover of the slow fox-trot. The initial training for combat, the voyage from Marseilles to Singapore through the Suez Canal, the months witnessing the arrogance, complacency and the bungling of the colonists, and teaching of the Chinese ‘dancing girls’ how to dance smoothly. When the Japanese stormed across the Malayan beaches and jungle, the Allied infantry fought doggedly against tanks and highly skilled jungle fighters. Two weeks after the battle for the island began 80,000 soldiers surrendered to a much smaller Japanese force. The atrocities to the Chinese are well documented as are the conditions in the Changi POW camp. As new campaigns elsewhere took the headlines, the Singaporean POWs were forgotten.

After the horrors of the 900 mile rail journey into Thailand, Alastair became part of the Death Railway. I have walked across the surviving steel and concrete bridge on the River Kwai so have an inkling of what the Allied construction gangs faced. I have been into Hellfire Pass to see the memorial to the Australian hewers of that large piece of limestone, only softened by a tree growing from the old trackbed in that massive trench. Beyond the rock is the hillside where prisoners had to position the stones for the bed of the railway, the stones are gradually slipping down towards the Kwai. The tourist can walk back to the museum for refreshments, the prisoners could not despite the great heat and humidity and the failure of the Japanese captors to offer them more than a starvation diet for his 750 days in the jungle.

Cholera released him into a hospital camp where he recovered the use of his feet. After portering sacks of rice and sugar in the Singapore docks he became one of 900 stuffed into a ‘hellship’ *Kachidoki Maru* which was later torpedoed by an American submarine. By luck he found a single-sized raft in which he floated for five days before being rescued by a Japanese whaling ship. Eventually he laboured in an open-cast coalmine close to the Japanese port of Nagasaki, before witnessing the blast of the second atomic bomb exploded over Japan.

Alistair deals with the psychological stresses of re-entering a civilized world and the kindness of the remarkable Miss Ash in San Francisco. By railway across the United States to New York, he crossed the Atlantic in the *Queen Mary* to dock at Southampton. With no welcome home came the resentment that underpins his book, linked to the British government’s seeming lack of interest to help POWs returning from Japan. The fox-trot helped him to



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reintegrate into Aberdeen society and into a successful marriage. He still answers queries from families anxious to know what their menfolk experienced at the hands of their Japanese captors. Though his book is a personal document rather than military history nevertheless it can bring understanding to the many families researching into their ancestors who suffered in the forgotten army.

George Bailey

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