Write His Story: A Response to 'Tell a Different Story'

Abstract

In this essay, a member of the audience who attended Professor Frank Cottrell Boyce's Kilbrandon lecture shares a very personal story of their father's survival.

Keywords

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'Why did some survive - and others not?' As I listened to Frank Cottrell Boyce reflecting on the extraordinary life of Eric Lomax, the author of *The Railway Man* my father's experience as a Japanese prisoner of war resonated. He too was named Eric. The question of why he, and not others, survived haunted him until his death in 1990.

Following the lecture I spoke to Frank about my own journey to try and answer that question. Before we parted I, shamelessly, asked Frank to sign a copy of *Millions* for my 7-year-old daughter. On my way home, I saw that having written some words of encouragement to her, he had added 'Tell your dad to write his story'. So here is my first attempt.

I'll start, if I may, back in 2003. I am looking at the most extraordinarily beautiful sunset over the Indian Ocean from the old Governor's residence in Columbo, Sri Lanka, in the very same place from which my father in 1945 looked out, taking in the amazing view. Like so many others at that time, he was being cared for in the residence - then a military hospital - recovering from his experience as a Japanese prisoner of war. He was 32. What on earth was going through his mind at that time? I know something of the answer because towards the end of his life I had the chance to ask him.

The end of the war brought with it feelings of apprehension; how would the world 'be' back home? After years of almost unimaginable horror, would he 'fit in' again? He also told me that during his time as a prisoner of war he dreamt of seeing family, his wife and, of cheese. He loved cheese.

Eric was born in 1913; he was a humble Englishman from Melton in Leicestershire. He left school at fifteen. His formative years were spent in Melton and later Nottingham during and immediately after the Great War. Brought up by his mother (his father never returned

from that conflict), he discovered in the playground that the man he called 'granddad' was his mother's partner and much older. He was bullied for it. It was hard for his mother no doubt, and he remembered resenting her for not telling him herself. His elder sister was brought up by an aunt – his mother could not afford to bring up two children - however, a baby brother was added to the family in the early 1920s.

Eric was musical and sang as a boy in his local Parish choir, under the direction of the then little-known organist and musician, Malcolm Sargent, and enjoyed cycling and camping throughout rural Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. His lifelong friendship with the Betts brothers, Sid and Ernest, was cemented then, and of course Stilton is made in and around Melton.

He enlisted in Prestatyn on 27 June 1940, joining the Royal Corps of Signals. He laid cables in Oxford and then near Dover during the Battle of Britain, before receiving orders for deployment in North Africa in the December of 1940 to fight, he thought, in the desert. Before embarkation, he went with some colleagues to a clairvoyant, quite popular then especially with those leaving to go to war:

> ‘I see you amongst thick green trees and yellow men. You will survive’.

She was ‘clearly mad’, he remarked to me later. He held on to that last bit. It became an ever-present voice in his head and may well have been a factor in helping him save his own life.

But they didn't call in to North Africa; the ship put in at Durban and was re-routed to Singapore. Maybe the words of 'Gypsy Rosie Lee' were not quite so far-fetched. Once in Singapore, he became ill and his unit moved on without him, leaving him to recover among an Australian unit. He was shortly afterwards attached to a Dutch infantry unit heading for Java and saw active engagement there against the Japanese.

He was taken prisoner by the Japanese in Java on March 8, 1942, after the Dutch surrender. ‘A Japanese prisoner of war’....the phrase sounds so neutral, so matter-of-fact.

Initially, there was little work for Eric to do except attend to the supply of provisions for prisoners and guards in the camp. In the early days it was something of a relief from the fatigue of fighting. He discovered a library in the permanent Dutch barracks where they found themselves detained, and this proved to be a real friend to him and others. There were few books in English and he and his British comrades struggled to find enough to read. He, along with some others, had an interest in foreign languages and they found themselves well catered for, with many books in French, German and Dutch. Eric had taught himself French and German before the war. Till then, he had very little knowledge of Dutch or Malay, but was determined to learn both. There were a great variety of vocations and trades in the camp and they were given permission to hold classes on different subjects. They were conducted in French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Afrikaans, Malay, Russian, and of course, Japanese. He cultivated an interest in everything he could, including woodwork.

Each prisoner had to carve a food bowl out of coconut shell engraved with name and number in Japanese. My mum still has it. He was convinced, later, that these initial activities helped him to transition into the role of ‘prisoner’, and prepare him for what was still to come.

He was forced to perform everything under orders in Nipponese (as the Japanese refer to their language). The Japanese numbers system is:

> *Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, sichi, hachi, kyu, dju* and so on.

To start with, the prisoners couldn't care less and would be beaten up for not following orders. Eventually, a few amongst them, including dad, started to understand that knowing the numbers prevented a beating, and so would stand in the front row to shout out the numbers. However, every now and then, the Japanese would start with the back row - and the beatings started again.

Looking for opportunities to 'get one over' on their captors became a preoccupation. They would steal from the Japanese kitchen - bags of sugar were often 'diverted' - yet the Japanese never seemed to notice. Resistance became more sophisticated. Prisoners would sabotage Japanese trucks and cars, including pouring water into their petrol tanks.

At first they received Australian rations, which were apparently superior to British ones. When they ran out they were reliant on the food that the local people ate, mostly rice. The good news was that they were surrounded by rice paddies, the bad that the rice was poor quality and boiled the Chinese way, without any sugar, salt or milk. So searching for food became a recreation. It was rare indeed to eat meat. But they tried everything available including buffalo, boar, monkey, snake, and even cat and dog.

Soon, they were moved to other camps, some to other islands to build airports, paths, radio stations and naturally....railways, including the infamous Burma-Siam railway.

My father counted himself lucky because he remained on Java before being moved. At that point there were a few thousand British prisoners on Java. The Indians had been conscripted into the Japanese army. The Australians were taken to Siam to build the railway there. This left the British, the Dutch, colonial troops from the islands, and several minorities including Danes, Norwegians, and Portuguese (then neutral). There was also one Russian and one Turk.

Here, he and others, including his colleague and friend Colonel Laurence Van der Post, built and used secret radios and small rice distilleries. In spite of frequent searches they were never found. Had they been, they would have been beheaded. The radios connected them, mainly the officers, to the outside world, but this did not provide them with the comfort that they sought and needed. He hid his bible too – the pages made great roll-ups.

The Japanese continually used propaganda to grind them down:

> *The gallant Japanese had already sunk the American fleet several times!!*

They were slaves for life!!

Their wives and girlfriends were now living with the Americans!!

The Japanese slavishly believed their own propaganda too;

One of their brave pilots was killed while fighting the American enemy and such was his spirit that he guided the plane back to its base...

An American pilot was shot down because one brave Japanese pilot who had run out of ammunition had attacked him with old rice cakes.

A gallant Japanese sailor, who had noticed that a torpedo was going to miss its target, jumped in the water and swam holding it in his arms.

And then in May 1943 life worsened; his 'life of Reilly' was over.

His section was moved and leaving Java by boat, via Singapore, for Padang on the West coast of Sumatra. Some boats had the Red Cross emblazoned on them - the ones with the Japanese military and ammunition. Prisoners were pushed into the holds of the unmarked boats and were only allowed on deck once a day in the suffocating, tropical heat. You soiled yourself where you stood. The hatches were routinely closed during the day but opened at night.

Over half of them died.

They had to endure being torpedoed by the Americans. Some ships in the convoy were lost - mostly unmarked and containing POWs. Dad later recalled the Cockney lad whose sense of humour kept them going that night. Sadly, he never saw the sun again.

On disembarking in Padang, Eric and the others were sent to a Dutch holding prison. Black and white, soldier and civilian became comrades - dying side-by-side, enduring horrible deaths, nearly all with dysentery. He experienced a week of this personal hell, before being moved out and away by railway. Not knowing what was yet to come he thought himself lucky. He remembered the Clairvoyant’s voice saying, ‘You will survive’.

The journey at first was a relief. The air was pure and fresh, and the view magnificent, despite the overcrowded railway wagon and the insanitary conditions. Constantly watched by the Japanese, with rifle, bayonet and machine gun, they soon reached lower ground. Endless hot sun, swamps, flies, bedbugs, mosquitoes and far worse, contagious disease.

It was now constant forced labour. Day and night. No time to read. No time to study. They had to clear the jungle, build their encampments, and construct by HAND, the trans-Sumatra railway, linking coal mines to the sea to supply the Japanese navy.

Slowing down meant a beating. Helping a comrade meant a beating. Forgetting to bow meant a beating. Beating. Beating.

Here lived suffering and deprivation. All were becoming weaker and malnourished, constantly fighting an array of diseases. He succumbed to most including dysentery and beri beri, but, as he noted at the time, he seemed luckier than most. He always seemed to recover.

He helped in the hospital when he could and later remarked to me on the extraordinary tenderness and compassion of this all-male group. The POWs were tortured by both hunger and isolation. There seemed to be no world beyond their miserable existence, only loneliness and hopelessness. The Japanese too seemed, over time, to become more tolerant. Their suffering was strangely similar, except that they enjoyed more and better food than that of the prisoners.

They never received parcels from the Red Cross; no letters from home. They were allowed to send one postcard home once every six months, dictated by the Japanese. None arrived. At home Eric was reported 'Missing - presumed dead'. I think that is how he must have felt inside.

Eric was saved just in time. Very few of his comrades had survived. He arrived in England in December 1945 having spent a few months in that hospital in the Old Governor’s Residence, with the amazing view, at Mount Lavinia, Columbo, Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon.

He was demobbed in York on 4 January 1946. The army medic wrote that he was ‘Six stone one; A 1 - fit for active service. Discharged’ and his army record states that his military conduct was:

> *Exemplary; Prisoner of war in Japanese hands Far East 1943 (sic). A careful, accurate and diligent worker who is thoroughly honest, trustworthy and sober.*

And after the war? He found his family. His first postcard home, post-liberation, is touching in its thoughtfulness:

> *Dear Mother. Feeling fine and very optimistic. Remember me to all relations and friends. Keep smiling. Love Eric.*

There was no wife. Eric had been reported 'Missing presumed dead'. His wife had moved on, selling all his possessions. That bit of the dream had gone. He married again, Jessie, in the late 1940s and they had a child, my half-sister Heather, on the 23rd December 1953. Jessie died on Christmas Day from postnatal complications.

He returned to the job he left in the Lace Market in Nottingham, his old firm having kept his job open for him. He took up again with his old friends Sid and Ernest.

His nightmares, and recurrent malaria, dissipated in time. He found a new wife Betty, my mum. They married in 1957. They were to have 33 years together and had my brother and me. She nursed Eric through Parkinson's disease - most probably the result of his wartime diet. It was during the last stages of that illness, when looking after him to give my mother a break, I had a chance to speak to him.

Writing a speech (in French) to give to a civic French society in the 1960s he recalled:

> *But, you know, I have neither bitterness nor hatred for the Japanese. War is war unfortunately, and we must hate it and think of peace and not of vengeance.*

He forgave - but he didn't forget. As with many of those who endure suffering and trauma, he did not speak of it unless pressed. He survived, he said, by keeping his mind active, never accepting hopelessness and maintaining a capacity to forgive.

The experience, however, haunted him all his life. His work required him to meet Japanese clients after the war. They never asked where he had learnt his excellent Nipponese. He never learned how to make the hair on his neck go down as he conversed in it.

But it never got the better of him. He would still laugh at some of the funny things that happened. He could recount many, all delivered in the style of Spike Milligan. He wore his old uniform with Japanese boots in the garden for years. He laughed at the disease which eventually killed him. He never again felt nervous. He didn't see the point.

> *When you have been sentenced to death and no one carries it out for 6 months, what else is there to get nervous about?*

There was definitely something about the clairvoyant’s voice saying that he would survive....

His life was marked by times when he had every reason to feel despair; however, he always found ways to rise above it. Keeping his mind active, reading and learning and taking an interest in others. He was not a religious man, describing himself as an atheist. In spite of this, he and the RAF chaplain, Eric Jones, took responsibility for burying many of their old comrades after the war. When my father’s time came the family held a church service. At the end of the service the chaplain, alone, accompanied him to the crematorium. It felt absolutely right.

To the end Eric always found something in every situation to laugh about. As for what he relished on returning from Ceylon? –cheese.

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