

LESSONS FROM THE RIVER KWAI

In response to the 60th anniversary of VJ (Victory over Japan) Day celebrations on 15 August 2005, David Morgan reflects on the experiences of former prisoner of war, Ernest Gordon. Ernest's story was told in the best selling paperback, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, published in 1963 and, more recently, in the film, *To End All Wars*, released in 2001. A paperback book-of-the-film entitled *To End All Wars: a true story about the will to survive and the courage to forgive* was published by Zondervan in 2002.

Selfless and sacrificial

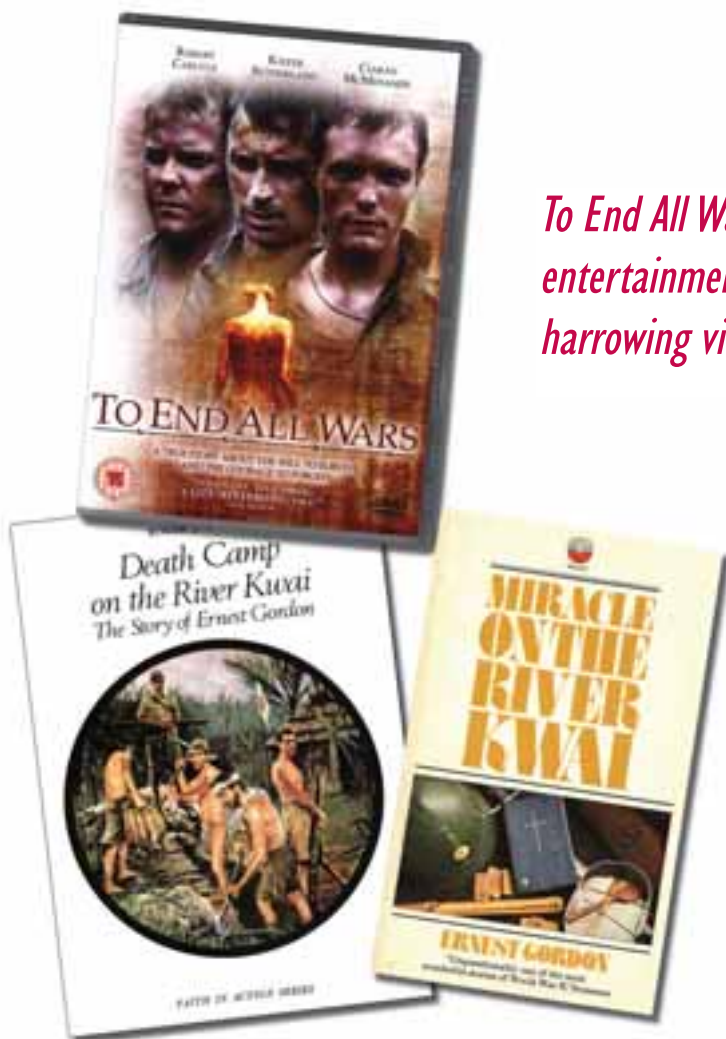
The widely acclaimed book, *Miracle on the River Kwai* (Collins, 1963), was first introduced to me through a church sermon about 30 years ago. I have since re-read it several times. Ernest Gordon, a young captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was amongst thousands of Allied soldiers captured and imprisoned after Singapore fell to Japanese forces in 1942. Subsequently, the prisoners of war were forced to work in Thailand constructing the Japanese railway to Burma in the valley of the River Kwai.

Amidst the horrifying and brutal living and working conditions in the forests, thousands of Allied soldiers died. Ernest would have died as well, but for the sacrificial care and support he received, when desperately ill, from two of his mates, Dusty

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and Dinty, who both happened to be practical Christians! Ernest recovered, and then devoted his spare time – along with other Christian prisoners – demonstrating a practical, Christ-centred way of life. Gradually morale amongst the prisoners was lifted as some of the men demonstrated a selfless and sacrificial way of living.

The level of selfishness, hatred and despair that had characterised life in the POW camp early on became less dominant. People's gifts were identified and they were encouraged to share them with others. Ernest, who had wanted to teach when the war was over, was asked to start teaching fellow prisoners about literature; others promoted music and drama. Gardens were started to grow desperately needed foodstuffs and herbs, even medicines. Bartering with some of the local Thai people also occurred.



Community education at its most basic was growing from the grass roots. The study schemes became an informal 'university', with diplomas being awarded. A church-with-no walls was set up by the prisoners (and permitted by their captors) outside the bamboo walls of the camp, for spiritual nurture and worship. Meanwhile, the railway construction was nearing completion at great cost in human lives.

Loving the enemy

Relationships between captors and captives improved to some extent as the years passed. The captors realised that tensions had eased as a result of the improved community spirit, and the regular concerts were enjoyed by them as well as by the prisoners. As World War II drew towards its conclusion in 1945, issues of revenge versus forgiveness and reconciliation came to the fore.

One incident recounted tells of an encounter between the Allied prisoners and a group of passing wounded Japanese soldiers, who were receiving no medical care. Spontaneously, many of the prisoners passed water and food over to them as an act of practical compassion. Perhaps they were recalling the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the words of Jesus: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). After the surrender of the Japanese, Ernest relates that the Allied prisoners did not exact revenge on their former captors.

After the war, Ernest Gordon fulfilled his aim of becoming a teacher. He was ordained in the Presbyterian ministry and later became Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University in the USA where he ministered for 26 years to countless young people. Towards the end of his life, the experiences he had described in the book were transferred to the silver screen. In 2001 *To End All Wars* (starring Robert Carlyle and Kiefer Sutherland) was released.

Late one August evening, I watched the film on BBC2 TV in our caravan by the shores of Cardigan Bay. I managed to stay awake until its conclusion

Dusty said to me, 'None of us thought you'd live... To tell you the truth... I didn't see how on earth you possibly could.' Then he added softly, 'But I prayed that you would.'

MIRACLE ON THE RIVER KWAI (p137)

'I've never been much of a one to pray – but that's what I'm doing, I'm praying. Prayer makes me feel stronger, see – and then I'm ready for whatever's coming next.' *MIRACLE ON THE RIVER KWAI (p152)*



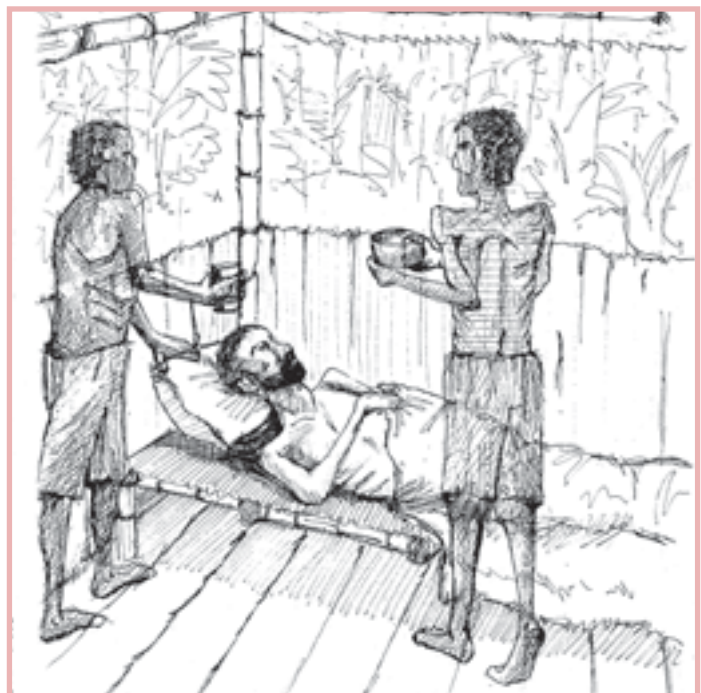
David was, until his retirement in 2001, Community Tutor at The Leys High School (now called Kingsley College) in Redditch, Worcestershire.

at 12.20am and was entertained traumatically by its modern, reality-style cinematography – similar in many ways to *Saving Private Ryan*.

The earlier (and much better-known and oft-repeated) POW film is, of course, *Bridge on the River Kwai* (starring Alec Guinness and William Holden). Released in 1957, it won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. *Bridge on the River Kwai* is considerably more sanitised and less violent than *To End All Wars*. The latter vividly brings to life the terrible living and working conditions of the prisoners, the appalling health risks and lack of medical care and the utter brutality of the camp guards.

Reconciliation and healing

To End All Wars is certainly not relaxing entertainment! It contains strong language and harrowing violence, and is not for the faint-hearted. It depicts war in all its dehumanising ugliness. Yet it also shows how the human spirit, particularly when motivated by a relationship with our living God, can begin to rise above the most appalling, vengeful and abusive of environments.



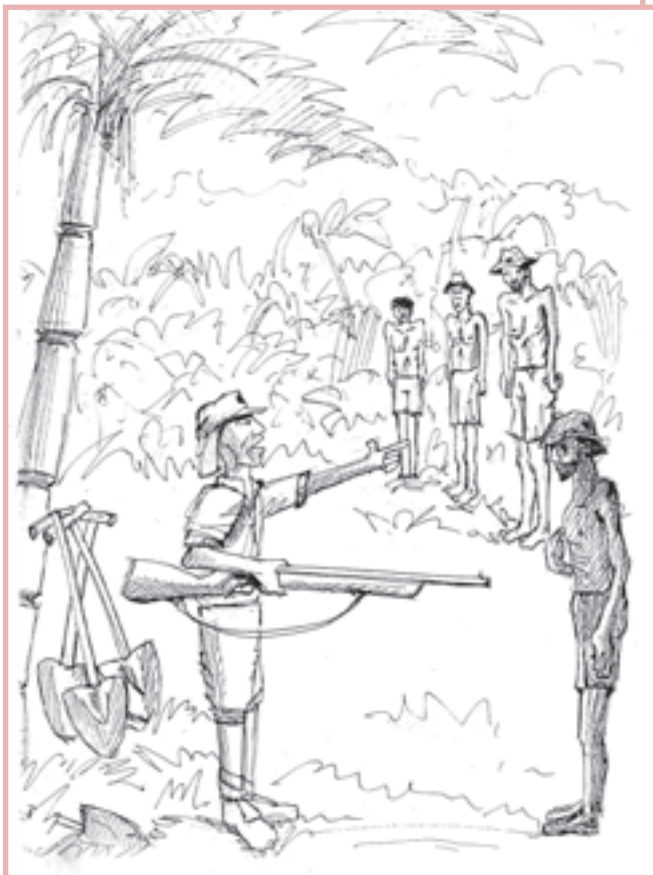
Ernest's hospital shelter

*I have used several of the stories from **Miracle on the River Kwai** in assemblies, fellowship meetings and RE lessons.*

Fruits of goodness can result from suffering. I am reminded of Jesus' words: 'I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds' (John 12:24).

The film shows the contrast (and conflict) between two survival strategies. Some prisoners (eg Major Campbell) demonstrate a hard-line antagonism toward their captors; other prisoners (eg Captain Gordon) live out a more pragmatic let's-avoid-unnecessary-conflict-and-co-exist philosophy.

The film portrays Japanese brutality as an outworking of a fascist worldview: the strong should prevail and the weak (whether Allied or Japanese) should perish. In short, the Japanese regime is brutal and unforgiving; its military machine is not interested in caring for its own wounded soldiers. There is no room for mercy; no room for mistakes. Once someone – even a faithful Japanese soldier – 'loses face' there is no room for them in a system based on a 'might is right' philosophy.



The incident of the lost shovel

A final update on the events in *Miracle on the River Kwai* is afforded by the closing scene in *To End All Wars*. It shows an elderly Ernest Gordon (now the retired Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University) being re-united with Takashi Nagase (the Cambridge-educated Japanese Imperial Translator from the prison camp; now a Buddhist priest) at Kanchamburi War Cemetery in Thailand in 2000. This touching reconciliation of former enemies echoes an event in Eric Lomax's book, *The Railway Man* (1995), when the author was reunited with his former torturer.

Lessons learnt

Over many years of teaching at a high school in Redditch in Worcestershire, I have used several of the stories from *Miracle on the River Kwai* in assemblies, fellowship meetings and RE lessons. Themes such as practical caring in desperate situations, sacrificial giving, encouraging people's natural skills and interests to benefit both themselves and others, the importance of forgiveness rather than



The informal 'university'

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Every evening a service was held at which prayers were said for the sick, for those at home, and for our daily needs. We prayed for guidance and for strength to face the ordeals that lay ahead. We needed the gift of a tranquil spirit, so we asked God for an untroubled sleep. MIRACLE ON THE RIVER KWAI (p136)

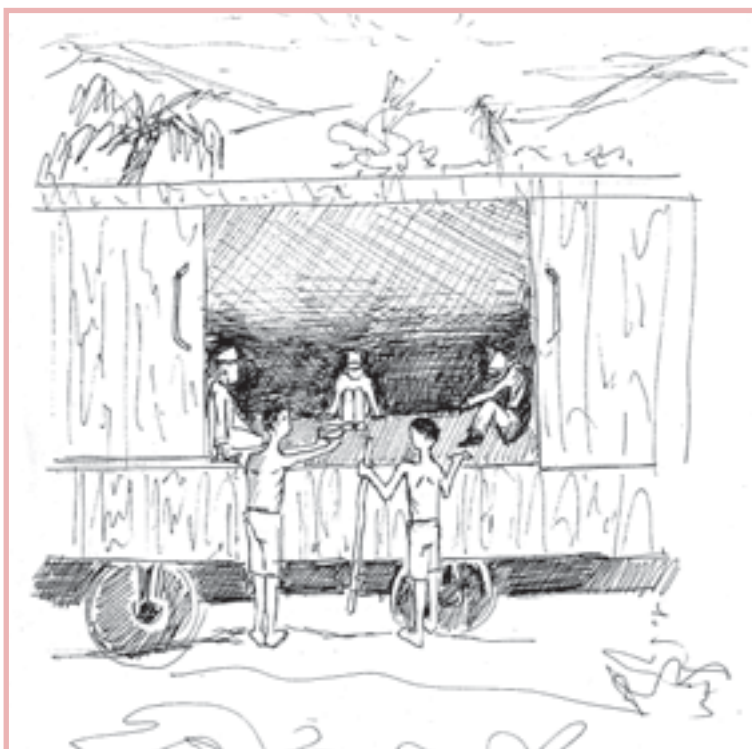
revenge, the need for developing spiritual awareness and God as a source of help and strength in everyday life, have been inspired by Ernest Gordon's book.

Roger J Owen's illustrated book, *Death Camp on the River Kwai* (Religious and Moral Education Press, 1981), has also been a valuable resource. This book contains contemporary photographs and Ronald Searle cartoon sketches which provide useful visual stimuli.

Teachers and students alike can learn a great deal about human character and Christian values from the wartime situation of the River Kwai. How did beleaguered prisoners of war manage to raise their spirits above their immediate, desperate environment? The answer, for those willing to acknowledge the truth, is that God worked miracles in the hearts of mortal men.

■ David R Morgan

These four drawings were prepared by Rob Barley of Alcester to illustrate scenes from the book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, for use in a teaching setting.



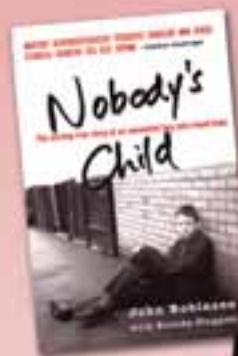
Caring for the enemy

Survivors of child abuse



A more recent scenario in which a person was dominated by a brutal environment can be found in the early life story of David Pelzer, as related in his biographical trilogy: *My Story – A Child Called It, The Lost Boy and A Man Named Dave* (Orion, 2002).

David was rescued from his highly abusive mother, thanks to action taken by some of his school teachers. David has since set up a network to support others who have been similarly subjected to parental abuse – whether emotional, mental, physical or sexual.



On this side of the Atlantic, the amazing testimony of John Robinson in *Nobody's Child* (Monarch Books, 2003) and Tony Anthony in *Taming the Tiger* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2004) illustrate how the power of God can bring healing to the lives of people who were subjected to abusive upbringings.

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