

Eric Lomax's Long Journey

Memories of the horrors he'd suffered as a prisoner of war tormented him. Now he would meet again the man who embodied his hatred...

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Eric Lomax was filled with anxiety. The flight from Britain to Thailand had taken almost 12 hours, but his real journey to this remote area near the Burmese border had taken far longer.

The lanky, white-haired Scotsman watched as tourists crossed the infamous bridge over what is commonly known as the River Kwai a few hundred metres away. He wondered whether coming here again would be a terrible mistake. After so many years of suffering, was he truly ready for this moment? Suddenly he saw a small, slightly stooped man wearing a tentative smile emerge from the crowd. It's him. In that instant the years slid away, until Lomax was back in the place and time that had shattered his life.

It was 1939. Lomax, a handsome, dark-haired 19-year-old, was working For Edinburgh's Telephone and Post Department and planning to marry his sweetheart. Then everything changed. Hitler's armies marched into Czechoslovakia, and with war looming, Lomax volunteered for service in Britain's Royal Corps of Signals. His parents expressed their pride, and his girlfriend promised to await his return.

Second Lieutenant Lomax was dispatched to Singapore. In February 1942 the Japanese besieged the island, and on February 15 the Allied Forces surrendered. Two days later Lomax joined thousands of fellow prisoners on a 24-kilometre march to Changi, on the eastern tip of the island. For two months, he and 300 other half-starved men cleared jungle growth for a Japanese war memorial. In October, Lomax was among the 600 men packed into stifling metal boxcars for a five-day journey to a prison camp in Ban Pong, Thailand.

To obtain war news, Lomax and a few other prisoners

secretly built a radio receiver from scrap materials they collected. They concealed it in a coffee tin and huddled around it at night. The radio went undetected, and the prisoners took it along when they were moved to the town of Kanchanaburi in February 1943.

Prisoners in camps there were forced to help construct a 418-kilometre railway link into Burma that would supply Japanese troops preparing to invade India. One of their early chores was to build a bridge spanning the River Kwai, which eventually became the subject of a well-known movie.

By day, the prisoners laboured in temperatures exceeding 38°C. By night, they slept on wooden planks in dismal bamboo huts. Nearly all the men were depleted from malnutrition and disease, and they were dying by the score.

Lomax decided to draw a map of the area to help in escape attempts. To gain information he questioned truck drivers and new prisoners, and scrutinized Japanese papers whenever he had access to camp offices. He hid his map in the latrine.

One morning in August, the Japanese announced a surprise search of the huts. Suddenly an angry cry came from soldiers inside Lomax's hut. *My God*, he thought, *they found the radio!*

The wireless was discovered beneath the bunk of another prisoner, whose immediate punishment was to swing a 12½ kilogram sledgehammer onto a block of wood for hours at a time. Then, a few weeks later, five prisoners - including Lomax - were ordered to gather their belongings. Lomax ducked into the latrine and grabbed the map. *We'll need this if we try to run for it*, he thought.

Taken to another camp in Kanchanaburi, the prisoners were thrown to the ground and their few possessions ransacked. When a guard found Lomax's map, they were ordered to stand at attention all day in the scorching sun, without food or water.

Finally, that night, one of the prisoners was told to raise his arms above his head. A soldier swung the wooden handle of a pickaxe down across the man's back, knocking him to the ground. Other guards joined in, beating and kicking the man until he appeared lifeless. Another prisoner was similarly beaten. Lomax was next.

Within seconds he was slammed to the ground, and his mouth filled with blood. He felt bootheels on the back of his head, crunching his face into the gravel. He heard the crack of his own bones. The beating went on until he lost consciousness.

When Lomax woke the next morning, his body was numb. The other four men were sprawled nearby, groaning. They lay under the fierce sun for two days before fellow POWs were sent to carry them to the camp hospital, where a Dutch doctor treated them as best he

could.

Lomax was in the worst condition. His nose, arms, right hip and several ribs were broken. Bruises covered his body. "You men suffered the most horrendous beatings I have ever witnessed," the doctor said. "I counted 900 blows over six hours."

"Stop what you are doing, and come with me," the Japanese sergeant said, stepping into Kanchanaburi's military-police headquarters. Takashi Nagase looked up from a pile of documents. "We've caught some prisoners operating a radio, and we need you for the interrogation."

Nagase nodded. The studious 25-year-old wondered what treatment he would see employed.

Growing up in Okayama, Japan, Nagase had been a sickly youth who developed a love of reading, especially English novels. In 1936 he moved to Tokyo to earn an English-teaching degree, but his plans were cut short by war. Brought up to give unquestioned loyalty to the emperor, he volunteered for service and was accepted as a noncommissioned interpreter for the Ministry of the Army. Nagase was sent first to Saigon, and later to Kanchanaburi to relay orders to prisoners of war.

Inside the POW camps, Nagase was astonished to see desperately ill prisoners in huts without roofs. The men lay shivering in blankets soaked through by monsoon rains. *Is this the way the Imperial Army treats prisoners?* Nagase thought. As disturbing as this sight was to him, nothing prepared Nagase for what he was about to witness.

His arms encased in splints and bandages, Lomax was driven to military-police headquarters only two weeks after the beatings, and brought before Nagase and a Japanese sergeant. In fluent English, Nagase told the gaunt soldier: "We know you were involved in building and operating the radio - your friends confessed to your part in it. Now tell us: Who else was involved?"

Trying to hide his fear, Lomax refused to tell them. The interrogation went on for hours, then days. Nagase was always on hand as interpreter. Eventually the furious military police began to slap the prisoner. Nagase winced as Lomax took repeated blows to the face.

When the police stalked out of the room momentarily, Nagase leaned over and whispered, "If you confess, they'll stop beating you." The pity he felt for Lomax was deep. All he got in return was a cold, defiant stare from Lomax's piercing blue eyes.

Nagase could see that Lomax, who was fed only tea and salted rice, was growing weaker. The police were pushing harder and harder, hoping he would crack. On the interrogation's fifth day, Lomax was accused of being a spy - a crime punishable by death. When Nagase told him he had to sign a confession, Lomax refused.

He was dragged out to the banks of the River Kwai. Soldiers laid him on his back on a bench. One of Lomax's broken arms was pulled behind his back, the other across his chest, and he was tied down. Nagase could see that he was in agony.

"Are you ready to talk?" Nagase asked. Lomax shook his head.

They put a towel over his mouth and nose. Then one of the guards picked up a long rubber hose, turned a faucet on full force, and directed the stream onto the towel. The water soaked through, blocking Lomax's mouth and nose. He gagged and frantically gasped for breath as water filled his throat. Nagase watched Lomax's stomach begin to swell. The man was drowning.

Nagase heard the POW cry out in near delirium when the towel was taken off. Again Lomax was to confess and name his confederates; again he refused.

As the water torture began once more, Nagase felt stricken. *The shame my mother would feel if she saw her son now*, he thought.

Finally, after more than a week, the interrogations stopped. The Japanese had brought Lomax as close to death as possible, yet he showed no signs of giving in.

Nagase informed Lomax he was being transferred out of the camp. Nagase wanted to express his sorrow, but he couldn't think how. Finally, he just said softly, "Keep your chin up." Lomax stared back, feeling nothing but hate.

In Lomax's mind, this man was the personification of all the atrocities being committed by the Japanese. His was the voice that Lomax heard hour after hour, when the torture began and ended. During the interrogations, Lomax stared into the man's face, memorizing every feature: the dark eyes, the small nose, the broad forehead. *I want to remember you*, Lomax thought, *because someday I want to find you and make you pay.*

A truck took Lomax to military-police headquarters in Bangkok, where a court sentenced him to five years of hard labour. He was sent to a disease-ridden prison in Singapore and twice feigned injury in order to be sent to a hospital, where he stayed until the war ended. Finally his suffering appeared to be over.

Nagase remained in Kanchanaburi for several months after Lomax's departure. He translated documents and patrolled the camp, but there were no more interrogations. No amount of work, however, could block from his mind the British soldier's screams. *Is he still alive?* Nagase wondered.

After Japan was defeated, British officers ordered Nagase to guide them along the Thai - Burmese railway in search of POW graves and cemeteries. The findings were grisly. Some bodies were discovered rotting above ground in the thick jungles or in unmarked graves. Nagase was

overwhelmed with horror. *Our army committed unspeakable cruelty*, he thought.

On June 20, 1946, the 28-year-old interpreter went home. Japan was in desperate straits; food was scarce and work almost non-existent. Nagase wandered the countryside doing odd jobs, trying to come to terms with his conduct during the war.

His depression deepened. One afternoon he went to the ocean to drown himself. He stood staring at the surf, but lost his nerve.

When Lomax went home to Britain, he learned that his mother had died three years before, and his father had remarried. He was relieved to find, however, that his fiancée had waited for him. They married three weeks after his arrival, and Lomax's life seemed to settle into a comfortable routine. He retired from the army in 1948, worked abroad for some years and later got a job teaching personnel management at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. He also became the father of two girls.

But his wartime past wouldn't leave him. The fractured bones in his right arm and wrist never set properly, making it painful for him to write. Worse, he had frequent nightmares in which he would see Nagase's face and hear his voice. He refused to talk about the war, reasoning that nobody would understand. He grew aloof from his colleagues at work. At home he would blow up over trivial events. When his wife asked him what was wrong, Lomax remained tight-lipped and sullen. Finally the marriage ended.

Nagase opened a small English-language school in 1955. Six years later he met and married 33-year-old Yoshiko Fujiwara. Nagase told her about his war experiences and the suffering he had witnessed.

"I have promised myself to atone for these terrible cruelties," he said. "Not only for me but for all the others in the Japanese Imperial Army who remain silent." But what could he do?

An opportunity to make amends came with the first of a series of visits to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, where almost 7,000 soldiers had been laid to rest. Nagase looked out over the bronze plaques and prayed, wondering if the tortured British soldier lay among them.

His pilgrimages to Kanchanaburi soon gave way to more public forms of atonement. He began speaking at small rallies in Japan to promote friendship and understanding among Pacific War veterans. Soon he proposed a bold project: bring together former Allied prisoners and Japanese soldiers in Kanchanaburi to foster reconciliation.

There was opposition from many Japanese who thought the country had no reason to apologize. The

Ministry of Foreign Affairs was outraged and urged Nagase to abort the project. But he was determined.

His plan was announced in international newspapers, and on October 25, 1976, twenty-three ex-POWs from Britain, Australia and America arrived in Kanchanaburi to meet 51 former Japanese soldiers. At first, the wartime foes were awkward in one another's presence. Soon, however, they were sharing stories, even laughing. For Nagase it was a soul-stirring experience to know that the residue of hate and enmity was beginning to disappear.

In 1983, at age 64, Lomax married Patricia Wallace, a 46-year-old nurse. Patti understood that her husband's angry outbursts were related to his war experience and assumed things would get better with time.

Unfortunately, matters grew worse. The flashbacks continued. A car's backfire became a gunshot; a person in uniform turned into an enemy soldier. Lomax once refused to take a seat in a restaurant because a Japanese couple was eating nearby.

At his wife's urging, Lomax contacted the London-based Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of torture, where he began monthly treatments: with a psychiatrist. For the first time, he talked about his experiences as a POW. Still he remained darkly obsessed with his torturers, especially the interpreter. *If it's too late to prosecute them, he thought, I'll find a way to punish them myself.*

Not knowing which Japanese army unit had been involved, he located and wrote other British survivors of Kanchanaburi, requesting information about the camp officials. Nothing came of his efforts.

Then, in October 1989, a friend gave Lomax a newspaper clipping about the publication of *Crosses and Tigers*, a book by Takashi Nagase. Reading the article, Lomax gasped. "The author has flashbacks of the Japanese military police in Kanchanaburi torturing a POW accused of possessing a map," the article stated. "One of their methods was to pour large amounts of water down his throat."

"That prisoner was me!" Lomax exclaimed. He stared at paper's photo of the frail, 71-year-old Nagase. "This is the man I've been looking for!"

The article spoke of Nagase's remorse over Japanese atrocities and his devotion now to the victims. *He's probably just saying that to avoid justice*, Lomax thought bitterly.

Lomax got a copy of Nagase's book and found it extraordinarily painful to read, especially the details of the interrogation and torture. His wife suggested that he write Nagase. Lomax refused, but gave her grudging permission to send a letter on her own. "I have just finished reading your book," Patti wrote. "My husband is the man you

describe being tortured so terribly". She went on to say he had lived with many unanswered questions all these years and ended with a request: "if you are willing, perhaps you would correspond with my husband?"

Nagase looked up from the letter. "My God, he's alive," he told Yoshiko.

"What will you do?" she asked.

Nagase didn't hesitate. "I must write him immediately and ask if I can meet him. I have to apologize directly for what he suffered." He added softly, "I believe it is my destiny to meet him again."

Patti Lomax was moved to tears by Nagase's reply. "I've suffered tremendous guilt all these years," Nagase wrote. "I have often prayed I would meet your husband again and be able to seek forgiveness for what I assisted in."

Convinced of Nagase's sincerity, Patti suggested to her husband that he should write himself.

"How can I contact the very man I've hated all these years?" he asked.

Sensitive to her husband's pain, Patti did not push him. But she continued to broach the subject gently. "Maybe it's time to step out of the darkness," she would say.

Eventually Lomax agreed that Nagase's remorse must be genuine and replied with a note: "Perhaps a meeting would be good for us.

They agreed to meet at the World War II museum in Kanchanaburi. The date: March 26, 1993 - almost 50 years after their first encounter.

Just before 10 a.m. that day, Eric and Patti walked nervously about the museum's terrace. Soon Lomax would face the man who had come to him in countless nightmares in the past five decades. Could he even speak with this person he'd imagined killing in revenge so many times?

Then he saw a slight Japanese man walking towards him. The face was much older, but still instantly recognizable.

The former interpreter identified Lomax just as quickly. As he drew closer, Nagase saw the feature that had lived on most in his mind: those eyes that had once looked into his own with such defiance.

When Nagase reached Lomax, he bowed deeply. "I am so very sorry," he said softly. "I would like..." His voice cracked, and he began to cry. On instinct, Lomax put out his hand, and Nagase clasped it tightly.

They sat together in silence on a nearby bench, Patti having left to grant them privacy. Finally Lomax spoke. "Do you remember what you told me when we last met?"

"No, I don't," Nagase replied.

"You said, 'Keep your chin up.'" Lomax paused, then

smiled. The tension began to vanish.

Over the next three days, the men talked about their lives since the war. It pained Nagase deeply to hear of Lomax's traumas.

Their rapport grew easier with time. The Lomaxes even decided to accompany Nagase back to Japan for a visit. But always in Nagase's mind was his request: Would Lomax grant him forgiveness?

The day before they were to part, the two men sat across from each other in silence. Then Lomax handed Nagase a letter he had written the night before. "I think you'd like to have this," he said.

Nagase unfolded the page and read the words: "Although I can't forget the ill treatment at Kanchanaburi, taking into account your change of heart, your apologies, the work you are doing, please accept my total forgiveness."

Nagase looked up and grasped Lomax's hand. Both men had tears in their eyes. "I've learned that hate is a useless battle," Lomax said, "and it has to end sometime."

The next day at the train station, Nagase said to Lomax, "We are friends now, after all these years."

"Yes, we are friends. I hope we will meet again someday," Lomax replied.

The men looked into each other's eyes in silence. Then the two former enemies wrapped their arms around each other and embraced.

Since their meeting, Eric Lomax and Takashi Nagase have stayed in touch, writing and telephoning each other often. Their correspondence is between friends who shared a terrible ordeal and, with each other's help, found at last a measure of peace. Says Lomax today: "What I have discovered is the healing power of forgiveness. With that gift, I can now get on with my life."

Dividing the Camels

A parable from the Middle East...

A man died, leaving seventeen camels to his three sons. The first son was to receive one-half, the second son was to receive one-third, and the third son was to receive one-ninth. The sons were unable to agree on how to divide the camels fairly. After arguing among themselves, they consulted a wise old woman for a solution to this difficult problem. She offered to lend them her one camel. Now that there were eighteen camels, the matter was simple. The first son took nine, the second took six, and the third son took two. One camel was left over, so the sons gave it back to the woman.