



The Forgotten Highlander by Alistair Urquhart

A book review by Andrew Mason

A fantastic account of Singapore and later the terrible times of the Thai-Burma Railway.

Urquhart describes his early life in Scotland and young years on his family property to when he got his first job working hard and on his days off to impress. Conscripted into the Army he spent several years in Singapore before the fall of Singapore. He was treated with the same contempt as the local Chinese and Asian population by the very people he was protecting – the upper-class snobs of British aristocracy living the high life. He was a keen ball room dancer and still got to practice his craft on stand down days in various halls of Singapore.

Urquhart describes in detail the humiliation of marching into captivity in Changi and witnessing severed heads on poles as a warning to others not to cross the determined Japanese. He describes the various guards he recalls as Dr Death, the Mad Mongrel and the Black Prince etc who worked on the railway – he also describes their fate post war.

He moved north on various work parties on the Thai-Burma Railway and unlike others who clung to a mate – Urquhart kept to himself with the shortages of food, disease and regular beatings, including the beatings he received from the Guardhouse when he protected himself against a nasty guard.

Urquhart survived the hell of the railway to be shipped to Japan as a slave labourer, his hellship sunk by the Americans only to be picked up by the Japanese; his description of the bowels of the ship in transit is incredible – you feel like you are right there smelling the stench of death in that claustrophobic hold. He slaved in the coal mines of Nagasaki and survived the Atomic attacks of the mainland.

Nightmares and post-traumatic stress plagued Urquhart for the rest of his life and this book highlights some of those battles. ‘Get on with it and put it behind you’ was something difficult for these men to do – particular ones who suffered as POWs (advice they often received).

This is a real page turner and a book you won’t be able to put down. The story is unique yet similar to many others of the same genre. Urquhart had tenacity, luck and determination on his side and like many others did what he had to do to make it out alive. A remarkable book penned by a remarkable man; a book that I enjoyed reading from start to finish and one when finished you feel like you know the author.

Well written, great description and story-telling. Highly recommended.