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The Forgotten Highlander

My Unbelievable Story of Survival

By Alistair Urquhart

As Reviewed by Capt. Joe Columbus Smith

Endless stories, movies, documentaries, and ink have been written, produced and spilled over the atrocities during WWII committed by the Germans, Italians and Russians. Lest we forget the Japanese atrocities, a survivor of the savage brutality of the Japanese has documented those unthinkable brutalities against our troops.

Hate and revenge keep Alistair Urquhart alive and at 91 he would just as soon live forever, and he just might.

"You know what keeps me going?" Alistair, now 91, told *SOF*, "To beat the Japanese! The longer I keep them waiting the better I'll feel about it!"

Sixty-five years after World War II, Japan still denies its horrendous abuse and killings of tens of thousands of Allied POWs by forced labor under unspeakable conditions. Sixteen thousand Allied POWs from British, Australian, American and

Dutch and Canadian forces died from beatings, slow starvation, jungle disease, malnutrition, and beheadings via samurai swords while building the 415 kilometer "Death Railway."

Another 22,000 Allied slave labor POWs were killed aboard Japan's "hellship" flotilla designed to shuttle slave labor where Imperial Japan needed it.

But Somehow Alistair Urquhart survived!

His revenge is his book, perhaps the best ever first person indictment of Japanese Imperial Army brutality against Allied prisoners.

His just released *THE FORGOTTEN HIGHLANDER, My Unbelievable Story of Survival* is also one of the best survival stories ever written.

The Forgotten Highlander is studded with tactics to help the next captured soldier stay alive!

THE DEATH MARCH

He and all the POWs survived or died without a hint of medicine—not even an aspirin—for six years!

He relates his experiences to include the Capture of Singapore, the Death March, followed by 3.5 years working on the Death Railway and unloading Japanese ships.

Beatings from sadistic guards were a daily ritual. This brief sketch of the Singapore docks gives some insight into the horrors Urquhart and 60,000 others suffered.

Hundreds of POWs from the proud

Gordon Highlanders were laboring all but naked on docks, barefoot and wearing nothing but a thin diaper called a "Jap-happie" to hide the "bits," as the Scots called their private parts.

Many, like Alistair, had withered by then to less than 100 pounds. But the skeletal wraiths were each expected to tote huge rice sacks—heavier than they were—off of ships and they were expected to do it at on the double.

Pity to the poor slave who dropped his sack, spilling rice across the docks.

"The Japanese would go mad and beat us with anything they had at hand. Blows would rain from stick bamboo, fists, and rifle butts," wrote Urquhart.

Imagine hell like this for six years for sixty thousand allied POWs who endured not just the forced labor but perpetual dysentery, tropical ulcers, beriberi and broken bones.

But for Urquhart, his worst experience came when he was thrown aboard a notorious Japanese "hellship" with 900 others who had also survived 3.5 years building the Death Railway.

"HELLSHIPS"

"Hellships" were used to shuttle Japan's POW slaves from site to site and were torpedoed and often sunk by American submarines, with a total of 22,000 allied POWs killed.

They died only because Japan re-

fused to paint a huge *red cross* on the ships as dictated by the Geneva Convention. This was the "Don't Shoot" signal to US submarines that the Japanese ship was either a hospital ship or transporting POWs and should *not* be torpedoed.

Instead the Japanese painted *red crosses* on their ammunition ships, ensuring safe passage.

Alistair was just one of nine hundred men crammed like vertical sardines in the hold of the ship.

"It was a sea of human waste and you risked being trampled," wrote Urquhart

"You had your space and protected it with your life. ... You stayed strong, protecting your space with elbows and fists...By this stage it was every man for himself. Each person had... their own life to save. Strangers surrounded me, all British, but none of us knew each other."

He could hear some of the POWs succumb to madness and begin shrieking.

"The sane murdered the insane and wondered when it would be their turn to go mad."

A TREMENDOUS CLAP OF THUNDER

It just got worse when on the fifth day in the South China Sea their ship was torpedoed and sunk by an American submarine.

Once again Alistair Urquhart survived, but was sent to a slave labor camp just ten miles from Nagasaki, Japan.

On 9 August, 1945, Alistair looked up and saw a lone, low flying B-29 drone over their camp, heading toward Nagasaki. A minute later he heard what sounded like a "tremendous clap of thunder" and a moment after that his 82-pound frame was rocked sideways by a hot blast that felt like it had come from a "giant hairdryer." That second atomic bomb blast ended the war.

It wasn't long before Alistair's camp was liberated.

In his 70s Alistair developed aggressive forms of both prostate and

testicular cancer and survived that too. Now he battles skin cancer from 750 days of naked hard labor in

"After all I had been through I decided to stay apart from everyone else and focus totally on survival. I lived one day at a time in my own little world...and adopted the position of a self-sufficient loner."

Burma on "the Death Railway," immortalized in the movie "Bridge Over The River Kwai."

SURVIVAL TIPS

When 19-year-old Alistair Urquhart left Aberdeen, Scotland as a "Gordon

"You have to go through the horror of seeing them die," he told *SOF*. "Do you want to do that again and again.

No, no you wouldn't.

"The only thing I could do was go it alone. I psyched myself up every day to make it through *that day only!*"

But that seems counterintuitive. Shouldn't, wouldn't soldiers and POWs band together to make it through?

But to Alistair, the ultimate survivor, he lives *today* because *way back then* he learned to throttle back his energy to eyedropper expenditures he hoped would nearly match the calories in his single daily cup of rice.

From that rice burn he was expected to labor hard for 12 to 18 hours under a hot sun.



Upper left photo: With his young brother Bill. Urquhart was so shattered when he returned from captivity that he didn't know who he was.

Upper right photo: On the mend in 1946 but the battle against nightmares, depression and ill-health had just begun.

Bottom photo: Urquhart's wedding day. The nightmares persisted and he had to sleep separately for fear of choking his wife, Mary.

Highlander" in 1939, he was he was a rock hard 135 pounds. He excelled at all sports and was the fittest trainee in basic training. When he returned 6.5 years later he was a ravaged 82 pounds.

But that he returned at all is a miracle.

What survival secrets pulled him through? This is what *SOF* thinks might save a soldier's life someday.

He is that one in a thousand who *learned* to survive.

He learned to detach, completely, after watching two close friends die and grieving over their loss.

In *The Forgotten Highlander* he writes:

"After all I had been through I decided to stay apart from everyone else and focus totally on survival. I

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lived one day at a time in my own little world...and adopted the position of a self-sufficient loner.

"To survive each day required maximum concentration and alertness.

"It also meant you have to conserve every possible ounce of energy. If someone spoke to me I replied but there was no memorable sense of community.

(Psychological stress was also a calorie burner and Alistair closed his eyes at the moment a fellow prisoner was beheaded. But he still remembers the sound of the samurai whacking through and the sight of the puddle of blood left behind.)

"I was so damned tired all of the time that it was an effort to do anything but survive," Alistair wrote.

And what advice does he have for contemporary soldiers who might become POWs?

"Go For Low," Alistair told *SOF*. He meant keep a low profile. "Set your mind to accept whatever might happen. And whatever you do don't retaliate because that only increases any torture or punishment.

Each morning as a POW he would chant to himself "Survive the day, Survive the day, Survive the day."

"If you fix your mind solidly you can withstand punishment and survive as I have done."

And he learned a few other survival tricks that he passed along in.

Keep well away from anyone who is always fouling up. These types provoke retaliation and *anyone* near the Foul Up will get a beating.

He learned a technique for swinging a pick that made it seem like he was expending more energy than he was.

BEFRIEND A FEW MAGGOTS

With zero medical supplies in the Japanese camps Alistair learned to use maggots to debride his infected tropical ulcers, and other putrefying wounds. The trick was to carefully count the number of maggots put into the wound and just as carefully count them out after they have duti-



Upper photo: Meeting veterans on his emotional 2008 trip to visit the USS Pampanito, the submarine that sank the "hellship" he was on in 1944. **Bottom photo:** With his first child, Joyce, in 1949.

fully nibbled away the rotten flesh. Leaving one maggot behind in the wound is simply bad medicine.

Alistair also credits a very tough Scottish upbringing for his survival against all odds.

"I credit my sheer 'bloody mindedness' for my survival," he told *SOF*. "In Scotland there is no such word as 'can't.'"

This year Glasgow's *Daily Record* presented Alistair Urquhart with their annual Senior Heroes Award.

A GIBRALTAR-SIZE CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER

Alistair carries a Gibraltar-size chip on his shoulder toward the British and US governments. He notes that while Germany has fully atoned for its war crimes Japan has been handed a permanent "stay out of jail pass" for its crimes.

"Those of us who survived became an embarrassment to the British and American governments, which turned a blind eye to Japanese war crimes in their desire to forge alliances against China and Russia."

(Alistair holds no grudge against the USA for either torpedoing his ship or his getting knocked over by their atomic bomb at Nagasaki.)

Ironically, recognition and reparations by Japan for the wartime sacrifices of a 60,000-strong "forgotten force" became a casualty of the Cold War.

"We were a forgotten force in Singapore that vanished overnight into the jungles of Burma and Thailand to become a ghost army of starved slave laborers."

Urquhart noted that in addition to the 16,000 Allied POWs who died building that Death Railway, approximately 100,000 Thais, Indians, and Malayan locals perished as well in precisely the same way.

He puts the toll in the "millions" of Asians killed by the Japanese from 1939-1945.

"We were not prisoners but slaves in Japan's vast South-East Asian gulag, forced to become a vital part of the Emperor's war effort."

Hey, that would look great as an epitaph on Alistair's tombstone if he ever dies, which I doubt.

Capt. Joe Columbus Smith,
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4 June 2010

