

ALMOST ALL MEN ARE MARKED IN SOME WAY BY THE
EXPERIENCE OF TAKING PART IN ANY WAR.

MAX HASTINGS¹

There is an unconquered griminess to war. Marks not easily removed. Stains that linger through a lifetime. In conflict, graceful lines and form are deliberately destroyed. Images of twisted metal, of shattered concrete, become similes of damage done to men and to women – to aggressors and victims alike. We see it all the time. True reconciliation seems, at best, hard to achieve, frequently impossible.

Conflict and war darkened my childhood. The son of missionary parents, I was raised within reach of Chinese bandits who were the scourge of the local peasants. My boyhood was spent beneath the shadow of Japan's belligerent occupation of China. Aged fourteen, I became a civilian prisoner of war under the scrutiny of Japanese guards. Four years later I escaped this orbit of aggression and went to Australia. And there I understood that my life would complete a different circle. I must go to Japan and proclaim reconciliation for the Japanese and eternal peace with God.

巢立ち

Sudachi (*Leave Home*)

Life, for me, had a precarious start.

I was born on 23 October 1927. Just a few weeks later, a disgruntled mob of army deserters ransacked the tribal village of Taku² in south-west China. This was the remote mountain home of my parents, Eddie and Bessie Metcalf, and the Eastern Lisu people,³ among whom they worked. The men came down the hillside after dusk. Home after home was set on fire. A terrified Lisu young man scooped up Ruth, my four-year-old sister, and fled for the deep wooded gullies below the village. My father grabbed me, and he and my mother raced after the young man into the thicket. My mother shrieked as a bullet brushed the brim of her hat. Then a storm of bullets hissed above our heads, tore at leaves, snatched at branches, ricocheted into the darkness.

“Come back!” my father shouted after the young man, but the petrified Lisu ignored him and plunged on down the slope with Ruth. They heard him crashing on through the undergrowth and then nothing more.

In a lull in the gunfire my parents emerged warily into the open. Rough hands grabbed my father and pinioned him against a tree. A man picked up a bamboo rod and whipped it maliciously across his face. There was blood on his cheeks and neck as the hard nodes bit into his flesh. I can only imagine

that my mother turned away, instinctively shielding me as well as herself from the sight.

“Why are you beating him?” the brigand chief yelled at my father’s tormentor. “Imbecile! Tie his hands. We want him as hostage. He’s a good man.”

My mother watched as my father was led away. There was nothing she could do. Until the bandits had finished their destruction and looting, there could be no rescue. She hurried back to the house and stood on the balcony waiting for the Christian villagers to return and put out the fires. Ruth was still missing. My mother endured a dreadful night of anxiety, till, at dawn, the young Lisu returned with her frightened daughter. Ruth’s dress was torn and stained. Her tears had washed mottled lines in the dirt on her cheeks. Someone had given her a lump of malt toffee and it had become stuck in her thick, black, curly hair.

It had happened before. It could happen again. This was the life Eddie and Bessie had chosen – to serve as missionaries amongst the tribal people of China’s Yunnan Province. Taku was their home and this was their life. And now, for a while, it was mine.

My father was away from home for two weeks before he escaped his captors. Typically, he held no grudges for his treatment and found amusement in the direst of occasions.

“One of the bandits had taken your mother’s pink nightdress,” he told me with some relish many years afterwards. “Looked a pretty picture in it. I told him to take it off – he was embarrassing himself!”

Taku village lies close to the southernmost bend of the Yangtze River, around 8,000 feet above sea level. The region is a crowded system of tightly curving valleys hemmed in by

steep-sloped mountains. Here the Eastern Lisu have perched their settlements high above the river ravines on small shelves of land and carved out tiers of terraces for their crops. There was, and still is, no easy route to Taku. It took us a week to walk home from the provincial capital, Yunnanfu (now called Kunming). The narrow, dusty trails wound themselves like thinly defined threads around sheer hillsides above the river valleys, taking us by degrees higher and higher. Only when you came to the crest of the last hill could you see the village across the chasm of one final ravine. As a boy I would stand at the top of this hill and shout as loudly as I could, waiting for the echo to bounce back to me. Then I would plunge down beneath the line of sight and scamper up the opposite slope to the little white church my father had built in 1916.

My father, a young and enterprising single businessman with good prospects, aged twenty-seven, had come to China in October 1906 with the China Inland Mission (CIM), having relinquished his bespoke tailor's business in Oxford. Teachers, preachers and evangelists were needed to work among the ethnic tribes in the south-west. These minority groups were responding to the gospel in great numbers.

Eddie's ministry eventually centred on the Eastern Lisu. At the end of the nineteenth century these people had been locked into a horror of devils, bound in the thrall of animism.

"It was superstitious terror," my father explained to me. "Tangible fear that blighted their every action."

With the arrival of Christian missionaries the Lisu had found salvation in Jesus and now praised God passionately, pouring out their love for God in their love of hymns and harmonies. Across the region my father witnessed the conversion of thousands of tribal folk. In Taku, in the early

1930s, about fifty of the sixty families in the village were Christians. In our church services, many Lisu men and women stood and testified to God's transformation of their lives.

Even as a child I sensed a difference as we travelled from a Christian village to a non-Christian one. I have no recollection of a time when I did not trust in God, nor when prayer and Bible reading were not a natural part of my life. However, I recall one evening when I was about six years old. My father and I were hiking home together, and he had slowed his energetic stride to match my faltering steps. I felt agitated at the sight of the roughly built idol shrines that littered the roadsides. The acute awareness of evil was very real.

"I'm scared," I told him as dusk closed in on us.

He did not indulge my fretting and chided me severely. "Stevie! Satan rules with the dread of demons. God reigns with love. What does Psalm 23 say?"

As we walked on into the nightfall, my hand in his, we recited together, "The Lord is my Shepherd... though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me..."⁴ and with each footstep homewards my fears subsided.

Daily life amongst the Lisu was at best basic. The village had no shop. A monthly market had to suffice. There was no gas or electricity. We collected water from a stream in a metal bucket. We grew our own vegetables and there were large fish to be caught in the bigger rivers. Goats' milk and butter were an essential part of our diet. My father received the liver of every animal slaughtered locally because he suffered with sprue. To ensure more time for ministry, my parents hired a male cook and servants to do the household chores. Our mail had to be collected by a courier sent down the mountain to the

county town, a day's journey away by pony or on foot.

My father had received basic medical training as preparation for missionary service, and his dispensary and our home were at the far side of the village from the church, distinguished from the plain mud homes of the Lisu by the luxury of whitewashed walls. The mission compound was enclosed within a four-foot-high perimeter wall of dry earth, topped with a parapet of tiles to protect it from the rains. The house itself was relatively large, with four rooms downstairs laid out along a line and a staircase in the middle. Upstairs, the four bedrooms were connected by a long corridor that ran along the back of the house. We had an outside toilet – this was a surprisingly well-built outhouse with a tiled roof. It contained a box with a bucket inside for the adults to sit on, and a matching little box for Ruth and I. The family took baths in a round tin tub in the kitchen.

As a young child I delighted in the freedom I was given. When bandits and brigands didn't threaten, I had generous licence to roam onto the hillsides, to follow a stream to its source, or to sit with Xiao Yang, my Lisu friend, as he tended the family's goats. Set within subtropical conditions, the mountains of Yunnan are rightly known for the beauty of their "perennial spring". There was an abundance of wild lilies, irises and forget-me-nots to be picked. Fields were bright with tall sunflowers and cosmos. And everywhere there was the rich vibrancy of rhododendron bushes. The air was scented with the aroma of wood-smoke and strong, earthy smells. I regularly watched rabbits and spotted monkeys in the thickets, whilst golden pheasants strutted imperiously in and out of the undergrowth, not flustered by my presence. Every night a profound silence, punctuated only by the howl of wolves,

held the village in its thralldom, until the dawn freed the birds and insects to sing their songs.

I knew little of life beyond Taku. On very rare occasions we travelled to Kunming; occasionally other missionaries visited us. The fact that every Lisu family stored grain in a coffin appeared conventional to me. As did the fact that each family, except ours, owned a gravestone, kept ready for the unavoidable (a custom they still maintain). Conversely, it did not seem out of place amidst the homespun clothing of the Lisu that my father wore a well-cut suit, a shirt, a tie and a dark grey trilby, and my mother wore blouses, knitted cardigans and skirts. While Xiao Yang wore a flowerpot hat pulled down over his ears, baggy trousers and a smock top with buttons as big as early corn cobs, I was content with V-necked pullovers, short trousers and knee-length socks. There was no concern that I spoke English at home and Lisu with my friends. I readily accepted that Ruth and I were the only children in the village who were not already betrothed in marriage.

I was just three when Ruth left home. She had gone to school, I was told, and I would see her at Christmas. The China Inland Mission boarding school was 2,000 kilometres away as the crow flies, located at Chefoo, a town on the north side of Shandong Province – the distinctive arm of land that points across the Yellow Sea towards Japan. There was no other provision for schooling. At seven years of age Ruth made the journey with my mother, a circuitous route via Hong Kong and Shanghai. The continuum of family life was disrupted and, apart from a few brief months in Australia fifteen years later, we would never again be together for more than a few weeks. In my small world, Ruth had simply disappeared from my domain. After she had gone, all I knew of her adventures

and heartaches came from her letters that were hand-carried up those long, dusty trails to Taku.

In August 1934, aged six, it was my turn to start school. I swapped life with my parents, Xiao Yang and the Lisu for a rekindled relationship with Ruth, the roguish camaraderie of boys I had never met and the rigorous conventions of a Western education. My luggage was strapped to the backs of mountain ponies and my father, mother and I walked down to Kunming. Nights were spent in the shelter of coarse, smoke-filled wayside inns. From Kunming we boarded a series of steam-trains that took us to Hanoi in Vietnam and then to Hai Phong, a seaport on the estuary of the Song Hong, the Red River. As a boy brought up in the clasp of great mountain ranges, I was fascinated with the frothing wake of our small steamship to Hong Kong and the ever-changing, fluorescent, crested waves at night. Hong Kong harbour, with its huge liners, cruisers and destroyers, sporting flags from a multitude of countries, was like nothing I had ever seen before.

From Hong Kong to Shanghai we travelled on the *Conte Verde*, a floating Italian castle of extravagance. I enjoyed exploring her countless decks and her labyrinth of corridors and staircases. Even our economy-class cabin seemed a treasure hall in this palace on water.

The fact that my mother and I almost missed the boat added to the adventure! I can still picture my father's anxious face beneath his neatly combed grey hair, as he stood on the lower deck, leaning over the rail. My mother and I hurried along the quay. The ship's siren sounded for departure. The last gangplank was being raised. I was hastily thrust into the hands of a crew member. My mother, then aged forty-three, had to leap across the gap that appeared

as the ship moved away from its moorings.

For two days I indulged in huge meals served in a cavern of a dining-room, was captivated by the music of large orchestras and revelled in treats that had never before enchanted my imagination.

In Shanghai I discovered a world where people travelled in taxis, rickshaws, cars and buses. The city seemed akin to a new planet, packed with high-rise buildings requiring lifts and escalators. I thrived on an altogether alien diet, which included heavy clusters of green muscatel grapes and Eskimo pies (an American invention of vanilla ice-cream coated in chocolate and wrapped in tin foil). Even my first trip to a dentist did not diminish my enthusiasm for exploration.

We finally reached Chefoo on a small coastal steamer. The boat sailed past Lighthouse Island into the sheltered waters of the Bluff and threaded a route among the American and British naval vessels stationed in the bay. The school was pointed out to me – a distinctive set of five hefty European buildings standing appropriately erect on the fringe of First Beach. It was an excellent example (as colonial attitudes at the time would have it) of Western civilization, against the backdrop of a range of low Chinese hills. Chefoo was home to a thousand foreigners, served by more than thirty businesses, three banks, the “Chefoo Club”, a delicatessen, a German restaurant, six missions, two churches, a newspaper office and an amusement park. Such amenities were not unusual in the Treaty Ports,⁵ but Chefoo was unusual in that the foreign residents did not have their territory distinctly marked and had handed the administration of the area over to a Chinese committee.

The siting of the school on an isolated bay in north-

east China came by divine circumstance rather than human design. Forced by severe illness to find a place in which to recuperate, the founder of the China Inland Mission, James Hudson Taylor, came to Chefoo in 1879, the year my father was born. A farmer offered to sell Taylor his bean field. He accepted the offer and a convalescence home was constructed from locally quarried stone. Oak beams and Norwegian pine were taken from the *Christian*, a ship which had run aground in the bay. Teak and a host of furniture and fittings were mined from another wreck, the *Ada*. A school was soon established on the site for three children, one of whom, Dr Fred Judd, was our school doctor. By 1894 Chefoo School had grown rapidly to accommodate 200 missionary children.

What I failed to understand on my first day at school was that I would not see my parents again for over a year. Before returning to Taku, they were going to Britain for much-needed recuperation. Both of them were wearied with the ordeals of dengue fever, malaria, typhoid and typhus. My mother moved more slowly due to the onset of osteoarthritis and damage to her upper spine in a riding accident; she had been pulled from her pony by a low-hanging branch. My father, already closer to sixty than fifty, would need to have chunks of flesh cut away from his abdomen to remove an infestation of maggots. Ruth and I returned to Taku at Christmas 1935. We were there for only two weeks before we started the long journey back to school. We enjoyed four of these brief Christmas holidays until 1938, after which the Sino-Japanese War curtailed our travel back to Yunnan. Although my father and mother continued their work in Taku for another twelve years, I was never able to go home to them again.

I knew none of this on the day my parents said their

goodbyes to Ruth and me before climbing into a rickshaw. As they were carried out of sight through the school gates, there was a sense in which they vanished from my life. In time, there came the cruel dawn of understanding – the heart-breaking realization that they would not return in a few days or even a few months. Even their first letters would take weeks to arrive from Britain. It was many years before I ceased to feel that same sorrow of bereavement whenever we separated.

均衡

Kinkou (*Balance*)

Boarding-school was an assortment of experiences: some lessons were learned by the hard route, others through carefree diversion. Among my many more enjoyable memories are a catalogue of boyhood escapades – classic boarding-school tales which grow to gallant proportions with time, but which were mainly the innocent or not-quite-so-innocent misdemeanours that groups of boys naturally fall into when left to their own devices.

I shared a dormitory with seven other missionary children. It is difficult to describe (or now to understand) the immense pleasure we got from chucking our slippers at an empty enamel chamber-pot balanced carefully on a chair. Imagine our consternation when, one evening, the heel of a well-aimed slipper went through the bottom of the pot! But our boyish logic easily resolved the dilemma. One boy was away for a few nights. “Shove it under his bed,” someone suggested. Several nights later, inevitably, we were woken by the distressed shouts of the lad who had discovered the weakness in our strategy and, more crucially, in his pot!

Neil Yorkston and Brian Thompson were two of my friends at the school. I had known Neil since I was three; we were both born in Kunming. Like me, his father was British and his mother Australian. They were working with the Big

Flowery Miao tribe in the province east of “mine”. Brian was the eldest child of an Irish family working in Hebei Province.

As a gang we were not averse to investigating the school drainage system. On one occasion Brian and I crawled into a storm drain (reckoned, in retrospect, to be ten inches wide, eighteen inches high and twenty-five yards in length) beneath the girls’ hockey field. He got stuck and I had to shuffle back out. “Wriggle,” I told him. “Wriggle harder!” I extricated him from his plight by pulling at his legs.

This should have been a lesson in itself, but we had not finished our foolery for that particular afternoon. We surfaced from the drainage ditch and raced up to the centre of the pitch in search of the other end of the pipe. Brian, Neil and I prised off the circular concrete lid.

“You can get through that,” said Brian confidently. He was bigger than me and he had got trapped last time. Clearly, I needed to prove I could get trapped too. Which I duly did, some feet along the drain. I had pushed on around a gentle bend in the pipe and could see light at the end of the tunnel, when it became obvious that I was going no further.

“I’m stuck.”

There was no response.

“I’m stuck!” I yelled.

There was still no response. My muffled voice was not carrying back up the pipe. I began to panic. With my arms stretched out ahead of me, I had little leverage. I pushed backwards, but my body was wedged in place. I needed to take my own advice. I wriggled for all I was worth. It seemed to be an eternity before I emerged and sat shakily on the grass.

Seeing Brian’s bottom in the air and his head down a drain, a group of younger boys had gathered. They all greatly

admired my exploits, but it still gives me nightmares to this day!

On another unwise occasion, one winter, seven of us were allowed out on a hike. We headed for a local hill on which stood a small pagoda. Finding crude cracks chiselled out in its walls, we helped each other up a risky climb of fifteen feet. The view, such as it was, quickly lost its appeal as a fierce and bitter wind threatened to blow us off the ledge around the wall. Frightened of losing grip on the icy holds, five boys became captives in our "castle" while I and another friend made it to safety. A sound piece of advice was yelled after us as we began the three-mile walk back to school: "Bring the toilet ladder!"

This excellent solution proved not to be an option. The ladder, used to climb up to fix the plumbing, was missing. Instead of struggling several miles across frozen tracts of land with a ladder, I had to struggle to keep up with a burly and irritated schoolmaster, who carried a long rope and a nice line on "miserable offenders". His irritation was not eased by the discovery that the five captives had already been sprung from their keep by a Chinese farmer with the aid of a rake. My nine-mile act of "heroism" was rewarded with having to write a 200-word essay on "How to avoid doing foolhardy things".

Others had a more alarming encounter. In January 1935 seventy pupils and five staff, returning from their Christmas break, had boarded the *Tungchow* at Shanghai and apparently sailed off into thin air. Pirates had seized the ship, killing the commander of the Russian guards charged with the boat's protection. White stripes were painted around the funnel and the vessel was renamed. The incident was headlined across the world.

It was four days before a British aircraft spotted the ship parked in Bias Bay, a regular pirates' lair, near Hong Kong. The hijackers fled with money and jewels they had fleeced from the passengers, and \$250,000 in what proved to be worthless banknotes, because they lacked official signatures.

At school, the rescued Chefusians regaled us with tales of dodging bullets and showed us pieces of cloth they extravagantly claimed they had pinched from the pirates. A grey jersey with holes at the elbows – a pirate's pullover – was placed in a glass display case as a prime exhibit of their adventure. The hostages were definitely in the class of heroes. But, more heroically to me, they had missed a whole ten days of lessons!

As we grew older our interests, of course, matured. Girls, in particular, changed from unavoidable classmates to attractions. One of my friends, Lance, inadvertently got me into trouble over a girl he became infatuated with. When I was around fourteen I set myself up as an amateur photographer and sold my pictures to other pupils. Lance was keen to get snaps of Mary. Enterprisingly, I plonked myself in front of her at a tennis match and by reversing the camera took several photographs of her.

Eager to make a quick dollar or two with my pictures of the tennis, I cycled to the Chinese photographers and asked for the photos to be developed as rapidly as possible. Unfortunately, the shop manager gave them to a senior boy to deliver, and he had no aversion to flicking through the pile before handing them over. It did not take long for the boys' dorms to be buzzing with the news that Steve Metcalf had a crush on Mary. And it wasn't long before Mary's uncle came demanding to see the photos.

“It was a mistake,” I stuttered. “They weren’t good. I... got rid of them.”

This was closer to a lie than a half-truth. I had given them to Lance, as arranged. To Lance’s chagrin it also transpired that his “beloved” now had her sights on me. Through a friend she hinted that she would like the negatives, wanted my picture and suggested meeting. Nothing came of it!

At school the essential truths of Christianity were taught and the practices were mandatory. On Sundays Ruth and I joined the crocodile of a hundred or so children being marched a mile along the seafront, past the rank of European hotels, to Consulate Hill on the edge of town. We were apparently nonconformists, since we joined the procession to the Union Church. St Andrews was for the Anglicans – a detail I accepted without comprehension. We learned little from the adult-orientated services but at least the walk helped to maintain my relationship with Ruth.

We were encouraged to find time to pray on our own. Morning and evening prayers were conducted by a rota of schoolmasters. Ironically, the only message that sticks with me was delivered by one of the stuffier members of staff with a pedantic style of repetition.

“If you are walking in the light, you are not walking in the darkness, are you?”

“No!”

“If you are walking in the darkness, you are not walking in the light, are you?”

“No!”

Far more enlightening were the non-compulsory and fun events, such as the Children’s Special Service Missions on the beach each summer, complete with a sand pulpit and bucketfuls of activities.

It was music, however, that opened a door for my personal experience of God. The singing of the Eastern Lisu had always stirred me. Our services at the little white church resonated with powerful worship, glorying God in harmonies that literally rang down the valley. Now I discovered other forms of lyrics and tunes that were equally compelling. As a member of the school choir I responded to the words of new hymns such as “Facing a task unfinished that drives us to our knees” and “Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour, all for love’s sake becamest poor”.⁶ I was captivated by lines from a performance of Stainer’s *Crucifixion*: “Could ye not watch with me one brief hour?”⁷ It may come as little surprise, therefore, to learn that my commitment to Christ eventually came about through music – the result of a few stolen notes played on a harmonica I filched from a friend!

My school reports gently revealed the reality about my academic prowess: “He is very good on the whole.” I now appreciate the subtle tone which allowed my parents to read between the lines. At the time, I was not sure which “hole” was being referred to. My mind was generally elsewhere in lessons. Often exploring the hillside above Taku. Frequently wondering what my parents were doing. I wanted to see my father pulling the teeth of a patient. Or watch him in the dispensary measuring out medicine from bottles of aspirin, castor oil and quinine, and handing out tins of Epsom salts and Mecca ointment (an antiseptic cream). I wanted to be at home with my mother. I wanted to speak Lisu with Xiao Yang. Or wander down through the village where the women, some dressed in their intricately embroidered tunics and skirts, would expertly crack open sunflower seeds for me with their teeth. And I wanted to be in our little white church, listening

to the swell of Lisu voices in worship. In truth, despite my school friendships, I often felt lonely.

If my confidence was lacking in the classroom, it was bolstered by the knowledge that I could hold my own on the sports field. The school, blessed with the ethos of a British system and the motivation of Victorian achievement, encouraged excellence in sport as well as academic attainment. Our headmaster, Patrick A. Bruce (known as "Pa" Bruce), had played cricket for Cambridge and rugby at Harlequins. Monday, Wednesday and Friday sessions were designated for "serious" sport and there were compulsory daily plunges into the cold water of Chefoo Bay.

I captained the football team and enjoyed gymnastics, rowing and swimming. I was less accomplished at cricket and retreated behind the stumps as wicket-keeper. It was my ability at running that later brought me the friendship of Eric Liddell, gold and bronze Olympic medallist in Paris in 1924. Eric had held his head high on the great running tracks of Europe, but he was also a quiet, humble man of God. He, more than most, taught me to love the Japanese.