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To End All Wars

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To End All Wars

Abstract

This is a review of *To End All Wars* (2001).

In "*To End All Wars*" (2001), we witness a story of what it means to offer forgiveness and reconciliation to captors even though they perpetuate the most horrific tortures on prisoners of war. This film tells the story of the survivors of the 93rd Division of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders based on a true story by Ernest Gordon. Captain Gordon (Ciaran McMEnamin) provides an eye-witness account of one of the most transforming simple acts of faith ever told on film.

The story of the 93rd Division is set in the jungles of Thailand where 61,000 Allied POW's were forced to build the Thailand-Burma Railway as Japanese prisoners of war. Rather than focusing on the personal heroism of the soldiers, Gordon's biography is a simple telling of the differences in approach that we all take to our enemies, and what one man's faith led others to do.

As many have done in times of war, the Highlanders left their homes in Scotland with a sense of pride and honor in their sacred duty to enter World War II. Little did they know that they would be captured within weeks in 1942 after the fall of Singapore. And little did they know how the unfathomable evil of war would become so real to them. The agreements of the Geneva Convention were not recognized here, and prisoners were treated with the kind of contempt witnessed in the death camps of Nazi Germany.

Major Campbell (Robert Carlyle) wants an "eye for an eye." He exhorts his fellow prisoners to resist everything asked of them by their captors, and to use every opportunity to escape. He holds dearly to the belief that each soldier must fuel his survival by nurturing his hatred for what the enemy is doing to him. Lt. Jim Reardon (Kiefer Sutherland) is an American Advisor from Singapore who believes that survival requires focusing on self-interest and seeking only one's own benefit. He becomes the buyer and seller of favors in order to stay alive.

It is Dusty Miller (Mark Strong) who makes a positive difference in everyone's lives by his simple acts of kindness, love and sacrifice. In the end, his personal faith changes everyone, including his enemies. Strife gives way in the camp when one person chooses to rise above the inhumanity and give people hope. Beginning with basic education, Dusty offers classes in Shakespeare, art and orchestra - all from his own memory. Even in the midst of immense suffering, each person begins to realize growth.

It is in an act of undeserved grace, though, that we see the most profound transformation. After leading a rebellion in the camp, Major Campbell and a handful of soldiers are lined up in front of the others, each to be executed by a shot in the head as a grotesque reminder to the camp of the power, hatred and resolve of the Japanese command. One by one the soldiers are executed. When the only remaining person is Major Campbell, the execution is interrupted by

Dusty, who steps forward and offers to trade his life for the Major's. The reaction by Takashi Nagase (Yugo Saso), the Japanese commander, is stunned disbelief that someone would be willing to "lose face" for another. For Major Campbell and the rest of the camp including the Japanese soldiers, this act of sacrifice for someone so undeserving seems like egotistical madness.

Dusty probably doesn't expect that the high command will choose to execute him by nailing him to a cross as a mocking example to others, but he willingly pays the price. The shock and sorrow of watching Dusty's sacrifice overwhelms everyone who witnesses it. He is the best man in the camp and yet he gives it all away for someone else who has caused nothing but trouble and strife.

"What can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Captain Gordon asks this question over and over as he slowly sees the power of Dusty's act of compassion play out in the lives of others around him. What does it mean to offer redemption through self-sacrifice? In 2000, during the filming of this movie in Thailand, the real Captain Ernest Gordon and the real camp commander, Takashi Nagase, came together for a final act of reconciliation and forgiveness. It is shown at the end of the film as a wonderful reminder that the power of evil cannot overcome the power of forgiveness and love.