

# Building Bridges



*The Kanchanaburi War Cemetery contains the remains of 6,982 Australian, Dutch and British war prisoners who lost their lives during the construction of the Death Railway over the River Kwai.*

by Cliff Neill

**E**ric Lomax's experiences as a Japanese prisoner of war in Southeast Asia during World War II are chronicled in his memoirs, *The Railway Man*. Like so many he was the victim of the Japanese obsession to build the infamous railway link between Burma and Siam, now Myanmar and Thailand.

He writes with brutal reality about the unspeakable cruelty exacted by the camp guards and military police on allied prisoners. Not surprisingly he found that his entire life was haunted by this experience, in particular by the memory of the young Japanese translator Nagase Takashi, who worked for the interrogators, and who became the focus of Lomax's pent-up rage, bitterness, and longing for revenge.

Years after the war, Mrs Patricia Lomax wrote to Nagase, having read a book he had written, entitled *Crosses & Tigers*, in which Nagase had included a chapter about the torture that Eric Lomax had received from the Japanese military police.

After some correspondence by mail with Nagase, he and Eric decided to meet. Lomax and his wife travelled to the former prisoner of war camp at Kanburi, a short distance from the station platform on the River Kwai Bridge. Eric and his wife had lunch at the River Kwai Restaurant and met its remarkable proprietor, Tida Loha, who told them that she had given Nagase, who had become a Buddhist, a plot of land next to the bridge to build what he called a Temple of Peace.

For years he had worked for peace and implored the Japanese Government to come out, face the world, and apologise for the crimes committed against British POWs during that awful time on 'the Death Railway', as it was called.

They met on the dreaded bridge that epitomised all of that suffering. Eric took the hand of his former captor and in Japanese said: 'Good morning, Mr Nagase. How are you?' He writes about that first meeting: 'He looked up at me; he was trembling, in tears, saying over and over, "I am very, very sorry!" Somehow, I comforted him saying something like: "It is very kind of you to say so". We talked for a long time and seemed to be happy in each other's company and we found that we had a lot in common: books, teaching, and world history'.

Somehow during this emotionally charged meeting in that place of terror there developed an extraordinary bond between this former captive and his torturer, which culminated in an act of forgiveness on Lomax's part. For the first time in half a century he was able to let go of his need to settle old scores. Instead he found reconciliation and a new beginning.

These two men became firm friends for the rest of their lives and they visited each other often in the joy of forgiveness.

Someone said once: 'When I forgive someone, I set a captive free and that captive is me!'<sup>1</sup>

There are some words that we humans have difficulty in saying, for example:

'I'm sorry, please forgive me'; 'I love you'; and most importantly, 'I forgive you!' But why is forgiveness so very important? It's because in forgiveness a special power is released and reconciliation happens, peace of mind returns, prisoners are set free, burdens are cast down. Joy fills the lives of those who are forgiven and those who have received that amazing gift of forgiveness.

There is indeed power in forgiveness. Despite the excruciating pain as Roman soldiers pounded large metal spikes through his hands and feet, Jesus was thinking of forgiveness. Before his death he uttered this prayer: 'Father, forgive these people because they don't know what they're doing!'<sup>2</sup> And upon his death forgiveness was indeed ours, for you, me, and everyone else on planet Earth, for all eternity, because that amazing prayer was answered by his Father, showing that 'mercy always triumphs over judgement'.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the day, the only people we can really change are ourselves. Forgiving others is first and foremost the healing of our own hearts, because when we plan to get even with someone, we are only allowing that person to continue to hurt us.

Let us be free of that and live in the spirit of forgiveness!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of a quotation from a book by Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:34, New Living Translation.

<sup>3</sup> James 2:13, New International Version.