

Searching for Fergus

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The months of planning were over, and every detail was in place. Our trip to England in August 1995 would occur exactly 24 summers after a honeymoon that had included a brief stay in cold, rainy London. By this time, Bill and I would stroll past our former B&B in Russell Square (tub down the hall and two threadbare towels allotted for the week) with the light step of travelers who didn't have to sleep there. This time we would come prepared with extra sweaters and raincoats.

It hadn't crossed our minds that August 1995 was the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, a fact that hit full force soon after we touched down at Heathrow.

In pub and hotel, Hiroshima replayed over and over: the same footage of stunned orphans stumbling through the rubble, the repeated interviews with survivors – elderly Japanese women and retired British colonels speaking in tight, strained voices. On August 7, the *London Times* reproduced a page from that day in 1945: “FIRST ATOMIC BOMB HITS JAPAN...A Rain of Ruin from the Air.”

We decided not to spend any of our limited time tracking down the Harley House Hotel which, we reasoned, might no longer exist. Instead we visited the Cabinet War Rooms, the converted basement of a government building that Winston Churchill and the Armed Forces Chiefs of Staff used as a secret nerve center and bomb shelter from 1939–1945. Scratchy radio recordings from that era broadcast their urgent messages to the citizenry as we shuffled through the

cramped, poorly lit rooms, amazed at the Spartan conditions the British leaders endured. Still, it didn't seem too much worse than the near-daily subway rides I had endured since toddlerhood because my urbanized parents never learned to drive. In fact, I quickly calculated, I had spent at least as many years in a gloomy, unventilated underground as the British elite, without ever having received a single medal.

Emerging onto the street after several hours in darkness, I was disoriented by the sudden blast of white light and air that felt like a blow against my face. The heat wave that had descended a few days earlier was out of control, as if nature were violating its own rules. Bill and I dragged ourselves the few blocks to Parliament. In the 98-degree heat, the stones seemed to sear right through the soles of our shoes.

Dutiful tourists, we forged on, but I began to feel I was in a kind of crucible. Every night we struggled to fall asleep in our stuffy Kensington hotel room (having moved up in the world, finally able to afford “good” accommodations – but wait-listed for a fan). Everywhere, fire engines howled, racing into my dreams.

Before long, a weather emergency was declared, vying with Hiroshima for the front page. The heat that blanketed all of Great Britain was trapping traffic fumes and other pollutants, leading to daily health alerts. “If you suffer from asthma or allergies, if you're elderly or your immune system is weak, stay indoors,” somber-faced doctors warned.

Stay indoors? We hadn't traveled thousands of miles on

our only vacation of the year to stare at wallpaper curling. The next day, we rented a car and drove to West Wycombe Park in Buckinghamshire. Not a major tourist attraction, but for me, the estate held a powerful Arcadian allure from the moment I saw its photograph in a coffee table book, *The English Country House: A Grand Tour*. Set on gently undulating acres, the columned, 18th-century stone home seemed just the balm we needed.

But I was shocked to find that the lush green lawns I remembered so vividly were burned yellow, and the algae-covered pond surrounding the mock-Roman music temple clogged with monstrous fronds. We returned to London in choking traffic – frazzled, deeply disappointed, and fighting the sinking feeling that we would recall our second trip to England for all the wrong reasons.

The next day we met Fergus Anckorn.

We had spent the day sightseeing in Bath; he boarded our London-bound train, his black Labrador at his feet, and for the next two hours, this slightly built, soft-spoken man held us spellbound as he recounted his wartime experiences. Like children immersed in a Grimm fairy tale, Bill and I hung on every word, oblivious to everything else – the passing scenery, the conductor's announcement and the flow of passengers on and off the train, the heat, our own hunger and thirst. As soon as we returned to our hotel, we wrote furiously, combining what we both recalled to reconstruct, as faithfully as possible, Mr. Anckorn's remarkable narrative.

The conversation opener was his dog, Sam. As a member of the Magic Circle, an elite group of London magicians, Mr. Anckorn had taught Sam and his predecessors a variety of stage tricks, which man and dog gladly demonstrated. But then the conversation veered sharply.

He told us that he had just been interviewed by the BBC for an upcoming 50th anniversary special on the war and was on his way to a veterans' dinner hosted by the Imperial War Museum. Fifty years earlier, Mr. Anckorn had been a prisoner of war in Burma. “Magic helped save my life,” he said. “By showing my tricks to the general, a ten-minute break stretched to 25 minutes and during that time, my friends were pinching potatoes and things to eat.” Later, when others were shipped out to other camps – and death – Mr. Anckorn was kept on to amuse the officers.

“I should have died many times over,” he said matter-of-factly. At the age of 76 – his weight in pounds when he was finally freed from the prison camp – this veteran still grinned.

“My name was Smiler as a lad,” he said, eyes flashing clear and sharp as aquamarines. It was easy to see why.

As Mr. Anckorn spoke during the ride to London, always without the slightest trace of bitterness, he would occasionally reach into his battered briefcase to illustrate a point. I noticed a jagged white scar on his right hand as he pulled out medals, official army papers, faded letters, and

a postcard from the camp to his mother, a business teacher who had taught him shorthand.

“Her last words when I left England were ‘Keep Smiling.’ She had received my death notice, but afterwards, received this postcard from me, unsure when it had been mailed. Was I alive or dead? What should she believe?” He explained that every month, the prisoners were allowed to send a card containing a variety of standard, pre-printed messages. “We were supposed to put a line around whichever messages applied, but I managed to encode ‘Keep Smiling’ in Pitman. I guess the angular lines didn't arouse suspicion.” His mother propped the postcard on her bedroom bureau, staring at it for hours until she suddenly screamed, “My Smiler's alive!” so loudly that the next-door neighbors rushed out of their houses.

The first time Mr. Anckorn “cheated death,” in his own words, was when a grenade hit the army truck he was driving, seriously injuring his leg but hurling him just beyond the fire. He had emergency surgery on an army post office table, and then was sent to recuperate in a makeshift hospital in Singapore. “When soldiers rushed in, plunging bayonets through everyone lying on cots, I was sure my time was up. I hid my head under the pillow, pretending I was dead.” Although stabbed, he was one of only four men to survive the massacre, and awoke to find himself in a POW camp in Burma.

His description of life building the notorious Thai-Burma railroad was harrowing. “We were put to work 18 hours a day,” he said. “The trees that would become rail ties were strapped to our backs.” Since his leg had been shattered in the truck bombing, he had to pull it along all day with a rope tied to his hand. Not knowing what was expected of him, he was severely beaten on the head once for not bowing low enough before a commander.

Many soldiers in the camp died of malaria, but he survived that, too. “I knew I had to protect myself from mosquitoes, so I sewed blankets together to make a hood and slept in it although it was stifling,” he said. Others died of starvation because they wouldn't eat the maggot-infested rice. “I took theirs, knowing the protein would save me. To this day, I can't eat a big meal.”

Hearing these horrors, I couldn't help asking, “What kept you going? Didn't you ever despair?”

“I pictured myself back home in Kent, sitting with my mother and my fiancée at the kitchen table,” he replied. “I knew they were waiting for me. I just wanted to get back to see them one more time, even if I died the next day.”

By then, he had been talking for almost two hours, but it felt like no more than five minutes. “After the A-bombs were dropped, only our captors knew that the war was over,” he continued. “They didn't dare kill us. But we sure didn't know that when we were ordered to stand for 20 minutes before a firing squad.”

I thought about how it feels to wait for the result of a crucial medical test. Is the shadow on the x-ray harmless or the beginning of the end? I thought about sitting in an emergency room, waiting for news of a loved one just beyond the closed doors. So the full meaning of standing 20 minutes facing the barrels of a dozen drawn rifles was just beginning to sink in when Mr. Anckorn added, "I never hated anyone, even when I was being beaten. Almost all my mates died – it wouldn't be right for them if I spent my life hating, would it?" As he shook his head slowly several times, a strand of sandy-gray hair fell onto his brow, and I noticed then his face was nearly unlined.

He told us that he had recently traveled to Japan with other veterans on the invitation of their government. "We were treated like heroes wherever we went. We talked to schoolchildren, everyone we met, even some former prison guards. Most people had no idea of what had happened to us – they wept when they heard our stories. Some people here, even our vets, criticized me for befriending the Japanese, saying I dishonored the memory of those who died. I feel the opposite. I blame no one. It was just the war."

Our train finally reached Paddington Station and we shook hands with Mr. Anckorn. He climbed down and disappeared into the crowd, a thin, erect man who moved with ease.

I couldn't forget him. Images from our brief time together returned: his quiet animation, the way his slightly concave cheeks looked, imprinted with the shadows of passing trees. I wanted him to know how much his story had moved me, and for years, I wondered if he was still alive. My own father had served during World War II as a medic on the Eastern European front but had never talked about that time. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's some years earlier, he was losing memory not only of the past, but of his very self. What I did know of that time was that my father, who now can no longer speak, had won my mother's heart with the beautiful letters he wrote daily from field tents and transport trucks. Perhaps in my mind, Mr. Anckorn was a bridge to my father and his generation. I had to reach that bridge before it collapsed into the sea of oblivion, forever lost to me.

In the year 2000, in a three-degrees-of-separation miracle – without knowing Mr. Anckorn's address or even the correct spelling of his name – I found myself back in touch with him.

Our communication came about through serendipity and the courtesy of Lord David Owen, former British Foreign Secretary and member of Parliament. Lord Owen was a keynote speaker at a week-long training event at my college for humanitarian aid workers who go wherever victims of war need them, and it occurred to me that he might help me locate Mr. Anckorn. The next step – getting

Lord Owen's mailing address from the college's conference organizer, a friendly colleague – was easy enough.

Mentioning Mr. Anckorn's membership in the Magic Circle of Magicians turned out to be the best of several "missing person" clues I provided. Lord Owen forwarded my letter to the Centre for Magic Art in London, writing back to say, "I have been assured that your letter will reach him, my office having spoken to someone there who was due to meet with Mr. Anckorn that very evening."

I received a letter from Mr. Anckorn soon after. Fergus – he insisted on being called by his first name – informed me that he was using email. (I wasn't surprised.) And so at the beginning of the new millennium, we began our transatlantic conversation, supplemented by his occasional air-mailed missives. In one he wrote: "When I was a POW, I had four ambitions if I should survive: to learn Japanese, to see Japan, to use a compass properly for tracking through the jungle (I did not stand a chance of escape without that skill) and to learn to fly. I can read and write Japanese fairly well now. As you know, I've been to Japan. I've learned the compass. And this summer, I had my first flying lesson."

Widowed many years before, he talked about his remaining family: his daughter in Cannes, his French grandchildren, and his son, a jazz musician. In one heartbreaking letter, he described the violent, accidental death of his beloved Sam while they were on one of their daily walks in the woods.

In another letter, he related one of those quiet, mundane encounters that, in my mind, sum up an individual's character more powerfully than any heroic act witnessed by hundreds: "I was stopped in the street yesterday by four young Japanese exchange students from our local school," he wrote, explaining that they were conducting some kind of survey about the public's knowledge of Japan and its culture. "When they asked me how I knew about Japan, I said to them – in Japanese – 'I was a prisoner of war of the Japanese.' Their mouths dropped and they kept saying, 'Sorry, sorry, sorry.' I said, 'No – it's a long time ago. You are my friends.'"

The students followed him into a shop to apologize some more. "I told them they were not born until 40 years after these events. I shook their hands and let them know I was pleased to speak with them. But I felt rather awful that perhaps I shouldn't have told them I'd been a prisoner, as it had quite upset them."

The last communication from England came in December 2003. There was no answer to my two emailed replies, and I grew afraid to try again. Months added up to nearly two years. Sometimes I reversed the chronology of every saved message on my computer so that the last one – it happened to be the Happy Christmas message from Fergus – became the first. I'd open it and stare at the screen.

Thinking about Fergus and my own father – now

irretrievably lost to late-stage Alzheimer's – I wished I could permanently reverse time. Maybe I could conjure my father back to me, using some of that life-saving magic. Maybe Fergus was still alive exactly as we remember him, Bill suggested hopefully, but now in an assisted living facility without Internet access. I wanted to believe this, and tried to banish my fear that he was now in the earth.

I could no longer bear not knowing, but realized that another email might be met with continued, ambiguous silence. I can endure a lack of clarity for the short haul, but living in a permanent state of ignorance is difficult for me, especially when the unanswered question centers on life and death. Mesmerized by his last words on the screen, I realized that I was like Fergus's mother so many years ago when she could not take her eyes off his postcard, trying to divine a hidden message and, if necessary, to banish death by sheer will power.

One night I took the plunge and sent another email – a long one this time. The next morning I had my answer, "I am fine, as ever. You are so kind to think of me." Fergus went on to say that two months earlier, in June, he and his son had joined other veterans and their families on a journey to Singapore and Thailand. "We went to the sites where something had happened to us," he wrote. But where the camp was once deep in the jungle, there are now "shops, buses, taxis and tourists. After 63 years of nightmares, I have not had a single one since this trip."

The catharsis continued, not just for Fergus but also, perhaps, for the countless other people damaged physically and psychologically by the war. The day before Fergus received my new email was, coincidentally, August 15, 2005 – VJ Day, the 60th anniversary of the war's end in the Far East. Just like ten years earlier, when we first met, Fergus had been invited to a memorial event at the Imperial War Museum in London. On this occasion, though, it was a reunion with England's Prince Philip and about a hundred other Far East survivors of what came to be known as "the forgotten army."

Simultaneously, the Prime Minister of Japan held a

ceremony at which he expressed "deep reflections and heartfelt sorrow" for the damage inflicted and vowed that his country would never forget the "terrible lessons" of the war. Also on that day, a thousand people attended the opening of a new memorial in Staffordshire dedicated to the Far East prisoners – an exhibition inside a series of huts like those that had housed Fergus and his comrades.

"I gave at least 12 interviews," Fergus wrote. "It seems I've become quite famous." I could picture him saying this with a barely perceptible shrug and bemused smile. He wasn't exaggerating. A web search of his name turned up news stories from the BBC, the *London Times*, and many media outlets across Great Britain. Reading these stories, I learned some new details about my friend.

From the *Yorkshire Post*: "He was so badly injured before being taken prisoner, a soldier who found him in a ditch thought he had perished and removed Mr. Anckorn's dog tags before making his own escape and reporting his friend dead."

That's when I also learned, on one of the Christian-oriented media sites, that Fergus was a declared atheist. At first this surprised me. Atheism, after all, is unusual for a man of his generation. After some reflection, I realized that my surprise sprung from something

much deeper, an ingrained assumption – perhaps a kind of misplaced superiority complex on my part – that a man of this kind had to believe in God.

Should I tell him that I believe he survived death so many times for a reason? That his deep and abiding humanity is all the more amazing to me because he acts without any thought of a reward in the afterlife?

I'll probably stay clear of these opinions, as I continue to communicate with Fergus Anckorn – retired business teacher, longest-serving member of the Magic Circle, father, widower, son of England. I'm just grateful that this man of peace is "still on the twig," as he puts it, traveling the world at the age of 86, speaking in his quiet, deliberate way to people of all ages, backgrounds, and beliefs. And I'm thankful that although war burns some men with the tattoos of hatred, others are cauterized to forgiveness.

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