

STORIES THAT TELL: The War Stories

Study 6

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“Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)

In mixing with members of SAPOL in recent years, I came across a saying, which is a bit of a take-off of the old diggers in Australia. They say something like ‘we were all standing around telling *war-ies*’. This term *war-ies* is short for ‘war stories’, and is a slang term synonymous with ‘tall tales’, bragging, or embellishing old exploits.

Geoffrey Bingham’s War Stories are not really that sort of thing. While some of them may truly recount and even embellish certain funny or even strange historical incidents, the stories are written not merely for entertainment, but in order to convey something of the truth of life, during war times, as a person of faith has seen, understood and experienced it. Most of the war stories, like the other types are undoubtedly written in the hope of helping to lead a person to ponder life more deeply, and in particular, to consider God and all his works in creation and redemption. Christ has come to meet us amidst all of life, including painful, poignant, tragic, sad, miraculous and even, or especially in the humorous days of war.

THE PACIFIST POSITION—A BRIEF WORD

There are many Christians who regard pacifism as the only authentic response to war. One Internet blogger recently wrote: “Participation in the military... is a violation of one’s commitment to Jesus Christ”.¹ Familiarity with Geoffrey’ Bingham’s writings, and his own decision—as a pacifist—to join the armed forces during WW2, have helped me to think through this issue in a helpful way. The following extract is taken from Geoff’s theological teaching, and a subtitle: ‘The Christian and War’²

A "just" war might be said to be one, which, resists oppression and defends righteousness and freedom. Whilst killing in war is evil it is pleaded that the evil of tyranny, especially that which results from such forces as Nazism are worse evils and a choice between two is necessary. A realistic recognition of man as he is will determine a person's view, e.g. whether a view of depravity is taken, or a humanistic view of man's innate potential of good. The problem that complicates the decision about "just" or "unjust" wars is that it is rarely, if ever, that the evil is on one side. So many elements complicate the matter entirely. Such elements could be aggrandisement by one country against another, armaments interests, sub-Christian views of retaliation (for wrongs done or imagined), racial hatred, and personal lust for power by leaders or nations.

(f) The Pacifist Position

There are Christians who are pacifists. The question of whether Christianity is pacifist is a wider question. Some reconciliation of the use of war in the Old Testament and the forecast of war to the end-time in the Scriptures has to be worked out by one who would be a pacifist or a non-pacifist. The whole question of righteousness, as of love, must be sorted out, with an understanding of penal elements within the context of nations and international relationships. Realistic views of man's sin

¹ <http://fireandrose.blogspot.com/2010/11/confession-on-negotiating-my-ecclesial.html>

² Geoffrey C. Bingham, ‘Christian Ethics and Their Practice’, *Living Faith Studies*, Series 3, No. 30, N.C.P.I., 1978, p. 218

and depravity must be taken and then decisions made. In this regard it is to be considered whether pacifism springs from a Christian or a humanistic source, and if from the latter whether it is, nevertheless consistent with general Christian teaching where the Bible does not give a specific direction. A further consideration is that wars spring out of the evil of man and simply to accept them as a necessary evil in passive fatalism is a contradiction of the moral powers the believer possesses and may even become moral (immoral?) acquiescence. The pacifist believes in non-resistance, non violence, non-killing. He claims that man being evil does not excuse wars. Positive pacifism alerts others to war's evil and seeks to outmode war. Retaliation is sub-Christian as also selfish aggrandisement and all national and racial hatreds. Whilst wars may be predicted as continuing this is no reason for acquiescence in any. Christ took the way of non-resistance and accomplished his goal. Because pacifism has not worked, nor may not work is no reason why it should not be espoused and followed. Evils such as slavery have been diminished by teaching. If all refused to fight wars would cease and governments would wish to gain the support of their people by not fighting. It is not a utilitarian question but a (totally) moral one.

(g) Pacifist or Not Pacifist?

Each person must abide by his own convictions whilst he is sure they are right. He does not go against his own conscience for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. He is responsible, however, to make sure - as far as possible - that his convictions are correct. That honest believers see two views in the Bible is patently clear, i.e. war is right (in some circumstances) and war is wrong (in all circumstances). These conclusions ought to be reached only when the total Biblical portrayal is considered. No conclusion is valid which omits the fact of man's depravity, of constituted authorities and of the working of penal elements of God's wrath in history. The question may not seem, finally, to be an "either-or" but a concession that whilst war and killing are evil of themselves it may be simplistic to work from this basis alone. The whole matter of morality and judgement is also involved.

In war, or even if a crazed violent attacker is shooting people in any society, Christians must face the moral question of 'what shall I do in order to truly love my neighbour?' How do I lay down my life in love, to care for or protect others? To my shock, Mennonite Christians often view police as merely agents of State violence.³

THE FIRST WAR STORIES

Geoffrey Bingham's first book of short stories was entitled '**To Command the Cats**'. It was published by Angus and Robertson in 1980; however many of the stories had been previously published in the *Bulletin*, a weekly Australian Magazine, in production from 1880 to January 2008. Geoff writes:

On return to Australia a story written in the POW camp—'Laughing Gunner'—was snapped up by the *Bulletin* as soon as I submitted it. That was why I chose it as the title story to this book. Thirty-three more stories were accepted by the same journal within a few years, and I was dubbed as their most prolific writer. I owe most in my writing career to the poet and short-story writer Douglas Stewart, who was literary Editor of the *Bulletin* for twenty-four years⁴

³ Andy Alexis-Baker, 'The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police', in *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Volume 25, Number 2, Spring 2007, p. 23-49 (Note: "Glock" is the name of a company that manufactures handguns popular with police departments for decades). Alexis-Baker says: "Because of the idolatrous character of the police, because police represent a threat to church order, and in the spirit of the early Christians and Anabaptists, Mennonites should ban police occupations for all current and potential members, and do so with the historical recognition that the police have served as the bridge for wider acceptance of warfare, idolatrous collaboration with the state, and further breakdown of community discipline and life" (Baker, p. 40).

⁴ Geoffrey C. Bingham, 'Preface' in *Laughing Gunner and Selected War Stories*, Troubadour Press Inc. Blackwood, 1992, p. xiii; This book has been very well received in Australia, winning the 1993 *Christian Book of the Year* award, from the Australia Christian Literature Society. It is a great gift suitable passing on to others, especially around Anzac Day, each year. Further to this, a most

A SHORT PRÉCIS OF SOME WAR STORIES—AND SOME QUOTES

It Sometimes Happens But Not Often

A professor – a Dutchman - held captive as a P.O.W. loses hope, and intends to die. But his dear friend, an army Chaplain prays constantly at his bedside. Then a miracle occurs. A hen arrives and lays an egg on the bed – most suitable for making eggnog –, which the Dutchman loves. Hope returns - a mystery – and miracle of mercy takes place before their eyes, and in their hearts and lives. Geoffrey heard about this event:

The Dutchman had watched it from beginning to end. He had lain still, afraid lest the hen be scared away. When it had gone, his nerveless hands had fumbled towards the warm, smooth fruit of the fowl.

‘Oh, no!’ exclaimed the chaplain. ‘Don’t touch it. It’s too precious.’

Nevertheless he did let the skinny Dutchman feel it with his long, spatulated fingers, and then he took it.

‘Wait for the eggnog,’ he cautioned cheerily, and went away to beat the ingredients together, to grind the precious shell into lime-powder, and to make the drink complete and nourishing.

The Dutchman was sitting up, this being the first time in many weeks. An orderly had arranged a couple of pillows for him, borrowing them from empty beds.

‘Praise be!’ the academic was saying. ‘Praise be!’

‘Praise be!’ agreed the chaplain. ‘Now drink this up.’

The professor needed no urging. His hands trembled as he held the rusty cup, but he insisted on holding it himself. He kept sipping and sucking and sighing, and then heaving away with asthmatic joy.

‘Gott is goot!’ he said eagerly.

‘He is good!’ agreed the chaplain.

He watched the last precious drops disappear into the pink mouth of the patient.

The Dutchman was rubbing his hands together soulfully, gleefully.

‘A hen, eh?’ he said. ‘Just a little hen, eh?’

He chuckled to himself, and then shook his hand feebly towards heaven.

‘What a humour, eh?’ he asked. ‘The goot Gott He sends the little bird to lay eggs all over the old professor so that the old professor must not die.’

‘That’s right,’ said the chaplain, scarcely knowing what to say.

He added, ‘The good God needs the old professor, eh? He doesn’t want to lose all that training, all that wisdom, all that knowledge.’

The Dutchman stared at him. ‘You t’ink that, hey?’ he asked. He looked admiringly at his old chaplain friend, shook his head and went off into his asthmatic gurgle.

‘Oh, the Gott, He is goot,’ he said. He kept chuckling. ‘He is very goot.’

Then he remembered the hen, and his gurgling became deep, even more asthmatic. After a time he was gasping, and the tears were coursing out of his fine old eyes, and on to the silver-grey thatch on his torso.

‘Oh, so goot,’ he was saying in helpless joy. ‘Oh yes, and oh, so lovink.’

When the chaplain slipped away because he could not hold back the tide of his own tears, he heard the Dutchman repeating to himself, like some endless refrain: ‘Oh, so lovink. So lovink.’⁵

Laughing Gunner

The story of a soldier – an unusual man - who held a strange obsession for machine-guns. Nicknamed Tiger, he was not at all interested in the duties of a regular foot soldier, with gun and bayonet. However, he was very eager to operate the machine-gun. He was passionately involved in the fighting prior to the fall of Singapore, during World War Two. He revelled in his task, taking his stand with the machine-gun, as the Japanese invaders made their relentless approach.

The Life and Death of Puggi Mahomet - (This is not a précis, but is a small direct extract)

‘How many times, down through the years, I have thought about that event, and Chikka has also! As I said before, Sproggie, Blower and Chips got theirs in action. Joe and Don R had to live with the thing for all the years they worked on their sheep stations, but they never wrote to us, or rang us about the

comprehensive summary of Geoffrey’s war years is included in the highly recommended book by Geoffrey Bingham, *Love is the Spur*, Eyrie Books, North Paramatta, 2004.

⁵ Geoffrey C. Bingham, ‘It Sometimes Happens, But Not Often’ in *Laughing Gunner*, p. 154-155

matter. Every Anzac Day we would not mention the subject, because there was no way of settling the matter. We would just sit together in the Botanical Gardens in silence, thinking about it.

The seven of us agreed that Puggi was a slippery cuss, and would worm his way out of any trial. What was worse, he knew the whole signal system now, and if the Japs came we were done for, with that sort of communication.

The six men said to me, 'Danny, we make this decision together—the seven of us—but only you can veto it.'

In a way, the decision was left to me, and I knew we had to do something. We were not at war with Japan, but give us a few days and we would be. Of that we were all sure. To let this man go free meant disaster.

'The court decides against you, Puggi Mahomet,' I said, but even then I felt a bit sick.

It was then Puggi rushed us. He was an expert in karate, and had Chips and Sproggie toppled in a second. He grabbed Sproggie's rifle to keep us at bay. This decided the other men, and in a flash Blower's bayonet went through the old 'point, withdraw' exercise. Puggi fired his .303, but the bullet went into the air. Joe and Don R rushed him with their bayonets, and we were all sick in the moment that we had done it. Whilst he writhed, I fired a shot and that finished him."⁶

The Rim

An autobiographical account of a World War 2 gun-battle: a charge near Singapore. Australians with rifles, against a Japanese machine gunner, other soldiers and snipers; one of the many Australian men charging is badly wounded by a bullet to the leg, and as his blood flows out onto the ground. New thoughts of life and death and survival and recovery come to the man as he lays still on the ground, until help comes; profound questions of duty, heroics and folly - are raised.

The Skylark of Takafau

The freedom of a little bird, singing in a cage, in Osaka, signals something profound to Prisoners of War, during World War 2. A story of imprisonment, hope and freedom.

Three Rice Cakes

A crisis of faith takes occurs in the life of a Prisoner of War. Should he continue to take the smallest rice cake, and suffer personal deprivation and hunger – out of love for others – or should he abandon this principle, and select the largest rice cake for himself? Amidst an inner personal battle of immense importance, the prisoner reasons to himself that if there is no such thing as true law, and judgment then ultimately nothing matters. If nothing matters, then self-preservation at the expense of others is nevertheless the only truly logical course of action for him to pursue. An unseen miracle occurs – and a hidden resolve is strengthened – which has ramifications for the remainder of this man's life. Autobiographical. (Also published in the booklet of the same name).⁷

The Power Within

Upon what strength does a person draw, in order to maintain the integrity needed for a moral life? This story from WWII is of a man who can behave well, and talk well, and even tell extremely funny yarns, yet can be a person who is driven, solely, by his own self-sufficiency. It illustrates how a person can behave with high morality, and do so entirely from one's own resources. However, the great deceit is that a person, can—of themselves—be virtually faultless and blameless in thought, speech and action. Such deception, of oneself, is a failure to face the reality of the human race as we find it, and share in it; if not faced, this way of being can end, sadly, in self-justification and ultimately, self-destruction. Faith draws upon true power. (Also published in *The Raymond Connection and other stories*, and in *At the End of His Tether*).

From Singapore to Sydney

An autobiographical account of the release of prisoners from the Changi P.O.W. Camp on Singapore Island (in 1945) - the story – a true one – includes some interesting personal impressions as it traces the journey, beginning with the boarding of the transport ship – *Oranji* - and the subsequent return to Australia. The whole account is very moving indeed, and the service of love and kindness rendered by the Australian women in the Red Cross imparts a beautiful insight into the mystery and communion of the human race, as a male-female entity. One feels like applauding, as Geoff Bingham captures with words, the scene of the welcome in Darwin. One is drawn to contemplate the glory of Australia as a unique and grand nation.

⁶ Quote taken from G. C. Bingham, *Laughing Gunner*, p. 21-22

⁷ This story appears in numerous books including G. C. Bingham, *Angel Wings*, p. 77-85.