LOYALTY: Or a Boy Born of Two Fathers

J. A. Stapleton

ABSTRACT

*Loyalty, or a Boy Born of Two Fathers*, is an epistolary short story that chronicles the collapse of a marriage, an empire and a man’s spirit. Told through censored letters and diary entries made available to the public in London’s Imperial War Museum, we learn of Captain R. Loveday’s escapades during the Battle of Kohima. Our journey stretches from the stability of the Anglo-French Suez Canal in Imperial Egypt, through to the Japanese-occupied jungle state of Nagaland. The battle is often referred to as the Stalingrad of the East and was voted “Britain’s Greatest Battle” by the National Army Museum in 2013.

His narrative captures the change in tide of global events akin to the dramas of home, tragedy and heroism during the eclipse of the Second World War. Will the tide of the Brahmaputra break and let him sail home to North London?

The story, all names, characters, and incidents featured in this short are entirely fictitious.
The featured entries featured were recovered amid a clear-out at the residence of a Mr. Arthur Loveday - at his home in Edmonton, North London – following a fatal heart attack in 1981.

LOYALTY

Or A Boy Born of Two Fathers.

1.

THE VOYAGE.

18.04.1944.

Dear Arthur,

First and foremost, my condolences, I heard of Ethel’s sudden decline from our sister. I express my sorrow and apologies to you and the boys for not attending the funeral; I anticipate there was a great turnout. She was a fine woman and will be sorely missed.

Thanks for your letter old man. Upon receiving it I was at once filled with high spirits. It didn’t last. Later aboard our ship, The Empress, the Colonel called a conference of all officers and informed us that the cogs are set in motion for my lads to join the War in the East. I’m not most keen on the idea. Pass on my love to Mother and Sister, thanks for checking on the wife.

R.

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Brother,

Since I last wrote we’ve parted the Suez Canal and are crossing the blasted Arabian Sea. We’re headed for Nagaland, via the Brahmaputra River and along the Assam Valley. Fighting the Japs in North-East India.

The mood aboard has changed with the wind. The lads are dreading the exercise to Burma. Tensions are high. A boxing ring has been erected in the lower levels to ease them. Officers are forbidden to partake in such activities. One has chosen to break this rule; Lieutenant Kenworthy. The lads respect him and I will attempt to honour him likewise.

Yesterday evening two men, with enough towel rations for a fortnight, bundled - being the appropriate word - in to fight. One man entered the ring, taller than Kenworthy, with short hair and furry eyebrows - Private Johnson, a degenerate gambler. The men applauded Kenworthy as he made quick double jabs and sharp right hooks: glamorising it all and heightening the imbecilic air about him. Eyes flashing red. Johnson was bashed about despite being a monster in comparison - 6’ 4” - absolutely battered by the cruel-bodied man. The chaps roared with excitement, I can imagine you doing likewise. The air
was much too stuffy so I quit the room and joined the officers in the Mess Decks for drinks.

At 21.00 hrs, I decided to have a tinkle on the piano. I was contented with the reception I received – song. The tune, “Boys of the Southern Cross”, had raised their spirits and, to best explain, driven them to claim Kohima once more for the British. I returned to my quarters, around 22:30, somewhat drunk, and glimpsed of Kenworthy, the cocky bastard, on a stairway to the Upper Decks. Later I sat on my bunk and thought of Eleanor. Winfrey, the splendid lad I share a cabin with, was snoring again and so I went without sleep.

Hope you’re holding up O.K. following the funeral.

R.

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27 . 04 . 1944

Arthur,

Orders have come ! Tomorrow we land. We’re to rendezvous with Indian forces east of the Assam. The Japs have brought the 1st Infantry Division (15,000 bodies) to play with. We are to lead a second wave frontal assault with the Chindt Brigade on flank.
At the time, us officers stood about in the boardroom, smoking cigarettes, consoling ourselves. Comments included:-
“THEY must have an alternative plan.” Will THEY hell!

We went on down to the Mess Decks where the men stood about ready. Sad to say, I wondered, looking over them, who’d be killed first - Kenworthy rallied the cry.

Wish Mother a happy birthday. I don’t have it in me to write to her, it’ll be some time before you hear word from me.

2.
THE ARRIVAL.
CAPT. R. LOVEDAY’S DIARY

[TYPED, COMPILED AND CHRONOLOGICALLY INSERTED BY THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM]
nicknamed this the Stalingrad of the East, and they’re bloody well right.

Invasion conditions were terrible. Nonetheless, we gunned across the choppy waters: headlong into the line of fire. Strong winds caused a heavy swell, slinging [the] smaller vessels [inc. Loveday’s] from wavetop to wavetop.

One of the lads radioed in air support. Three RAF bombers soared overhead and blew the [snipers], taking pot-shots at us, to kingdom come. I waited in the boat with my flask, toasting the prodigious performance: the planes, dancing amid falling bombs in the orange skies above. I could almost taste that coppery blood smell in the air.

The sea eventually calmed and we bailed out of the boats. We shot at the treeline for good measure: no retort came and amounted a heath of scorched soil and burning bamboo, dropped into prone positions and waited. Watching. Nine wounded Japs, arms raised in surrender, padded over to us.

“No shoot.” A bespectacled fellow cried.

From the bushes there was a whistle. Sickening cracks. Rifles ripping them apart. Popping heads. Flailing limbs. Guilt in my heart. We’d gone and slaughtered them.

On the right flank came Kenworthy and his contingency of delinquents, smoking weapons over their shoulders, like
medals, boasting their hunt. Kenworthy stopped at the boy in specs, whose eyes bore into his, nudged his face away and stepped over him.

“This isn’t war. It’s murder!”

His eyes rolled. “Tell someone who gives a [damn] old boy. These slanty-eyed [men] done two of yours and a few of mine. If we didn’t shoot them, they’d have returned the favour.”

I cursed at him, we could’ve easily taken them prisoner.

“Funny, your magazine’s empty too. You do come out with some absolute [baloney]!”

Under that tobacco ridden breath of his, in his tone, I was also to blame: so, I hit him. He wasn’t as tough as first thought. I couldn’t have him belittling me, I’m the Captain. I broke his nose and put him on his arse for good measure. When he got back up, ready, he did the dirty and head-butted. We went for it like children, rolling about in the mud. I’ll soon have him.

No. 4          1st May ’44

These past days have been the most fascinating in my life. Every evening I wonder, somewhat drunk about the state of the human condition and how loyalty comes and goes with
servicemen. Fatigue is high and morale is low since setting off into the wilderness of the jungle after the Japanese, somewhere out in the bush.

Within this fantastical landscape Thomas Hardy surfaced in my mind: “The languid perfume of the summer fruits, the mists...the flowers, formed therein a vast pool of odour which...seemed to make the animals, the very bees and butterflies drowsy.” Not to mention the drink too.

Out in the bulrushes there was a whip and a crack. A lad, Livingston, was killed. No sniper spotted. After waiting a moment, we pressed on. Winfrey, damn brave fellow, was on flamethrower duty; filling in for Johnson after his hospitalization in the boxing match.

He led a path of smouldering earth. Then, after traversing the jungle for over an hour there was a rustle above. The Devil’s breath, engulfed a tree and a Jap tangled down from its bosom, in the rope, aflame. Kenworthy tore the poor sod to shreds with a Lee-Enfield rifle. The Jap was smiling at me.

No.7

4th May '44

I haven’t slept since the Jap. A great many atrocities have occurred under my command. Too many men killed in this Battle
for barren land. I’ll be one of them. I think this daily, wondering how long it can last. I have a family waiting for me: an estranged wife, we didn’t end on great terms when I departed for Africa many months ago. I need to write Arthur, his Ethel died, I need him to pass on a message to mine and possibly save what is left of my marriage.

ORDERS: We are now to capture the Imphal road.

No. 9

6th May ’44

More dead. Nothing to show for it: 1 corpse for 3 empty boxes of ammunition. There’s nothing of saving the free world, only safeguarding trading interests. Kenworthy and I are to attend a meeting tomorrow evening.

3.

THE LAST RECEIVED LETTER.

19 . 05 . 1944

Dearest Mother and brother,

The war for me is at an end. I’ve been wounded in a grenade attack that has claimed the lives of many men and the altruistic, Lieutenant Kenworthy.
I intend to inform his family upon my return.

The doctors have described my condition as stable after a fortnight here in the Camp hospital, only a few minor injuries.

You’ve been on my mind a great deal during my travels across the sub-continents of Africa and India. I will make amends for being gone these past months.

Your loving son and brother,

Captain R. Loveday.

P.S. Arthur, will receive a letter, read it well.
Arthur,

This’ll be posted to you anonymously. I’ve done something terrible. On May 7th, I planned to divulge evidence of mass murder in a meeting, executed by Lieutenant Kenworthy and myself, to Lt. Colonel George Brown. I bid that boy Jon Winfrey, farewell and went to the command-post. Kenworthy went for me. A grenade was tossed in and we were blown out of it. I was thrown clear of the escarpment and into the reeds below - for the most part unscathed.

I came to a few hours later, the ensuing gunfire had died down, the Japs had made for the hills. I found Kenworthy near the escarpment. His torso splintered and the better part of his face blown off. I didn’t know what to do, so I had a drink. I shot him in the knee, twice in his chest, then three or four times to the face. I took a few of his teeth. Lancasters soared overhead, a finer display of fireworks has never been given. There was a squelching beneath my boots, plummeting bombs overhead and satisfying screams. Winfrey struggled up after me and said nothing. He’s seen what I’ve done. They’ll court-martial me for this once I’m out this hospital.

Winfrey’ll be back for me, I’m sure of it, sooner or later.

Accept this as my admission of guilt. What I intend to do now, I don’t know, but I’m certain of this, you will never hear of me again.
LOYALTY: OR A BOY BORN OF TWO FATHERS – J. A. STAPLETON

POST OFFICE
TELEGRAM

222 2 i Padstow T OHMS 28

49 Woodford Avenue Ilford

= Deeply regret to inform you your son 42737 has been reported missing letter

Follows = OC STEVAL