

David K. Daltridge: Servant of God

Brian Evenson

I

THEY LEFT THAT MORNING WITHOUT BEING TOLD where they were going. Daltridge was surprised when, instead of flying high and north toward Hanoi, they stayed level and curved west. As the flight commander offered the target coordinates, he wrote them down, then looked over at a stunned Thompson.

"Jesus," said Thompson, without remembering to cover his mouthpiece. "That's Cambodia."

Daltridge did not answer. He listened to the commander lecture Thompson that officially they had no targets in Cambodia, that they were not going to Cambodia, that once they returned they had never been to Cambodia. Anybody who could not live with that should let him know right away so he could arrange for a court martial.

"Yessir," said Thompson. "Yessir, yessir."

Daltridge leaned toward the porthole, loosening the shoulder straps until he could see out and down. Below was jungle. There seemed no way to determine where Vietnam stopped and Cambodia began, the vegetation thick enough it was simple for the Viet Cong to pass from one country to the other with impunity.

"Should we be doing this?" asked Thompson.

Daltridge smiled. He leaned forward to avoid having to answer.

"Two minutes to target," said the commander.

Lowering his face to the sight, Daltridge watched the crosshairs flick through vegetation.

"What am I looking for, sir?" he asked.

"Routine," said the commander.

He saw jungle and then, near the river, a small grouping of huts. His heart began to beat louder and he started a prayer in his head. He blinked once. When his eye flashed open again, he saw coming into his

sight the outer contours of a town.

"Drop," he yelled. "Drop!"

He watched the town spread out briefly below him and then gather into the jungle again. He heard the faint blows far below as the bombs struck. The plane labored heavily upward, turned home.

He spent the night awake, praying for comfort. He could not sleep. It seemed to him that his prayers accumulated around him, pushing the air from the room.

Throwing off the blanket, he sat up on the edge of his bed. He stared at the dark lump of his duffle bag.

"What's wrong?" asked Thompson.

"Can't sleep."

"Thinking about the run?"

"Yes."

"I mean, Cambodia," said Thompson.

"If they want to drop there, they probably have a good reason."

"Man, I don't know."

"That's not what bothers me," said Daltridge.

"What bothers you?"

"I don't know," said Daltridge.

Lying down, he pretended to be asleep.

The second run was smoother for him, the third smoother still, though he still had difficulty sleeping. He could not understand why the runs into Cambodia made it difficult for him to sleep while the Vietnam runs did not. Though his discomfort decreased slightly, it stayed with him. Thompson, though, after the first run, stepped into the routine.

Daltridge boarded and strapped in, waited to see if the plane would turn west or fly north. It broke west. He heard Thompson talking to him, but not what the man was saying. Nodding, he leaned forward and stared through the sight.

He kept like that, his back hunched, until they crossed above the river. Then he straightened momentarily and looked at Thompson, who was looking in the other direction. Passing his hands over his eyes, he leaned forward again.

"Target approaching," said the flight commander.

He put his head down and looked, saw pass below a dark scar where a bomb must have struck on an earlier run. Saw as well pocks of smoke rising from the vegetation. He watched the jungle flood past.

He felt something strike the plane, then air rushing all around him. His head was batted about, the wind deafening. Looking over, he saw the metal eaten away beside Thompson's shoulder, the man's head smoothly gone.

"We've been hit, sir!" he shouted. "Thompson's dead, sir!"

He heard one of the others scream something over the radio as it shorted out, felt the plane engines struggle, the plane pulling too quickly upwards. Then the plane flashed all around him and he found himself and his seat spinning out into empty air.

He cut himself free from the parachute and dropped to the ground. He began to push his way deeper into the jungle. Behind him, he could hear the short, sharp shocks of gunfire.

He kept running until he heard voices sound close to him, then abandoned the trail he had crushed and picked his way with care. He climbed into a tree and waited for nightfall, examining the slight cuts down his hands and arms. On his chest was a long gash, the lips glittering with shrapnel. He removed his canteen and poured water over the wound, saw it loosen and begin to bleed feebly.

Leaning his head against the bole of the tree, he tried to sleep.

He awoke near dusk, his hands sore, the cut along his chest puffy and swollen. Climbing down from the tree, he took his bearings, began to run.

He watched the moon rise, splintered and low through the vegetation. He stumbled forward until he could smell the blood coming out of himself, then slowed again, his breath slipping raggedly from him.

His chest hurt. The jungle thickened. His feet grew damp in his boots and were rubbed raw. He punched his way forward, stopping only to read his compass by the dim moonlight.

It was like that for a few hours, his exposed skin jumpy until, without warning, he pushed into open space.

He could see huts before him, beyond them a weak spartle of light off the river. Keeping to the underbrush, he came toward the river. He listened to the low sound of its wash. He saw, near him, a shape in the water. Crawling forward, he made it out as a shallow boat.

Standing, he untied it, pushed it into the water, and stepped in. The boat rocked and swayed. He settled himself at the near end and groped along the floor for an oar, reaching forward until he touched an odd wedge which, under his cautious prodding, became a human foot.

He jumped. The man he had touched gave a stifled cry and sat up, his features inscrutable.

"Don't move," said Daltridge, and shook his pistol at the man. "No noise."

The man began to move backward and Daltridge shook his gun again. The man stopped moving. As he felt the boat begin to turn slowly in the current, he shook the gun again. The man lifted his hands.

The boat turned. He saw the man's face clearly an instant in the

moonlight, perhaps Cambodian, perhaps Vietnamese, and then shadows flooded over it. He wondered if the man could see his face as well. The moonlight wavered briefly on the bottom of the boat and he thought he saw an oar or a pole. He shook his gun. The man raised his hands higher.

The boat turned again and he saw at its bottom a makeshift oar, a bent metal blade bound to a bamboo pole. He saw the man's clothing briefly, enough to know he was not wearing a uniform. He tried to reach for the oar while staying on his seat and keeping the gun fixed on the man, found it out of reach.

"Cover your eyes," he said to the man.

The man made a strangled noise. Daltridge shook his gun. "Cover your eyes," he said again, then lifted his free hand to cover one of his own eyes. The man watched him. Daltridge repeated the gesture, until the man slowly lowered his hands to cover his face.

"That's right," said Daltridge, smiling though the man couldn't see him. "Good."

He came crouched off the bench and slid slowly forward, aiming the gun, until he could get his fingers around the oar's shaft. He scraped the oar carefully along the bottom of the boat toward him. He slid his gun to his other hand. Lifting the oar, he grasped it farther down the shaft and swung, bringing the edge of the blade down into the man's head.

The man's hands fell and he slid to the bottom of the boat. Daltridge brought the oar down again, then a third time. He kept bringing it down until the boat turned and the moonlight showed a damp pulpy hatching stretched across the man's face. The boat prodded the edge of the river, leaves from overhanging branches brushing across the boat and over his face, too. It struck into the roots and branches, stopped.

He stripped away the leaves against his face. Setting down the oar, he turned and felt, over the side, the tangled roots. He pushed off against them, felt the boat disengage slightly until he could no longer touch them. Instead of drifting into open current, the boat slowly slid back.

He heard the man groan in the dark. Sliding free his knife, he crawled along the bottom of the boat until he touched the man's bare feet. Throwing his body atop the man, the boat rocking, he pushed his knife into the man's face and chest.

When he was satisfied, he rolled the man out of the boat. The body tilted over, splashed, then caught onto something just below the surface. It hung suspended and pale, just visible, as if floating upon the surface of the water. He tried to push it down, but it would not go.

Taking the oar, he pushed out, rowed toward home.

II

At nights sometimes he would wake up in a cold sweat and think still of dropping the bombs, the jungle passing below him as he stared through the sights. He thought of his first and solitary vision of Thompson dead and then, the moment after, the plane missing from around him and he falling with his parachute open. He had no memory of having opened it and chalked the credit up to God. God, too, he told others, had been with him through the jungle, and had given him a boat to cross the river, and had lifted him clear of all traps and menaces. God had brought him crawling out of the jungle and back into the camp where nobody could believe he was still alive. Everyone he told said it was a miracle. He took their word for it, though he could not feel any sort of spiritual confirmation.

When he reasoned it all through, he saw no purpose to his waking in a sweat in the middle of the night. God had been with him every step of the way, or nearly, and what he did was to thank God in his prayers and lean over against his wife's body and try to fall asleep against her, and mainly he could.

But sometimes he woke up screaming, his wife beside him and shaking him and asking what it was. When he calmed down, he would tell her it was Vietnam, because that was easier than telling her he was back in Cambodia. He had not told her about Cambodia, nor had he told anybody except the men who had debriefed him, and they had raised the issue first. He knew his duty.

But when he lay in bed after he was no longer screaming and his wife was asleep again, he would think about what had frightened him. Sometimes he realized that what he was screaming about was not just Cambodia and trying to escape it, but two meager things about getting out—the sound of the oar's blade as he chopped it down through the man's head, the sound of the knife being plunged into the man's face.

In the morning he ate his wife's breakfast and kissed her and got off to the printing house. He would come home smelling of ink, and on Sundays they went to church together and he gained a certain amount of authority in the local ward. As a war hero, somebody who had proved his love for his country, he was respected by many. He found himself accepting callings and serving in the ward until, three years after his marriage and a few weeks before the birth of his second child, he was appointed a counselor in the bishopric.

He had always believed the bishopric to be inspired and in constant communication with God, though he himself had not felt God's spirit since before Cambodia, and even doubted ever to have felt it at all. He served in some confusion, waiting for inspiration to strike him. It did not. He had a second child. He had profound doubts which he revealed to no

one, not even his wife, and continued to serve, methodically and without personal comfort. His efficiency and faithfulness were noticed and he was made bishop.

He had four more children, in rapid and furious succession. He began to find satisfaction in the order of things, the way in which the *General Handbook of Instructions* delineated the bishop's principles and actions clearly enough that one was hardly in need of daily inspiration. There were rules to guide him, and he could live by these and be sure that others lived by them as well. Obedience was the principle upon which the gospel was predicated, and thus the superior law. He did his duty, cleaned up the ward. He learned to speak in a fashion that seemed to lend his words authority and which made others feel the spirit, even if he did not feel it himself. They made him stake president, which was proof of God's approval and enough to make the nightmares stop. He stopped thinking about Cambodia. He felt at peace with himself.

When the revelations came out about the secret bombings and the press began to criticize the military, he felt indignation. Cambodia was none of the public's affair. He had done what was necessary for the preservation of democracy. He had been following orders, and the orders had been good ones.

Still, when his wife asked him if he knew anything about the bombings, he told her he did not, without being quite certain what he was hiding or why. He repeated the lie to his children once they were older. He began to believe the lie himself, and no longer thought of the war at all.

His obedience was so perfect that the leaders of the church began to look on him with favor, and soon he found himself in their full employ, the church his only profession and master.

III

Years later, as a general authority, he found himself on assignment for the church in Asia, reorganizing the church divisions of Korea. He stood before a crowd spread through the park, there being no church large enough to hold them all. The church had grown enormously, and this he felt was clear proof of its truth. He spoke words of hope and faith to the people in single sentences, waiting as the man beside him translated all he said.

He had not thought of Vietnam in years. Even when he first arrived in Korea, he did not think of it. But there was something about the interpreter's cadence, the attitude of his body as he spoke, that suddenly drew him back. When he looked out again over the top of his glasses at the sea of faces, they seemed to him alien, perhaps hostile.

He faltered, fell short. He saw the crowd before him remain attentive

for some time and then slowly, ever so slightly, begin to move their eyes, incline their heads to whisper one to the other.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" asked the interpreter.

He shook his head. "Thank you," he said. But when he tried to begin again, he could not remember what he had been talking about.

"Where was I?" he whispered.

"... Jesus, who is Jehovah, the God of the Covenant," said the interpreter.

He tried again to remember, but could not. He waited a long moment, again became conscious of the force of the eyes staring at him.

"Sir?" asked the interpreter.

"I want to say a few things about the war," he said. "I was over here for the war, you know."

He began to speak, about Vietnam, about flying in a bomber, supporting the cause of freedom. How he had come to liberate the people and how, if he and his fellows had only been given the chance, there would now be a united, democratic, free Vietnam. He spoke for quite some time before realizing that the interpreter was staring fixedly at him.

"What's wrong?" asked Daltridge. "Am I speaking too quickly?"

"I will not translate this," the man said. "The people shall not be forced to tolerate it."

"Are you joking?"

The interpreter folded his arms. "You are here to speak about the church."

"Listen," said Daltridge. "I command you as a servant of God to translate this for me."

"No," said the interpreter. "I shall not."

They stood staring at one another, the sweat running off Daltridge's face, until he stumbled forward, collapsed.

He awoke to a crowd of faces all around him and over him too, and thought himself again in Vietnam. He sat up and the crowd rumbled back a few inches and he found he recognized beside him the interpreter, tugging at his arm now and trying to draw him to his feet.

He shook the man's hand off him, slowly shifted to his knees. The interpreter began to shout in Korean and the crowd around him rippled briefly back before beginning again to creep forward.

Swaying, he began to stand. When he started to fall, he found the interpreter there again under him, bearing him up. Stumbling their way through the crowd, they reached the car, and he was pushed in.

The interpreter was beside him in the seat and leaning forward, addressing the driver. Daltridge leaned his head back against the seat, listening to his heart harrow his chest. The car jerked forward, the driver

beckoning and chattering out the open window.

"Where are we going?" asked Daltridge.

"The hospital," said the interpreter.

"I don't need a hospital," said Daltridge. "Take me to the hotel."

The interpreter did not answer.

"Did you hear me?" asked Daltridge.

"We are going to the hospital."

Daltridge struggled off the seat. "Stay," he said to the driver. "Stop." The interpreter said something in Korean. The driver continued forward without hesitation.

"What did you tell him?" shouted Daltridge. "What?"

And then he found his cheek beside the interpreter's shoes, the interpreter shouting loudly above him and trying to drag him back onto the seat.

He awoke on a high bed, tubes up his nose, a Korean nurse beside him.

"What is it?" he asked.

She smiled and bowed her head repeatedly. She stood and left, the door squeaking as it closed.

He regarded the closed door. He turned from it and examined the monitors beside him, the dim blips. He pulled down the sheets, examined his pale, blotched chest. Closing his eyes, he tried to sleep.

The door squeaked open. He opened his eyes, saw enter a hunched and twisted Asian man, his head bowed to the floor. The man shuffled to the chair beside the bed, sat, then lifted his head.

He was missing an eye, and the other eye, bloated, was oddly rotated. His face and forehead were a ruin, the bones lumped beneath the skin, the flesh cicatrized and uneven, all symmetry absent.

The man twisted his face sideways, brought his single eye to bear on Daltridge.

"Nurse!" called Daltridge. "Nurse!"

The man raised his finger to the remains of his lip. "No move," he said. The man reached out slowly to touch Daltridge's cheek. His hand was rough, dry.

"Talk, you," said the man, his accent poor.

"What do you want me to say?"

The man put his hand behind his ear, pulled the ear's remaining cartilage into a cup.

"Talk, you," he said again.

"What shall I say?" asked Daltridge.

The man waited with his partial ear cradled, his single eye open.

"Who are you?" asked Daltridge.

"Yes," said the man. "Such a voice. It is the one."

"What?" said Daltridge.

"I am in this church, and you are in it as well," the man said. "I have forgiven you."

"Forgiven me?" asked Daltridge. "What must I be forgiven of?"

The man shook his head. "I do not speak. I do not tell them. But you push your knife into my face."

"I didn't do anything wrong," said Daltridge. "I don't even know what you are talking about."

The man turned his head, brought his bloated eye to bear.

"I have forgiven you," he said.

"There's nothing to forgive!" shouted Daltridge. "I am guilty of nothing."

"Die," the man said. "I have forgiven you."

Daltridge began to shout and struggled to climb out of the bed. He found the nurse holding him down, pushing down upon his shoulders, and speaking quickly into his ear in a language he could not comprehend. There was a nurse on the other side as well. He looked for the crippled man, but did not find him nor any sign the man had ever been there.

He felt his head fall back onto the pillow. Something was covering his face. He felt something striking his chest, felt himself being strapped down, the bed below him moving, lights flicking past on the ceiling, the nurse running beside. The bed burst through the doors into open sunlight and he was lifted, the bed and he on it slid into the back of an emergency vehicle of some sort.

He heard the engine start. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw faces running beside the car and slowly dropping away, replaced by people on the street turned in every direction and unaware of his existence, the car speeding forward as the faces faded into an anonymous and impersonal mass.

He could not think of where he was. He could not think of what place was left where he could possibly go.

