

ONE SOLDIER'S ODYSSEY
FROM SICILY TO DACHAU
THE
LIBERATOR

BY ALEX KERSHAW

AUTHOR OF *THE LONGEST WINTER* AND *THE BEDFORD BOYS*



“(R)iveting and satisfying” —*Time*

“An exceptional chronicle.” —*Wall Street Journal*

“Felix Sparks’ story illuminates what makes
a man a leader.” —*The Toronto Star*

“An uncynical, patriotic look at our
finest hour.” —*The Daily Beast*



CROWN

THOMAS G. BOWIE, JR.

Stories Matter a conversation with Alex Kershaw

Stories matter. They matter, in part, because they enrich our lives and ennoble our spirits. They matter, in part, because they help us understand where we have been, where we are today, and where we're going. They matter, perhaps most importantly, because they help us negotiate the details of memory and ultimately to invest them with meaning. Consider the recent tragic fertilizer fire in the little town of West, Texas for example. As the fire was building and plumes of smoke covering the town, a small band of volunteer firefighters were rushing toward the plant. Most had no idea what they were up against. They just knew that duty called, and they rushed toward it. However, a 32 year veteran fire chief from Dallas, Kenny Harris, was also in West, Texas that evening, visiting a friend, playing with his children in the yard when they saw the smoke billowing up. They jumped in a truck and headed toward the flames too, until Kenny Harris told his friend to stop and let him out. As Kenny sent his friend to get more help and to spur a wider evacuation, he noted that the all volunteer fire fighting force had no idea what they were up against...but he did. And Kenny didn't like their chances. Nonetheless, he moved forward, arrived on the scene and began sharing his expertise with the local team in the hopes of bringing the rapidly escalating situation under control. Sadly, it was not to be. Minutes later the massive blast that killed 15 and injured scores of others took Kenny's life and those of 10 other first responders.

Knowing what he knew about the fire, clearly aware of the dire risks it posed, why did Kenny still head straight for it? What does his story tell us about Kenny, and about the stories his life was built upon? What do such stories come to mean, and why do they come to matter so much to us? Joan Didion claims that "we tell

ourselves stories in order to live,” and over many years I’ve come to embrace her claim. At some level, we all *know that stories matter*, and we know that some stories matter more than others. We all know that our lives are built on stories, and that we do, in fact, tell them in order to live. So whether these stories were shared eons ago around a campfire, more recently on the evening news, or more permanently in a published text, the power of stories is both persistent and widely prevalent. Perhaps today, more than ever, we hunger for stories; perhaps today, more than ever, they speak to us with renewed urgency.

Clearly, for a *New York Times* bestselling author like Alex Kershaw, stories have always mattered. For over a decade, Kershaw has born witness to a series of remarkable stories, each rooted in World War Two, and each exposing a narrative that otherwise would be lost, forgotten, or remain untold. From his unauthorized biography of what Kershaw calls the “finest humanist photographer of World War II,” Robert Capa, to his powerful tale of the extraordinary losses endured by a National Guard battalion from Bedford, Virginia in *The Bedford Boys*, Kershaw feels the force of these stories in ways that matter greatly to both him and us. Listen, for example, to this brief story of a recent visit he made to Omaha Beach. “I went back with my son. He’s 15, with a high school group two weeks ago, and I took him across Omaha Beach. What I did was I took them to the very spot where the Bedford Boys landed...Company A and the 16th HR, 6:32 a.m. on D-day. The beach is about two hundred yards wide. At that point it’s sort of mid-tide, and I point out that between me and the nearest cover where you could possibly stand a chance of living, 102 people died.” He then has the students re-enact the landing, and as they start across the beach, after 30 seconds or so, he calmly says “Okay, you’re all dead.” In a way well beyond words, these young high school students began to understand what had happened, began to understand why the story of the Bedford Boys might really matter. Kershaw himself understands both the power of such stories as well as their limits: “You can’t really put it in words....it’s very profound.” So it’s with a real respect for these stories, and a real care for the words that seek to narrate them, that Kershaw approaches his subject.

In his latest book, *The Liberator* (Crown, 2012) Kershaw again engages a compelling figure, an infantry commander at the platoon, company and battalion level, Felix Sparks. Sparks endured over 500 days of combat with the 45th Infantry “Thunderbird” Division, from the beaches of Sicily, through Italy and France, and ultimately to Germany. Kershaw stitches together the testimony from hundreds of interviews and unit histories to tell a story of survival and endurance, as well as a story of the extraordinary costs Felix Sparks paid for such endurance. It’s a story

filled with pain, and suffering, and loss, and frustration, as well as one filled with grit and perseverance and remarkable leadership. In short, it's a story that matters, and one that matters for all the right reasons. As Kershaw suggests, "I think all of us are trying to find moments in history, people that we can admire, times when human beings are at their best. I think what draws us always back to those moments is that history tells us definitely what they did was very, very important." In *The Liberator* Kershaw has found such a moment, and in Felix Sparks, and the men he fought with, found people we can admire, despite their very human flaws.

The following excerpts are taken from an interview that was conducted by Nathan Matlock and Thomas G. Bowie, Jr. from the Regis Center for the Study of War Experience (RCSWE) on the 16th of April, 2013. Alex Kershaw spoke for over an hour about his work, his passions, his politics, his commitment to stories that truly matter.

RCSWE: As you followed Sparks for 500 days across Europe, what did you discover about these really amazing human moments where the limits of endurance are completely stretched and the motivation to go on seems most challenged?

ALEX KERSHAW: I think I discovered that fact can only take you so far and that imagination enables you to have glimpses into these moments....I spent a lot of time trying to get inside Sparks' head...but still I couldn't understand the really visual experience of what it was like to undergo that much trauma and stress. But my job is to try and get a little bit close to it, a bit further than some other people maybe, and to move people and to tell a story that moves people basically. I mean, I think the emotion is what draws me. I'm drawn to stories that reveal people's emotions and I'm trying to capture that. I'm trying to move people—I'm even a bit ashamed of trying to—and if people cry or they're moved or they feel something really strong from something that I've written, that's the goal.

And to appreciate people like Sparks, to appreciate how smart he was, how highly functioning he was, how compassionate he was, and how brokenhearted he was, and how damaged he was, and how important it was that we had people like that when we most needed them. Because we did and we still need them, we still do—we know that's the bedrock that we end up relying on. When the shit hits the fan, those are the people you need, and they emerged, thank goodness. There's a lot of people that are alive today because of him, not as many as he wanted, but a lot more than there would have been otherwise, you know.

RCSWE: Would you share a particularly powerful moment from *The Liberator* with us?

ALEX KERSHAW: I think for me it's when he elaborates about the liberation of Dachau. There's so much that he wrote about it: we know he talked about it, he remembered it. There were also so many other eyewitnesses. I think the sort of place that he is in his head was gripping. There was a certain—I hate to say the word truth—but Sparks and his men felt that they got so close [during the liberation of Dachau] to some evil in people that was really quite disturbing, that was insane, that immersed them in the madness, surrounded them by insanity and madness and things that are just really incredible.

But then, it's weird because even though I wrote that—that's the sort of climax of the book and I spent an awful lot of time researching it—I just saw some photographs recently, color photographs of the first day or two of liberation, and some of the pictures are just overwhelming. I remember it because I knew a lot about it, but suddenly those photographs, just the images, really made me think, "Whoa!" And I try to think, "What would it have been like to see that in reality?" Not somebody's idea, but for that to be your reality. It must have been just mind-blowing, and Sparks said it was. It was something that you just couldn't grasp. The human mind couldn't deal with it. So I think in terms of the book trying to keep that sense of insanity, that sense of something you just couldn't get your mind around, I think that that was quite important. That was interesting. It's hard to write about insanity, you know.

RCSWE: Absolutely. Can we focus on the title just a minute with you? Sparks is obviously the liberator of Dachau as you've just described, and there's something that this narrative journey does for him that is very personally liberating because he's always known that he's not guilty of murdering the SS guards—in fact, as you show, it's quite the opposite, he stops the summary executions his men would have conducted. But to what extent is the burden of this narrative a larger effort to liberate Sparks from the dehumanizing and overwhelming cost of the war?

ALEX KERSHAW: I think there's a guy who wrote a review in *Time Magazine* who said that, "When you get to the point where Sparks stops his men at Dachau slaughtering those guys, it's a cathartic moment in the book." And I kind of had a doubt that it was really a cathartic moment, but then I realized that actually I agree with him. There is something cathartic about a moment of sanity, of great

humanism—well, if not humanism, at least someone stopping it, stopping the killing. Sparks needed to at some point stop the madness and the murder and the killing, especially after being through so much violence and so much killing in 500 days of war. That moment in *The Liberator* is where Sparks is the guy who stops it, and I thought this is what the book is really about.

And thankfully, it's a moment that's captured forever in the photograph of him. But it's not often you get a photograph which I think can define someone's better nature. Somehow to get to the essence of what was really good about Sparks, despite everything, despite every reason for hating the SS, for hating the Germans. He didn't want to see people kill others unnecessarily and his words were carefully chosen: "unnecessarily." He was very happy to kill people necessarily, not happy, that's a wrong word, but that's the job. You have to get it done and the quicker you got it done, the better.

And in fact, many people didn't surrender and he had to bomb a town and destroy it and civilians were killed too. Then, so be it. That's the mindset that they were in, that he had to be in to get the job done. But at the same time, the fact that he clearly in his mind could make this distinction, even with that amazing stress, the fatigue, what would destroy men in a few hours, something he survived for over 500 days, he was still able instinctively to say, "This is necessary, that's unnecessary." And to make that judgment call and to have that leadership is something that I admire.

There's not many people you can put in that situation. And as a stress test, there's not much that comes close to a stress test compared to the first few hours in Dachau surrounded by all the evidence you need to just kill every German you could find and that's what some of these guys wanted to do, but he didn't. It does suggest that we're not always a plague on the planet that human beings can be—there can be something noble about it.

RCSWE: You spend a lot of time in personal interviews whenever possible. Given your background as a journalist, why is that dimension of the stories you tell so vital?

ALEX KERSHAW: I think because you can't really make it personal unless you really get inside people's psychology and you get to know them. Maybe it's a kind of betrayal of my friendships I have made with these people, and yet I still have, you know, quite a cold hearted way because what I want to do is to take that feeling, I want to get inside how they felt. I want to sort of be there in a way. I want to be in their head back when it happened. I want to try and bring those actions and those

decisions and those moments to life. So that requires a lot of being with people and just talking to people a lot, especially when people get on a bit and their memories can be very fragmented. Often they don't have a continuous smooth narrative unless they're bullshitting about their lives and you can tell—we all know about them. We've met a few of those, but generally memories are very fragile, they are beautiful things, and the older you get the more fascinated I become by just the sort of the fragments that are thrown at you every now and then almost by accident.

I've been spending a lot of time with a guy that's 85 and he was in the French Resistance. His parents joined the French Resistance and you know I'm sitting in his hospital room in Paris. I've spent a lot of time with him in the last six months and every now and again we'll have a lunch, and he'll have a couple of glasses of wine. That's what I love. I'm sitting a restaurant in Paris with an 85-year-old guy and he's talking about the Resistance in France. After a couple of glasses of wine, he started to talk about his mom and she was a very, very powerful woman that was very, very brave. She survived Ravensbrück for a year and went through an unimaginable hell, decorated by the French and American governments in two world wars. And she ran a resistance organization in Second World War; just an incredible woman.

He's telling me stuff about her and it just comes out nowhere. I'm not his friend exactly, but I'm someone that he trusts—that's the third time I've been out to lunch with him in the local restaurant. I go over and I wheel him in his wheelchair past Napoleon's tomb. This time I went with my son, which really helped because we could chat and my son was 15. My son's 15 now and so he was 15 when he joined the Resistance. And that's how these little things come back; you have to invest that much time to be able to get the details with those feelings, those memories, that just come back very quickly and powerfully to these people. So you have to spend a lot of time with them. I like to spend a lot of time with people because otherwise you don't get that detail that gives a nonfiction book a novelistic feel.

I was really taken by Tom Wolfe's Introduction to "The New Journalism" as a journalist in my early 20's. I was impressed by the fact that Wolfe saw himself as sort of Dickens, someone who can really narrate and tell these powerful true stories in ways that conform more to where a novelist would stretch narrative scenes and dialogue, and to use monologue and other fictional techniques. And I'd probably do it too much just because I've never got over that kind of addiction or that fascination with the ability for me as a journalist to go out and create something that reads like a novel. Sometimes I've done it very well and I'd love to be able to do

it a lot better. I'm not that good of a writer, but it's something that really has driven me, it fascinated me.

For example, I spent a lot of time with the central character in *The Longest Winter*, Lyle Bouck. Late in the book, Lyle is 20 years old, is about to be 21, and he's looking at a cuckoo clock in a café after he's been fighting against overwhelming odds for far too long. He's looking up and he's slumped on his side, blood everywhere, and he's looking up at this clock. He's thinking about something that his aunt had told him when he was a 12 or 13-year-old. She was a fortune teller. "You know if you make it to 21, if you make it to 21, maybe then you'll have a long and prosperous life, but I doubt whether you'll make it that far because you're such a loser." That's what he's thinking as he's sitting there. It's the first day of the Battle of the Bulge, his platoon of 18 guys have performed one of the most important, single actions of World War II—really, really dramatic, very heroic, and he's a 20-year-old who is scared to death and he thinks he's failed. It's the worst day of his life. He got his platoon of sergeant shot, his friend who carried out his orders. The guy that is probably his best buddy, half his face is blown off, he's slumped against him looking at this clock, and he's thinking this. You have to get to know these people to allow them to share these memories. I remember I was there for days and days when he was in his early 80's, and I overstayed my welcome. I was not very subtle about it. But I needed that memory. I wanted to go there. That's what I'm looking for.

So I think that given how problematic memory can be I really don't care, as long as the guy is alive, as long as the guy is 213 years old and he's sitting there and he's got nothing better to do than to chat with me, then maybe that's my destiny. I don't care because any conversation with someone after certain period is all about how they like to remember what really happened or it gets philosophical. It's all about memory of memory, and language, and what really is memory. As long as you were there, I'll listen to you, wherever the memories are, because once they're gone, the memories are gone too.

And I think interacting with the memory is as important as anything else, being able to ask the question, or have someone not answer the question, or being able to see their emotions, their tears. That's where you connect. I've been really lucky when I think about it. I've been really lucky to be able to connect with people where they were going through really profound trauma and moments that were so, so important in history that I admire so much. People talking about how certain events really changed them and their place in the history. These are big things like D-day, and Battle of the Bulge, and liberating Dachau.

You know I was able to speak to Sparks before he died and it was a moment like that. I think there's a residue whenever you meet people and whenever someone has shared those things with you. It's just something they feel compelled to leave behind. I think it's something that is transferred.

RCSWE: When you consider your latest book, *The Liberator*, have you transferred something in it, or left something behind for your readers?

ALEX KERSHAW: I don't know—it's a good question. I find it really difficult because sometimes these sort of conversations end up with me responding in emotional ways and I don't really understand why, but it does—it affects me emotionally. I don't know why. It's something I haven't worked it out yet, you know. I would hope that they would be able to feel something. That's what is the most important for me is to feel. I think if you can't feel you can't empathize, you can't be compassionate, you can't really understand anything about anybody.

We should be very careful about feelings and rationalizing, and be careful that people don't over react, but I think feeling is what connects everybody to everything. If you feel something, you really start to understand something in your own way. I hope that they would feel something, you know. I don't know if there's really a moral to it, I mean they're just ordinary people. And yet I see them also as extraordinary people, human beings doing things that are very, very important and making huge sacrifices. They're good people you know.

So I do think there's a moral dimension to my work. There is something that is maybe a projection of me looking for heroes, me wanting to find good in the world, me being something of an atheist; wanting to see goodness in people in extreme situations where it's tested and it's shown. There's no question about it.

RCSWE: You talk a lot about the tremendous cost of war and conflict even as you continue to seek the heroic moments or good in the world that it sometimes reveals. How do you reconcile this paradox for yourself?

ALEX KERSHAW: I've never been anywhere near a war, and yet through all this research and all these interviews I know I hate it. I think everything about it is really dehumanizing—it just really destroys people. It's very corrupting and corrosive. But I do think there are things that are really beautiful about it too and ennobling. I think a lot of the guys in World War II talk about it, and they look back at it a lot, and it's a great sort of lyric passage. It's sort of Homeric. I think they

feel that they were unlucky in some ways, but very lucky to be able to be alive and talk about their role in this amazing, amazing epic. World War II always fascinated me. Right now, I'm still fascinated and impassioned by a story that I'm researching. And I'm thinking to myself, "well surely I could find something else to write about and maybe I will." But whenever I think about other subjects, and I do all the time to try and get away from war, I don't find the same passion, the blood doesn't stir in the same way. I can't see myself spending two or three years being obsessed about these other subjects.

RCSWE: Can you say just a bit about your current project, what's under way right now?

ALEX KERSHAW: I want to write about a sort of upper middle class American family in Paris under the Nazi occupation and how they, unlike almost everybody else, did the right thing and joined the Resistance. But at the same time it's a story about the Germans who were living right next door to them who were going after them. So it's really an opportunity to evoke a beautiful place in a very dark time with an extraordinary model of good people who paid a very high price for doing what most people wouldn't do.

Unlike being in combat, being in the Resistance you could be killed at any moment. You're constantly in war. You don't get to go back behind the lines or have a bit of R&R; you can be arrested and executed at any moment literally. So it took a different kind of courage, a different kind of bravery. It was something that you made an active decision to be a part of knowing that it was very likely that you would be killed, that you would be executed or arrested. It's a different narrative, so much more complicated a narrative in some ways.

And I think it's also a narrative which throws a really stark contrast because there were so few who joined the resistance. I'm fascinated about the idea of what enabled them to do this. Was it a religious belief, was it within the DNA, the fiber of who they were? In many ways, what really fascinates me about them is the same thing that fascinates me about what creates a Felix Sparks. Where does that fiber come from? Because I think we all like to think we have it, but sadly most of us don't.

When Alex Kershaw takes the measure of the man Felix Sparks, he clearly does have it...and this profound depth of character punctuates Sparks' memories for the remainder of his life. But even such resolute character comes at great cost, and perhaps the story that matters most about Sparks is the way in which such character finally

only provides a partially redemptive down payment on that cost. Set in Europe in 1989, Kershaw's Prologue to The Liberator, "The Graves," tells this story:

"They lay beneath perfect rows of white graves that lined lush green lawns. He knew where they were buried. He had their names. Finding all of them meant walking back and forth, all across the graveyard, through avenues of thousands of white crosses. But he could manage the strain. His heart had given him problems for years, yet he still had the strength, the will, to search for his men. They had died near here, at Anzio, the bloodiest piece of ground occupied by American and British forces during World War II. Seventy-two thousand men lost in all—killed, wounded, sent insane, blown to shreds, missing, or captured, now a mere statistic in a history book.

The men he had commanded had achieved something of lasting greatness, something of permanence. They had defeated barbarism. He had seen it. He had been there, poisoned and heartbroken but somehow blessed, or rather damned, with the strength to fight on, to beat Hitler's most violent men....

Time had not healed. It had not erased the memories. That fall of 1989, seventy-two-year-old General Felix Sparks wandered through towns he had set free, across battlefields, and through several graveyards. The white crosses were silent. The men who had died for him could not be resurrected. They could not be brought back. He knew one thing for certain. It didn't matter how well he had waged war. The cost had been too great. . . ."

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