



## Point Me To The Skies

By Ronald Clements

### Chapter 1: 23 January 1951

*'If they go we may as well die' - Nosu chief, December 1950*

The fort parapet was dark with silence. A long line of ill clad men and women pulled the poor shelter of their blue-dyed cloaks around them, shielding themselves against the harsh, frigid cold, and stared down into our compound. Only their eyes betrayed their emotions. We, the *Yari*, were leaving.

The Communist officials milling about me in their padded jackets ignored the brooding hostility of the Nosu perched above them. Chinese soldiers stood at the clinic doors with fixed bayonets prepared to quell trouble.

'Joan...' I looked up from the bag I was packing. 'Wang wants to go through the medical inventory again.'

'Again?'

'A final check, he says.' Jim shrugged his shoulders.

'Do I unpack it?'

'Not if you can help it. We need to go.'

Jim glanced across to the mountain range that barred our path west. The outline barely registered above the wall parapet in the enveloping mists. Swathes of white marked snowfall. Ice-encrusted paths inched their exposed passage around steep inclines. January was a grim time to contemplate such a journey. If dark began to close in before we reached our shelter for the night the mules would be tested as the trails narrowed to mere ledges above five hundred foot drops.

The Communist 'liberation' was driving us from China, the land to which God had called us. The advances we had gained through patient prayer and perseverance amongst the Nosu Minority People of Xikang Province<sup>1</sup> were being swept away. Our team of four British missionaries partnered by Chinese and Nosu under the leadership of Dr Jim Broomhall, an accomplished surgeon, had been disbanded. Only our interpreter, Zhao, remained with us. Jim had dispensed medicines, performed operations and established a clinic. He had wanted to introduce community health programmes, allowing basic medical aid to be provided by the Nosu for the Nosu. Now none of this could continue; we had to leave.

Hong Kong, our ultimate destination, lay nine hundred miles away and many more by the route we must take. Our main medical centre had been set up at Zhaojue, an isolated, poverty stricken location in Daliangshan - the aptly named 'Great Cold Mountains'. It would be four days by mule to get to the nearest Chinese administrative centre, a small walled town called Xichang. How long would it be before we arrived in Hong Kong? Jim reckoned two, perhaps three months. However, his calculations assumed we would not be detained

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<sup>1</sup> Xikang Province formed 1939-1955, this region now part of Sichuan Province, SW China

significantly along the route. We had heard of other missionaries under house arrest, unable to get to the border.

We did not believe that we had chosen the wrong course but, as I surveyed our packages strewn around the courtyard, God's purposes seemed as masked in mist as the mountains we must cross.

I hurried into the clinic.

'Wang Comrade?'

'Please check this list.'

The official was polite and less hostile than others, if not a little eager. He was barely taller than my petite five foot nothing but wielded more authority than you might expect on first meeting. He, along with a posse of Communist administrators, had arrived from Xichang just before Christmas; part of his task now being to ensure we left the area as soon as was feasible.

He held out the hand written notes Jim had compiled. I moved to the poor light from the open door and read them carefully, though the contents were more than familiar.

'...small pox vaccine...' Jim had given his youngest daughter, one year old Joy, her inoculation this morning.

'...streptomycin, seventeen bottles...' for the abscess on my arm, which had now healed; the medication never used because insufficient doses had arrived from Shanghai.

'...santonin ...penicillin...scalpels...syringes... it is correct, Wang Comrade.'

The official nodded his thanks, retrieved the papers and moved away to check something else.

My radio stood on the table. And next to it Janet's sewing machine.

The radio had been both a luxury and a Godsend. Although we used it no more than a few minutes each day, it brought us news of what was happening in China and at home in Britain. It had been bought in Xichang, our 'base camp', with money sent by Aunt Hilda, my mother's sister.

I reached down and touched it as though it could transmit memories back to England.

My mother... what would she have thought of her daughter? Now a 'pioneer missionary' in the wastelands of the Chinese interior provinces, closer to the wilderness of Tibet than the sophistication of Shanghai; so far from the comforts and affluence of the south of England where I grew up. A woman with my own opinion on what I should do and where I should go. Nevertheless she would have been pleased that God had directed my steps to Zhaojue. Of that I was in no doubt. After all, my foremost memories of her were those times spent 'talking with Jesus'.

Would Janet regret leaving the sewing machine, a wedding present from Jim? Later perhaps. The immediate dangers of transporting four daughters under eight by mule over the precarious steep and hazardous descents would be disquieting her and Jim far more. The strain was evident in their gaunt, troubled faces. Both had been shocked by the report of plans to kill us en route and kidnap the girls.

It was the Chinese teenager Baodan, one of the new Christians, who between sobs late on Christmas Day had shaken Jim with the story of an ambush.

'They are going to force you out. But you won't make it to Xichang.'

'What do you mean?' Jim asked, though the implication was plain.

'They will shoot you... on the mountain pass.'

'Who told you this?' Jim had no reason to believe Baodan was making the report up – her tears were more than proof.

'The Communists told my father...' she paused, '...they will sell the children...'

It was unlikely that the authorities would carry out such a plan themselves but the threat was certainly credible. Though we had fostered good relationships with Nosu in the immediate area, there were others in less friendly clans who would be willing to perform the deed for payment or in return for favours. The Nosu were notorious for their violence. Their community was riven by internecine clan warfare and many of the tribes lived in undisguised hostility towards the Han Chinese. We would not be the first foreigners to perish by a bullet from one of the rifles Nosu men always carried.

Slavery was also no myth. Over centuries of hostility, in a savage hierarchy of castes, the superior 'Black' Nosu had coerced their 'White' inferior, a fusion of subjugated Han Chinese and other Minorities, into serfdom. Hapless Chinese from the valleys were still being captured and reduced to slavery. We too had lived in uncertainty, never entirely free from the threat of kidnap. There were rumours that American airmen who survived crash landings over the mountains were kept in captivity, though this had never been proved.

We had listened to Jim's account of the conversation and prayed. Our trust had to be in God no matter what happened to us. We accepted God's sovereignty in death as well as in life.

Ruth Dix looked in.

'The mules are being loaded. Have you anything else?'

Ruth was the oldest member of the team; certainly an 'old China hand' as far as I, the newest recruit, was concerned. She combined that hallowed status of 'senior missionary' with humility and versatility. Ruth was not one to let seniority keep her from hard work in whatever form it presented itself.

I shook my head. The radio must remain and service new masters.

'Do I take these posters down?'

There were still two or three posters pasted around the clinic. Bible texts. In recent months, as restrictions on our movements tightened, we had responded in Communist fashion with a poster campaign. At the centre of the fort the Magistrate's building boasted banners proclaiming the promise of religious freedom 'Zong Jiao Zi You'; a platitude with increasingly little substance, decorating crumbling walls. We had plastered the gospel about our buildings with abandon!

'If we are to be invaded, the intruders may as well have something edifying to read,' contended Ruth. 'Leave them. I doubt they will remain there long but you never can tell what God's Word alone can achieve.'

The Nosu lining the walls followed my movements with their eyes as I emerged from the clinic. Beyond them was Baodan with her sister, Baoli, and a group of three or four other Chinese girls, all new Christians. I waved a hand in the direction of the corner of our compound where the wall had broken away. They picked their way gingerly past the Nosu and down the steps from the rampart.

'Teacher Wei,' whispered Baoli, 'we don't want you to go. But we will follow Jesus whatever happens. One hundred percent for him!'

I looked into their faces, pausing deliberately over each one, fixing my memory of them. I had wondered how these moments of farewell would feel. It was less than ten days since we had been asked to pack and leave, yet I had imagined our parting untold times. Now it was happening. I needed to live out each moment intentionally, etching appearance and conversation into portraits I would always retain.

I read a Bible passage and we quietly sang choruses, before praying. 'God is able to keep you,' I reassured them. 'I will pray for you. You mustn't be afraid. Talk to Jesus and he will help you.'

Finally the pack animals were ready, our party assembled for departure. Ruth stood with Blackie and Belinda, the mules she and Jim would ride. Janet and I had hired mounts. Zhao, as interpreter, Zitu, one of our leprosy patients, and Mrs Yang, who had cared for the Broomhall children, would come with us the entire journey. Agu, a recognized Nosu leader, accompanied by the son of another chief, had offered to escort us a day's ride. Their servants would then take us to the borders of 'Nosuland'; a guarantee that no Nosu would attack us lightly.

Janet hurried around, checking the children were well protected with their padded jackets over layers of clothing. Jan aged seven and Pauline, five years old, were standing motionless together on the edge of the group; passive observers of the activity, their pale faces betraying inner unspoken apprehension. The toddlers, Margie and Joy, cheeks reddened by the raw cold, were already strapped in wicker panniers to the backs of the men. Jim gave the older girls a hug before lifting them up and setting them down into crude wooden boxes slung either side of one of the mules.

'Ruth, can you just check the hot-water bottles are in place. I think Jan's has slipped too far down. Make sure it is secure.'

Janet reached up to Margie and touched her cheeks.

'Hush, Margie... We're going on a long ride. Don't worry.'

Margie was three years old. Old enough to know great changes were taking place, too young to comprehend what was ahead.

Ruth settled Jan again and slipped a small package of food into her hand.

'This one's for you and there's one for Pauline. Don't eat them in a hurry. It will be a good few hours before supper.'

'Ready?' asked Jim. 'Let's walk. At least until we get beyond the fort gates. This may be a bit ignominious but we aren't fleeing our post.'

He led the way, guiding Belinda past the guards and onto the track that served as a road between the gates in the fort walls.

The fortress was a crude defence built by the rulers of the Qing dynasty<sup>2</sup>; a haven for the local Chinese whenever trouble erupted with the Nosu, a not infrequent occurrence. Less than ten years ago over three thousand Chinese had occupied the Zhaojue valley with their troops. Now only a few families and officials remained. Agu and his Ba'chie clan had driven the majority away in a belligerent revolt.

The high stone walls enveloped a square area of rough ground as long and wide as the length of two football pitches. Apart from the relatively prestigious Magistrate's halls, the barracks and our compound, there were few other buildings, most of which were in poor

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<sup>2</sup> Qing Dynasty 1644 - 1911

repair. In local parlance it was said that a single lamp could light the whole town. People could shout to their neighbours from their homes and expect a response.

The Nosu filtered down from the walls and two hundred lined the route as our procession headed for the gate. They were notably distinct from the Han Chinese, with strong aquiline features and swarthy skin. Both sexes wore the dark blue cloaks. The women had head scarves perched high on their heads, some displaying their distinctive, bulky silver earrings. Here and there I saw one or two had donned their better clothes, colourful high collared tunics over heavy pleated skirts. The men wore turbans, neatly wound around their black hair and coiled into a prominent horn above the brow.

Many of the Nosu had tears in their eyes as we moved slowly through their ranks. Our leaving had not been their choice, nor ours. Whatever suspicions the clans around Zhaojue had of the *Yari* who had taken up residence less than three years before, these had subsided with the knowledge that their medicine was effective. Jim's expert medical care for rich and poor alike, for opium addict and leprosy sufferer, clan chief and serf, Chinese and Nosu, Communist and Nationalist had broken down barriers, not raised them.

Outside the gate Baodan, Baoli and the teenagers I had prayed with were waiting with the other believers. Mrs Qiang, who had given her life to Jesus the previous evening, was there. And Aji, another teenager and one of the very few Nosu to respond. Just half of our thirty recent converts were now left in the area. Hardly any men. The Nationalist soldiers we had shared our faith with had abandoned their post before the Communists arrived, or been marched away as a defeated army.

With the news of our imminent departure had come the same question over and again, 'Who will help us once you have gone?' Even from the nefarious hag, who occupied the hovel by the north gate and was now standing to one side watching and wailing, 'What shall we do now?'

There were no simple answers. 'Help one another. Trust in God.' Were these adequate replies to people who knew so little? Could they be sufficient for eternity? Could we, let alone these new believers, comprehend God's purpose in bringing to an end a work that had been so long in the planning and so short in the implementation?

We paused and prayed with them.

Baoli brushed away her tears.

'We must sing!'

They sang the songs we had taught them so recently.

'Joyful, joyful will the meeting be,  
When from sin our hearts are pure and free,  
And we shall gather, Saviour, with thee,  
In our eternal home.'<sup>3</sup>

Unafraid for themselves they walked with us under the scrutiny of the Communist officials across the rice fields and rough treeless terrain of the Zhaojue valley.

It was two miles to the Sanwan River that curved away majestically around the base of the mountain we called Great Hen and which now rose above us to over eight thousand feet. Here we would have to say our farewells.

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<sup>3</sup> George F. Root 1820-1895

The mules carrying the children moved ahead, kicking through the water and trotting away up the ascending track. Aware that we had stopped, Jan and Pauline, restricted by their bulky clothing, struggled to twist around in their boxes, trying to see their parents. Their cries alerted Janet and Ruth and they pushed on to catch up, leaving Jim and me at the edge of the river.

I surveyed the distraught group, broken now into twos and threes; the fruit of barely three years' labour in meagre soil. The crop that God had chosen to harvest in the land of the wild Nosu. A seedling Church that would need to stand in the midst of Nosu lawless violence, drug abuse and drunkenness, hemmed in by animistic superstition. And what pressures would their new atheistic masters bring to bear?

Jim and I sang. 'God be with you till we meet again...'

It was clear that this was the final goodbye.

'Till we meet at Jesus' feet ...'<sup>4</sup>

We urged our mounts forward, taking the first slopes at a canter, pointing our whips heavenward beyond the bleak clouds. A declaration of hope in the God we knew to be faithful despite our fears for them.

And then, a last salute... We glanced back. The believers had regrouped. Faintly we heard them singing their response while they waved. No matter what distance separated us we would still be under the same sky.

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It was desperately cold on the mountain. Chill numbed the senses in fingers and toes and gnawed through my wadded jackets. To breathe in the frozen air burned our throats and choked our lungs. The climb in single file stifled conversation and as the mists enclosed us I retreated into my own thoughts.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah E. Rankin 1828-1904