

DAMIEN PARER

A UNIQUE AUSTRALIAN

by **Bernard Hosie, S.M.**

A MAN OF PRAYER

Prayer was as natural to Damien as breathing. He would kneel for his morning and evening prayers in the most unlikely places and at the most unlikely times. Beside a slit trench in the western desert. In a hotel room in Cairo. In a tent, while his comrades drank beer and told army stories. In a tree in New Guinea, from which he was filming a Japanese airstrip.

On one occasion he was filming the destruction of a Greek village by German Stukas. He lay full length, feverishly recording the horrors below him and his companion could hear his prayer: "Holy Mother of God, save the poor bastards!" It was an unconventional prayer— but Parer was an unconventional man and no one would doubt its sincerity. It was almost his last prayer, in fact. One of the bombs fell short, almost on top of Parer and his friend Ron Williams. Williams recovered consciousness to find his body pressed to the earth, with Parer protecting him with his own body.

PRAYER IN ACTION

But for Parer, prayer was not just the time when he was on his knees speaking to God. He was deeply conscious of the fact that his work itself was a prayer; that done well it was something that pleased God and brought him closer to God. Brought up in a Catholic family, educated in Catholic schools, associated with the first beginnings of Catholic Action in Australia, he knew well that "to work is to pray".

His close friend and fellow war correspondent regards this as the very key to an understanding of the character of Parer:

"Parer's genius — the quality which made of him a great, instead of merely a brilliantly effective, cameraman — was the product of his unwavering devotion to the Roman Catholic faith. Materialists will deride this finding, but nobody who knew Parer will question it; although I did not share his faith, I recognized it for the source of his strength. As Brother Barnabas, the ex-juggler in Anatole France's story "The Juggler of Notre Dame" made his devotions to the Virgin by juggling brass balls and knives before the altar, so Parer made his devotions with a camera."*

EVERYBODY'S FRIEND

Parer was intensely interested in everyone he met; he was everyone's friend. This flowed in no small measure from his Faith; he saw others as children of God, as his brothers in Christ. Damien was above all a Christian and love for others is the basic Christian virtue—without it Christianity is only a sham.

Barriers of language, race, religion, or anything else meant nothing to Damien; his devastating charm cut across those in an instant. Ron Maslyn Williams, his life long friend, and a fellow war correspondent in the Middle East, describes Parer in Greece:

"It was a wonderful fortnight. Parer fell in love with Greece. He was never still for a moment. Soon he seemed to know everyone in Athens. After attending Mass every morning we usually lunched, in their canteen, with Greek soldiers, with whom Damien instantly made friends. Whenever Damien saw a beautiful girl in a café or restaurant (and there were many in Athens in those days) he'd instruct me to introduce him. Protests were of no avail—I simply had to get up, approach the girl, apologize for my rudeness and explain that a young Australian wanted to meet her. One look at Damien and it invariably worked. And in the evenings, invited to their homes, Damien was like a fountain. Sitting on the floor, surrounded by beautiful women, everything poured out in great gusts of enthusiasm. A book he had been reading, a picture he'd seen, the Parthenon at sunset — even if he didn't know anything about the subject, great streams of breathless sentences gushed from Damien to the obvious delight of his audience. We had friends everywhere."

*"Australians—Nine Profiles", by John Hetherington (*Cheshire*), p. 108.

We had friends everywhere. It sums up Parer's whole life. And surely this stemmed from the fact that his first and greatest friend was always Christ — and the Mother of Christ whom he loved so dearly.

THE MAN WITH THE PURE HEART

His bubbling personality and his slender olive-skinned good looks made Parer extremely attractive to women. He liked their company, as Williams rather ruefully relates, but never relaxed his Catholic ideals of purity. John Hetherington speaks of his "untouchability", and says that Damien "hardly seemed aware" of the interest that women had in him.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Damien inherited his intense Catholic faith both from his Spanish-born father and his Australian mother — whose blood was all Irish. He inherited from his father his spiritual, artistic and creative insight — as well as a passion for gambling. His father made several trips to Monte Carlo convinced he was going to make his fortune. From his Irish side came the gift of laughter, the indifference to material things, courage that at times bordered on the reckless.

His passion for gambling and his complete indifference to whether he won or lost, were proverbial among his fellow correspondents. He earned only ten pounds a week, but he would gamble five pounds on the turn of a card and roar with laughter if he lost. He was always most careful about settling his debts — but never noticed at all if he was not paid money that was owed to him.

Hetherington sees all this a part of Parer's unworldliness. "He did not only appear to care nothing for wealth and social position, he did, in fact, care nothing for these things." Surely we have here something of that indifference to worldly things which is the mark of one who is uninterested in treasure in this world, for he has his treasure elsewhere.

BOYHOOD

Damien spent the first six years of his life on King Island between Tasmania and the mainland, where his father was running a hotel. Then the family shifted to Albury in N.S.W., and later to Melbourne—his father was always something of a wanderer. Damien began his education at St. Aloysius College at Portland, then continued at St. Stanislaus, Bathurst, and finished at C.B.C., St. Kilda.

When he was twelve Damien was given a box camera by an old family nursemaid and his interest in photography never flagged from then on. He was no great scholar at school and his school work was not helped by the fact that he spent every spare minute reading and studying about photography. He left school at seventeen and was apprenticed to a photographer.

GOD AND A CAMERA

1929 was not a good year to leave school and Parer faced a decade of struggle. He soon became interested in movie work and in 1933 had a small, part-time job with Charles Chauvel on the movie "Heritage". Chauvel was impressed with his enthusiasm and ideas.

He moved to Sydney in 1933 and went through a period of real, grinding poverty. His food usually consisted of meat pies, warmed up at the gas-flame in the studio, and ginger beer or milk. But he was happy for he was still working at photography and that for him spelt happiness.

One incident from this period is worth mentioning. Parer joined a hiking club of Catholic young men and women. A party of club members were caught in a violent storm one day while they were walking through the bush. Parer stripped naked, wrapped his clothes about his precious camera and took shelter under a huge old gum tree. Then he knelt in the pouring rain, while lightning flashed and thunder rolled and recited the rosary.

Is it too far-fetched to see something symbolic in this? Parer, stripped of everything except his camera and his God, sheltering under a gum tree. Parer the cameraman; Parer the man of God; Parer the patriot.

Chauvel employed Parer on several more films and he profited much in experience. In the late 1930s he made two short films himself. Typically, they were based on poems by Paterson and Lawson; Parer, himself intensely patriotic, was fascinated by the patriotism of these two poets and tried to transfer some of it to the screen.

WAR

Parer was again working with Chauvel on "Forty Thousand Horsemen" when war broke out. A chance vacancy gave him the opportunity to join the A.I.F. as a photographer and he sailed with the first contingent of the A.I.F. He scarcely had time to buy a uniform before he sailed.

Parer was incredibly untidy in his own person and incredibly careful when it came to his camera equipment. These qualities are well illustrated by John Hetherington's story of his first meeting with Parer. He was on the same troopship and went along to introduce himself. He found Parer's cabin a scene of unsurpassed chaos.

"Cameras, flashguns, bulbs, light-meters, tripods and other items of photographic equipment covered nearly every inch of the floor and even the counterpane on the bunk. A man, with a narrow olive-skinned face, like some Spanish saint, and a mop of uncombed black hair sat, cross-legged on the floor at the heart of the disorder. He wore a khaki shirt, but no other clothing. In his left hand he held a camera lens and in his right hand a tissue which he was using to polish the lens. I introduced myself and a great welcoming smile lit his face.

"Well, it's nice of you to call,' he said. 'I'm just trying to get this bloody muddle straight. Come in!' "I closed the door behind me and picked my way through the maze of fragile stuff underfoot. Parer did not rise; he went on polishing the lens, passing the tissue over and over its gleaming surface with the loving care of some ancient jeweller preparing a gem for an oriental potentate's crown. At last he raised the lens to the light and slowly oscillated it before his reverent eyes. Then he handed it to me. 'Take a look at that,' he said. 'Isn't she a bloody little beaut!'

He carried this untidiness over into his life as a soldier. It was rare for Parer to have the buttons of his jacket done up; rarer still for him to have a cap. Once in Palestine he was filming an infantry battalion exercising. He was hatless, barefooted and his shirt tails fluttered in the breeze. The colonel was horrified.

"For God's sake, man!" he snapped, "tuck your shirt in. You look like a Wog."

Parer grinned apologetically, put down his camera, tucked in his shirt and got back to work — still hatless and barefooted. The colonel gave up in despair.**

PARER IN ACTION

Parer went into action with the Australians in their first major offensive—on the Italian fortress at Bardia and again at Tobruk. He almost lost his life at Derna. Some miles from the town the Australians were held up by a heavily defended Italian block-house, which protected the aerodrome. The land was flat and afforded almost no cover. The cameraman decided to go in with the first wave of infantry. The Italian artillery fire was heavy and accurate and the Australian attackers were forced to the ground. Parer went down with them—but every time the chance of a good shot offered he knelt up to work his camera. He became the target for Italian shells and Australian abuse.

The attackers crawled forward on their bellies like snakes; by the time they were half-way across the aerodrome machine guns and rifles had opened up as well. Parer dived behind a milestone, the only bit of protection he could find. He could hear the bullets spattering against it, but even that did not stop him. He kept holding his camera over his head, filming whatever he could see. He spent four hours behind that flimsy shelter; time and time again it seemed that he had been killed by shellfire, but when the smoke and dust cleared away there was the camera waving impudently above the rock.

AHEAD OF THE INFANTRY

Parer's experiences at Derna only confirmed him in the theories he had been evolving. A cameraman must get ahead of the attacking troops so that his camera can see them as the enemy sees them. Frank Legg describes it:

"His task, as he saw it, was to capture the emotions, the fears and hatreds and the 'guts' of men in action to 'convey the moment of truth when a soldier charges to kill or be killed'. This meant, of course, he was committed not only to going into action under fire with the Australians as they attacked — or stood fast in desperate defence — but actually trying to get in front of them so that his camera could see them as the enemy would."***

His lifetime friend, Ron Williams, considers that Parer was doomed from that time forward. It was not so much a matter of whether he would be killed, but of when. The miracle is that it was more than three years before he was killed.

*"Nine Profiles", by John Hetherington. p. 163. **/***Frank Legg, "The Eyes of Damien Parer."*

GREECE

In April, 1941, the Australian 6th Division went to Greece and Parer with them. A massive German motorized force struck through Yugoslavia and the Australian hurried north to meet them. Parer filmed the pitiful columns of refugees fleeing south. He and Williams were so close to the front line that they narrowly escaped capture. They withdrew then to cover the gallant, hopeless fight of the Australian soldiers. They filmed everything they could on the retreat. Parer usually drove—he was a wild and reckless driver—while Williams lay on the roof watching for dive bombers. When an attack was coming he banged on the roof and they both dived for the side of the road. They had one hair-breadth escape after another, but eventually reached the coast in safety.

They were lucky enough to find a place on a Greek trawler which took them to Crete. An oil tanker carried them on from there — not the safest form of transport, with the skies alive with German planes. The correspondents and pressmen sat up for thirty-eight hours playing "Slippery Sam". Parer gambled with his usual recklessness and lost all his accumulated wages without the least concern. Williams was the winner, but as the money was in Greek currency, he gave it all away to the Egyptian children at the wharf. As the country was occupied by the Germans he believed the currency would be useless. When Blamey issued orders promising that all Greek currency would be redeemed, Parer was more amused than ever. The idea of Williams giving a fortune away was even funnier than the idea of Parer losing one!

The infectious gaiety of Parer did not mean that he was not very much alive to the horrors of war. We have already seen how he prayed as he filmed the systematic destruction of a Greek village. The fall of the gallant country left him stunned with the horror and sadness of it.

He left something of his heart in Greece. He had been deeply touched by the warm friendliness of the Greeks and he could hardly bear to think of what they had endured and still had to face. Indeed, he refused to talk about Greece, even to Ron Williams, who had shared his experiences. His heart was too big not to be moved by suffering.

SYRIA

Parer was the only Australian cameraman in Syria, just as he had been in Greece. His energy was undiminished in spite of the long months of campaigning, and he managed to be everywhere at once. We find him now on a destroyer, bombarding the French coastal strong-points; now in a bomber attacking French H.Q. in Beirut; now racing the infantry to be first into a French fortress.

In Syria he was able to test his theories about war photography — and very nearly paid with his life. At Merdjajoun he moved right into the Australian artillery barrage which preceded the attack and so was able to get some very fine pictures of the Australian infantry of the 7th Division as they attacked the Vichy French positions. Unfortunately his camera was damaged and the film destroyed by a French mortar bomb. He escaped unhurt.

One of his classic films in this campaign shows the Australians storming Fort Khiam. Leading the attack is a young Australian Bren gunner, gun at the ready and finger on the trigger; on his left are two soldiers with fixed bayonets moving rapidly across the open ground towards the fort. Just what would have happened if the French had left a rearguard is not hard to imagine. Fortunately they had not done so and Parer was able to beat the Australian troops to the fort and film them as they captured it!

Shortly after this he had his narrowest escape of the whole campaign. He and Williams were sitting outside the fort, reloading the camera, when the French opened up on them with machine guns and mortars. A bomb landed a few yards from them as an Australian soldier came running out of the fort, straight into the mortar fire. Parer and Williams carried the wounded soldier to shelter.

After the Syrian campaign Parer hurried back to the desert to film the "Rats of Tobruk". He made two trips through "Bomb Alley" to the beleaguered fortress. At the end of 1941 he and Williams were planning to go to Teheran in the hope of crossing to Russia to film the fighting on the eastern front. Then came the news that Japan had entered the war.

BACK TO AUSTRALIA

Parer wanted nothing more than to film Australians fighting directly and immediately left for Australia and hurried

back to Melbourne. He landed on March 10, 1942; he had been away twenty-six months. The Department of Information asked him to leave for the north next day! He managed to obtain two weeks respite, to repair his gear, then set out for Townsville and from there to New Guinea.

NEW GUINEA

Port Moresby was garrisoned by a handful of half-trained militiamen. Its air strength was nil. Within a few days of his arrival, Parer had filmed the biggest air raid that Moresby had experienced and sent down to the Australian people their first films of Australian territory under attack.

It seems incredible now, but the Japanese triumph had been so swift and so complete that there was at this stage only one point in the Pacific where the Japanese were being fought on the ground. This was in the Salamaua area in New Guinea, where a small force of some 400 men ("Kanga Force") made up of a Commando unit and members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, were harassing a Japanese force nearly ten times as strong. The tenuous supply line ran overland for hundreds of miles, up rivers and over wild mountain country. Parer determined to make the journey.

This time his companion was Osmar White, an Australian war correspondent. The round trip was some 700 miles, mostly on foot, over country which few white men had ever seen. Even in peacetime it would have been a terrible and dangerous journey. Not surprisingly, White found that few other correspondents were anxious to tackle the trip—until Parer arrived. Later, White was to write the story of the trip in his book "Green Armour". He describes Parer:

"Parer had seen more real action than probably any other war correspondent. He was young, tough, keen and unshakably courageous. The more I saw of the man, the more I liked and admired him. He was long, stooped, black-headed, sallow-faced, smiling. He had great piston-legs covered by a fuzz of black hair and ending in size twelve feet that looked as if they could crush the skull of a python. No one, however, could remain within earshot of the bubbling bass hoot that served him for a laugh without wanting to laugh too."

JOURNEY INTO DANGER

Parer eagerly accepted the opportunity and the army gave permission. Then began a truly epic journey. They went by schooner to the mouth of the Lakekamu river and then transferred to native canoes. A major tragedy was narrowly averted when the whaleboat carrying the precious camera was almost overturned in the surf as they landed! They travelled for days up the wild, crocodile-infested river, past Stone Age villages, to Bulldog. From then on it was by foot. They joined one of the supply parties, consisting of 100 natives, each carrying a 50lb. pack through the dense jungle, up a 9,000 foot mountain pass and down the other side, across rivers and through the kunai grass plains to Wau.

Bulldog was their last touch of civilization for a long time. They had a "bed" laid out on biscuit tins — to lift them out of the reach of the scorpions and death adders. One of the carriers kept moaning through the night (he had pneumonia — the scourge of the carriers) until two o'clock, when he died.

It took them two weeks to get across the mountains. Mostly they were travelling through a tunnel in the jungle and couldn't see the sun. They sweated by day and froze by night — they soon realized why the carriers died like flies through pneumonia. It seemed to rain all the time. Several dangerously sick carriers were sent back to Bulldog — leaving more for the others to carry.

But the jungle was easy compared with the mountains. At one stage White noted that "even Parer is gloomy". Several natives collapsed; one died of a ruptured spleen. But finally the desperately-needed supplies reached Wau.

There had not been a plane into Wau for two months. A few weeks before Parer and White had made their dreadful journey the army had sent a party of 55 tough, battle-trained commandos over the same trail. Forty-seven of them had collapsed and were hospitalized when they reached Wau. White, stricken with fever, also needed rest and medical care. Parer had a day or two to rest and to repair his camera and then set out for the front.

FAME

The next twelve months were to see a series of films from Parer which were to rocket him to world fame. A four-day journey brought him to Mubo, forward base of the commandos. He was at the front line at last.

Parer accompanied the commandos on a number of daring hit-and-run raids. As usual he was right with them as they attacked, forgetful of danger. One of his most famous films shows a small commando force raiding a Jap-held village. They crept to within 20 yards of the huts, then dashed in to attack. The film shows one of the commandos firing his Bren from the hip, while a second one hurls a home-made bomb into the hut, which disintegrates. As it does so, two tommy-gunners run forward, firing into the hut. A Japanese dashes for the jungle, but is brought down by an Australian waiting for any attempt of this kind.

OBSERVATION POST

Meanwhile the Japanese attacked Gona and White, who had rejoined Parer, was convinced that this was the prelude to an attack on Moresby, via the Kokoda trail. He determined to return via Wau and Bulldog. Parer elected to stay and the friends separated.

Parer's next move was still further forward, to an observation post in the hills above Salamaua. Here three daring scouts watched every move the Japs made —and many of these moves were designed to wipe out the observers themselves! The last thing they wanted was a camera man, "especially a fellow who said his prayers at the most inappropriate times and places."* But within a short time they had accepted Parer and did everything possible to help him.

The observation post was 50 feet up in a huge tree. Parer stayed there nine days, using a telephoto lens to film the Japanese on the airstrip below. He filmed planes arriving and departing; a burning troopship; Jap troops digging weapon-pits and repairing the aerodrome.

KOKODA TRAIL

Parer returned to Moresby to film one of the decisive battles of the war — at least as far as Australia was concerned. If Moresby had fallen there seems little doubt that it would have been used as the springboard for an attack on Australia. The attack was launched from Gona, via the Kokoda Trail — the "back door" to Moresby. The Australian forces, heavily outnumbered, had been retreating step by step. The supply problems were immense.

Ignoring an order from his superiors to return to Australia to make a training film, Parer hurried to the front line. He was accompanied by his old friends, Chester Wilmot and Osmar White. The track was awe inspiring. One stretch of 600 yards had taken the 39th Battalion seventeen hours to negotiate. A ridge of 2,500 feet was climbed by means of 4,000 logs. The three native carriers (rejects — the army could not afford healthy carriers) were hopeless and the 150lb. of camera equipment that Parer needed were split between the three of them. This was in addition to all their personal equipment and food for the five-day journey.

To make matters worse, Parer experienced his first attack of malaria and could scarcely stand. It rained incessantly. Wounded soldiers from these "ragged, bloody heroes" of the 39th Battalion were staggering back over the dreadful trail. The first two youngsters they met had travelled 113 miles in sixteen days; they expected to reach the hospital in five more days. This was war at its grimmest and most terrible. Inch by inch the Australian soldiers were being forced back through the blood and mud of the terrible Kokoda Trail. The increasing streams of wounded were clogging the Trail. Platoon by platoon the Australian reinforcements were being cut to pieces by the overwhelming strength of the Japanese. The Japanese forces were moving into the terrible jungle and mountains and outflanking the Australians. It was Malaya over again.

There was no choice but to withdraw. Parer threw away all his personal gear, even his spare pair of socks, so that he could carry his camera equipment. Even this was too much for the emaciated, fever-stricken man, and reluctantly he discarded bits and pieces of it until he had nothing but a movie camera and some film. He was still with the army at Toriebaiwa Ridge, where the Japanese forces were held and then slowly driven back. "Kokoda Front Line" was shown all over the world. It received an Academy Award as the Best Documentary Film of the Year, "for its effectiveness in portraying, simply and yet forcibly, the scene of war in New Guinea, and for its moving presentation of the bravery and fortitude of our Australian comrades-in-arms."

*Frank Legg, *"The Eyes of Damien Parer"*.

MEN OF TIMOR

Parer went to Sydney in October, 1942, and had a whole week to recuperate before he was offered his next job — filming the Australian commandos on Timor. Three hundred of these, had, been cut off when the Japanese captured the island in February, 1942, and for many months it was thought that they were prisoners. Finally a radio monitoring station in Darwin picked up a weak signal purporting to be from them, and dramatically, their presence was made known to an incredulous world.

Their presence had long been known to the Japanese. Over the past months a series of daring raids had killed over 1,000 Jap soldiers for the loss of 26 of their own men. The Japanese had sent another division of 15,000 men to reinforce the island and to extirpate the guerrillas. They had not succeeded.

By coincidence the commander of the force, Major Bernard Callinan, was an old school friend of Parer's but even so he was far from happy when he heard that the navy had landed a cameraman on the island. But, as usual, Parer soon won the confidence and friendship of all. A three-day walk brought him to Force H.Q.; from there he made his way to an outlying company, and finally to a platoon outpost. He filmed their patrols, their raids, their daily life — and even the commandos, when they saw the film much later in Australia, admitted that it was not as bad as they had expected anyhow!

BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

Parer was in Moresby again early in 1943 and persuaded the R.A.A.F. to allow him to fly in Beaufighters. This had its discomforts. He had to stand up and balance his camera on the pilot's head; he invariably passed out when flying over the Owen Stanleys (at some 20,000 feet) without oxygen. He spent days around the 'drome and made a fine documentary of the R.A.A.F. at war.

More important, he was at hand when the Japanese sent a convoy with some 10,000 soldiers to reinforce their troops in New Guinea at the end of February, 1943. He flew with "Torchy" Uren in the difficult and dangerous attack on the convoy, which inflicted on the Japanese the greatest defeat they had yet suffered and annihilated the convoy.

He made another trip in a Boston, searching for a Jap destroyer, but when they reached the reported position it was nowhere to be found. "Some cow must have sunk it," said Parer sadly.

He was with "Torchy" Uren again on those terrible strikes when the Beaufighters set about ruthlessly to destroy the hundreds of Japs who had reached the lifeboats or rafts. It was a sickening task, but with the war in New Guinea reaching its climax, every one of those soldiers was a potential enemy that could not be ignored.

When it was over Parer had a magnificent record of one of the most important Allied victories in the Pacific war. And the R.A.A.F. had its own Parer legends to add to those of the army. "Torchy" Uren told the story of the way that Parer kept saying: "Can you get lower; can you get lower." Uren was usually flying only a few feet above the water anyhow and finally said exasperatedly: "If I get any lower I'll be in the bloody drink."

ASSAULT ON SALAMAUA

In June, 1943, Parer was again at Salamaua. For months the build-up of supplies had been going on and the Australian forces were poised ready to attack. Parer spent three months with them and secured what is regarded by many as his finest film. He tramped over every inch of that country — country so terrible that even the toughest soldier moved only when he had to. The soldiers nicknamed one battlefield "Parer's Bowl".

He was an actor, not merely a spectator, in the attack. On one occasion, when the native carriers panicked and ran away, Parer carried 3in. mortar bombs to a forward position. When a commando was wounded in attack, Parer was the first to brave Japanese fire and help carry him out. Still again he was in a foxhole when a Japanese soldier charged them. Parer stood up, filming frantically and calling out; "Don't shoot the bastard yet. Don't shoot the bastard yet." The soldier held his fire till Parer had finished filming, then shot and killed the Jap.

BY SPIRIT ALONE

Parer sought always to capture the spirit of the Australian soldier; his courage and self-sacrifice, his good humour and laughter, his suffering and sorrow. So often we can see it in these graphic war films.

We see it in the young body crumpled in agony on the kunai grass; in the blind soldier groping his way down the Kokoda Trail, through the clinging mud; in the bowed heads grouped around the rough wooden crosses.

"The biggest and greatest thing to me," said Parer, "was the way these men, whose physical endurance had been virtually exhausted, were carrying on by spirit alone. It's a privilege to be a war photographer when you have to film men of the A.I.F."

His diaries, written in pencil and often hard to decipher, are in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. They show that Parer consciously strove to capture the peculiarly Australian characteristics of the men of the A.I.F. He describes one film:

"The rain mercilessly beats down; it runs off the grass roof of a native lean-to; the camera tilts down to a wounded lad; a big close-up of his sweating face — his cobber is with him. This mateship is the common theme that has run through the Anzacs of the last war and this one.

"The theme of our film is that: 'The greatest binding force in our army is mateship. This is found to the highest degree in the infantry platoons and sections. The particular quality of this mateship is uniquely Anzac.'

"This is no fake . . . it is dinkum. In the eerie half-light climbing up the stiff ridges . . . helping the wounded cobber."

JUNGLE FUNERAL

The diary also gives us a vivid description of a jungle funeral, after the capture of Salamaua. It shows us Parer's own strong sense of mateship with the men he filmed; his deep humility, which convinced him that his own part was nothing compared with theirs. Yet in fact he shared all their risks; he stood by their side in the front line, armed with nothing more lethal than a camera.

Sunday, 1st August (1942): "Father English came over today to bless the graves of Barry Muir, Buck and Hookesie. It was raining — the mist was moving slowly over the mountains. Slowly the boys filed down and around the graves, took off their hats and bowed their heads as the burial service started. Hard fight, tired men — wet capes — tired eyes — they paid with true sincerity their homage to their fallen comrades.

"It was the most moving ceremony I have seen. Not a man looked at the camera—the last shot I took was from underneath them showing their large figures standing silently by the graves and slowly moving as the service came to a close. Barry Muir was one of the most respected men in the company—a white man. Buck was a tower of strength and Hookesie had proved his worth.

"Before I left, John Levin gave me one of the Jap watches the boys had souvenired. It was from the platoon, he said. I felt awkward, as anything I had done in my short association with the lads was nothing compared to their gallantry, their resistance and spirit. He said that the boys would like me to have it. Hell, what chaps they are. I thanked him awkwardly and felt very small beside such chaps."

PARER JOINS PARAMOUNT

In May, 1943, Parer resigned from the Australian Department of Information and joined Paramount News, New York. It was not because he was still getting the same miserable wage as an untried cameraman or because the Americans offered him five times as much—Parer had no interest in money. But he simply could not get along with the pettifogging attitude of the department. They demanded he come south to make a training film at the height of the New Guinea campaign. Parer disappeared into the bush and never received the letter—officially anyhow! They instructed him to go to Broome to cover an expected Japanese invasion there. Parer regarded this as fantastic.

In accepting the Paramount offer he stipulated that his chief task should be to cover the Australians, but in fact, he never returned to the Australian forces. It was a real grief to a patriot like Parer; he felt he had failed his country by joining the Americans. Finally he decided he must come back.

MARRIAGE

In March, 1944, Parer was on leave in Sydney and married Marie Cotter. Marie had been a close and cherished friend for a long time and this friendship had ripened gradually and naturally into love. Like Parer, she was a deeply sincere Catholic.

DEATH STRIKES AT LAST

Parer covered the U.S. landing on Guam and soon had a wide reputation both for his camera work and for his incredible bravery. Denis Warner, an Australian war correspondent, wrote:

"The Marines think of him as a sort of legendary figure the bullets cannot touch because four of their own corps of cameramen have been killed in the fighting here, but none took the same risks as Parer. In the final fight for Orote airstrip, where Japanese resistance was easily the fiercest of the campaign, Parer preceded the infantry, following the tanks on foot. He was not injured, but many infantrymen, sheltering in foxholes behind him, were killed by machine-gun bullets and mortars."

Parer followed the tanks to give him protection from the front, while he filmed the attacking infantry who were behind him. The danger was, of course, that he had no protection from the flank; during the Guam fighting a bullet actually passed through his coat.

He landed with the Marines on Pelelieu on 17th September, 1944. It was to be his last assignment with the Americans; he confided to an American newspaperman: "My heart is with the Australians; I want to get back to them." He followed the same technique as on Guam, following the first tank. A machine-gun opened up from a Japanese pillbox at a range of about twenty yards and almost cut him in two. He was thirty-two years old.

One of his most touching memorials comes from his close friend and admirer, John Hetherington:

"I hope that Damien Parer found the life after death in which his faith never wavered. If he did, then it is not to be doubted that he sits among the heavenly company, polishing the lens of a camera, and every now and then raising it to the light and reverently exclaiming: "Take a look at that! Isn't she a bloody beaut!"*

"IT'S IN THE FATHER'S HANDS"

Parer never underestimated the risks he took. Quite frequently he told his friend that he expected to die in battle. Some have seen this as a sort of premonition, but it seems to have been nothing more than an intelligent estimation of the odds against him. Not long before he left Sydney he spoke to his brother Stan:

"This can't last. On the law of averages I've got to stop a bullet. I don't mind much. It's in the Father's hands."

This was typical of Parer's whole life. "It's in the Father's hands." He saw himself always as 'the beloved son of a Heavenly Father; a Father whose will would determine whether he was to live or die. And he never queried that will all his life.

He believed, too, with every fibre of his being, that death was only the passage to eternal life. He never doubted that when he died he would enter into the reward that God had stored up for him.

NO UNNECESSARY RISKS

This does not mean that Parer was reckless. The dangers were soberly calculated and were accepted as a necessary part of his life and work. He had a job to do, no less than the soldiers, and that entailed risks; there was no avoiding them, except by shirking his job.

LOVE OF THE MASS

Parer was at Mass and Communion the morning that he died. He always had a deep reverence for the Mass and went whenever he could—if possible to daily Mass.

His other great devotion was to Our Lady. He loved the Rosary especially. Among the papers that he left behind was the Treatise of De Montfort on "True Devotion to Our Lady."

He was always deeply conscious of the protection of Our Lady. On November 1943 he flew with a R.A.A.F. Mitchell bomber on a raid over Wewak in New Guinea—it was his twenty-second combat mission. He wrote in his diary:

"I had a feeling I might cop it today and repeated my trust in Our Lady's protection; not only from death, but if I was to die to do it well."

He certainly needed Our Lady's protection; the plane was badly shot up, some of the crew wounded, and they just managed to limp back to base.

**"Nine Profiles", p. 181.*

He was with the Americans later in the month and was most impressed with their Thanksgiving Day. His diary reads:

"25 Nov.: Thanksgiving Day. A national American holiday. The boys explained that when the Pilgrim Fathers had gathered in a good harvest after their first twelve months in America they proclaimed a holiday in thanksgiving to Almighty God for his gifts. It's a lesson to us. We have a holiday for Eight Hour Day, Labour Day, Bank holiday . . . No one yet has put forward the suggestion that we have a holiday to thank our Creator for his gifts to our country. It appears that a lot of Americans use it as an opportunity to feast and drink a lot without a thought of a spiritual motive behind it. But the national gesture is there and we could well follow it."

PARER THE PATRIOT

Parer was a passionately patriotic Australian. We have already seen that his first independent venture with the movie camera was an attempt to translate to the screen the patriotic poems of Paterson and Lawson. He felt that he was helping to build and to preserve the great Australian tradition which was enshrined in the army in a special way. He felt, too, that his Catholic Faith helped him to understand and sympathise the men who fought and died for their country — just as it helped Parer himself to face death without flinching. Something of this can be seen in another passage from his diary:

"We photographers don't actually realise the powerful weapon we hold in our hands; a weapon not only of immediate value but in the future it will be another stone in the building of the Australian tradition. Our sons will see with their own eyes the story of the cream of our youth and their country who are now dying.

"I find my Faith means more and more to me. This devotion to Our Lady is wonderful. I'm sure I could never carry out my work nor feel as much in sympathy with our boys if it weren't for this grace. I feel quite ready to die. The thought of being killed on a mission is not one of great alarm as, if my Mother is interceding for me, everything must be for the best."

Parer was, of course, very conscious of the immediate propaganda effect of his work and never underestimated it. He was helping Australia win the war. But he looked far beyond that. This appears clearly in the long entry he has in his diary about his aims in the "Assault on Salamaua" film, which he always regarded as his best. He wrote:

"This wonderful mateship is the common thread with the last war's Anzacs and for the first time in our newsreel film coverage of this war we are working with a clear central theme—a theme that will stand the test of time because of its essential truth. Its propaganda value is a by-product. It is the truth that Will Dyson painted in the last war — the greatest binding force in our army is mateship . . . The particular quality of this mateship is uniquely Anzac. The rain, fog, slush and malaria conspire with the wily Japanese to defeat our boys. But these things are all part of the fact that adds fuel to the fire that helps to forge the great mateship."

CHRIST'S WORK IN THE WORLD

Damien Parer believed that he was doing Christ's work in the world with his camera. That was why he had to do it perfectly. That was why his conscience nagged him unceasingly when he was away from the front line even for a few weeks. That was why he felt that he must brave every danger although he knew that he would almost certainly be killed. His life and his work was not his own but God's and he gave them back to God with that wholehearted enthusiasm which was his very nature.

This is not mere imagination; it is something that his whole life bears out. His friends were well aware of it. Ron Maslyn Williams, perhaps his closest friend, wrote of him:

"When Damien did all that scrupulous work on his cameras, preparing them as a priest might the chalice, he wasn't doing it for himself, but for God. His faith was limitless."

Among his personal papers, which are now lodged in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, there is an article on the Mystical Body of Christ. There is a passage in it which sums up perfectly Damien's outlook on life:

"We are united to and used by Christ as the living branches are united to and used by the vine to bear its fruit. We are not merely passive but active; each doing the particular part for which he or she is naturally suited . . . all helping to contribute to the scheme for the Redemption of the whole race."

Nihil Obstat.
Bernard O'Connor,
Diocesan Censor.

Imprimatur.
✠ Justin D. Simonds, Archbishop of Melbourne.
12 December, 1966.
