



Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II

Brendan I. Koerner

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Part history, part thriller, *Now the Hell Will Start* tells the astonishing tale of Herman Perry, the soldier who sparked the greatest manhunt of World War II, and who became that war's unlikeliest folk hero

A true story of murder, love, and headhunters, *Now the Hell Will Start* tells the remarkable tale of Herman Perry, a budding playboy from the streets of Washington, D.C., who wound up going native in the Indo-Burmese jungle--not because he yearned for adventure, but rather to escape the greatest manhunt conducted by the United States Army during World War II.

An African American G.I. assigned to a segregated labor battalion, Perry was shipped to South Asia in 1943, enduring unspeakable hardships while sailing around the globe. He was one of thousands of black soldiers dispatched to build the Ledo Road, a highway meant to appease China's conniving dictator, Chiang Kai-shek. Stretching from the thickly forested mountains of northeast India across the tiger-infested vales of Burma, the road was a lethal nightmare, beset by monsoons, malaria, and insects that chewed men's flesh to pulp.

Perry could not endure the jungle's brutality, nor the racist treatment meted out by his white officers. He found solace in opium and marijuana, which further warped his fraying psyche. Finally, on March 5, 1944, he broke down--an emotional collapse that ended with him shooting an unarmed white lieutenant.

So began Perry's flight through the Indo-Burmese wilderness, one of the planet's most hostile realms. While the military police combed the brothels of Calcutta, Perry trekked through the jungle, eventually stumbling upon a village festooned with polished human skulls. It was here, amid a tribe of elaborately tattooed headhunters, that Herman Perry would find bliss--and would marry the chief's fourteen-year-old daughter.

Starting off with nothing more than a ten-word snippet culled from an obscure bibliography, Brendan I. Koerner spent nearly five years chasing Perry's ghost--a pursuit that eventually led him to the remotest corners of India and Burma, where drug runners and ethnic militias now hold sway. Along the way, Koerner uncovered the forgotten story of the Ledo Road's black G.I.s, for whom Jim Crow was as virulent an enemy as the Japanese. Many of these troops revered the elusive Perry as a folk hero--whom they named the Jungle King.

Sweeping from North Carolina's Depression-era cotton fields all the way to the Himalayas, *Now the Hell Will Start* is an epic saga of hubris, cruelty, and redemption. Yet it is also an exhilarating thriller, a cat-and-mouse yarn that dazzles and haunts.

Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II Details

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From Reader Review Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II for online ebook

Alfred says

"It is best to use discretion when confronting an emotionally shattered man, especially if he's holding a semiautomatic weapon."

With this understated maxim, journalist Brendan Koerner begins perhaps the most phenomenal untold story of World War II. So phenomenal, in fact, that whenever I attempt to describe the book's plot to friends, they inevitably interrupt with, "Oh, I see – so it's a novel!" No, it's not a novel...

But I can understand why it's tough to reconcile the following plot with the realm of reality (spoiler alert – key details below): Charismatic black soldier is shipped off to help construct the Ledo Road through Burmese jungle for the benefit of Chiang Kai Shek's army during World War II. Living in squalid conditions due to Jim Crow era segregation, the soldier – through a combination of solitary confinement and drug abuse – basically loses his shit. Soldier walks away from base camp and, confronted by an unarmed white lieutenant, shoots him dead. Soldier flees into the jungle and befriends tribal headhunters. Soldier learns the tribal language, marries and impregnates chief's 14-year old daughter, and begins farming cannabis and poppy plants. Throughout the course of a massive manhunt, the soldier survives being shot in the chest, starved and ravaged by dysentery in the jungle, incarcerated briefly only to escape, and then shot at again...only to ultimately be captured by a white Texan cowboy and executed by order of the United States federal government.

So yeah, pretty standard stuff. If a functional illiterate with no sense of dramatic timing told a story like this, it would still be riveting. But due to Koerner's meticulous research, his well-paced and well-informed narrative, his wry and carefully measured prose, and dozens of photos with captions like "A Konyak Naga named Wong holding a skull trophy"...this book becomes an exceptional story that's brilliantly told.

In fact, I was shocked to see that not all the goodreads reviewers share my unbridled enthusiasm for this book. From what I read, these reviewers must be used to fast-food style historical narratives that consist of more action than analysis. The main critique I saw was that it takes the manhunt narrative a while to get moving, which was actually one of my favorite aspects of the book. In order to fully enjoy the magnitude of the manhunt, it was essential for me to understand all the underpinnings – the institution of American wartime racism, the "purpose" of the Ledo Road and Chang Kai-Shek's "role" in the war, the harrowing conditions on the Ledo Road, the role of drugs in war, and later, the traditions of the Naga, etc. If one considers such material "padded," or expects more specific details for a narrative in which few of the main characters are still alive, and for which relatively little primary source documentation exists (and most that does exist was apparently unearthed by the author, judging from the endnotes)...well, than we will just have to agree to disagree.

And we will certainly have to disagree about the book's rating. Perhaps I'm just an ideal audience for a story that blends murder, drug abuse, war, love, racial strife, manhunts, headhunters, and the ever-perplexing and recently news-worthy nether-land that is Burma. Or perhaps I was sucked in by my immense empathy for the protagonist, Herman Perry, who I believe, under more auspicious circumstances, had the looks, charisma, sensitivity, and theatrical flair to be a movie star. Well, here's to some bold filmmaker creating the movie version of Now the Hell Will Start, and to Perry finally getting his leading man role.

Erica says

i thought this was an excellent book describing the terrible treatment of blacks during world war II. it is the real life story of herman perry, a southern gent who moved to the good ol' nation's capital!! the author describes mr. perry' early life in the south, his migration north and his time in the military. while in the army, he and his fellow black soldiers endured what many of us cannot - horrible living and working conditions, being treated like animals and the list continues...

i don't want to give anymore away - go check it out. at least read the book cover to get a feel for what it is about. enjoy :)

Paul says

Think you're having a bad day?

Meet Herman Perry, an African-American World War II soldier who traversed the globe stuck in the bowels of a stinking ship and ended up in Burma where he endured back-breaking labor day in and day out as well as the Jim Crow policies of the time. To numb the pain, he starts smoking weed... and other stuff. Then he flat out loses his mind.

Then the fun really starts.

Some have criticized Brendan Koerner for throwing in "too much filler." I didn't find that to be the case. There were moments when the prose lagged but the background information was necessary to frame the story. The book challenges the reader. It's worth the time and energy.

And remember... if you're going to gripe about how bad your day was... just remember... it could have been a hell of a lot worse.

Mbanga Ka says

Like the zoot suit riot scene from "American Me," this book serves as a brutal and necessary rejoinder to myths about the greatest generation. In the protagonist Herman Perry, the author adds flesh, sweat, and bone to the nameless black GI lurking in the background of previous WWII narratives -- and although the book jacket depicts a story set in exotic locales, the real discovery is of a conveniently forgotten United States in which racism was allowed to compromise the war effort.

Aonarán says

Overview

Herman Perry was a black GI during World War II forced to work building the Ledo Road—a 465 mile supply road from British occupied India through the jungles and mountains of Burma to Chiang Kai-shek's China (an ally of the U.S. against Japan) that took the length of the war to finish and had a 50% or higher mortality for its builders. The actual construction of the road was left to black GIs and local indentured servants from India and Burma whose ranks were continuous thinned by malaria and dysentery, tigers, Japanese snipers, poisonous snakes, humidity and 100+ degree heat, festering leech wounds, 16+ hours a day of grueling, dangerous work, and (though not mentioned in the book, but I assume) suicide. As for the road itself, it was continuously washed away by monsoons with months of construction where only road was lost, not gained. Within a year or two of the war ending the road was impassable having been taken back over by the jungle.

After six months of working in this hell, a stay or two in the army hospital and stockade, and having developed a weed and opium habit, Perry refused to work. After a day or two of this, Military Police came to send him back to the stockade. This is when Perry snapped, ending in him killing a lieutenant who was trying to arrest him.

After doing so, Perry fled into the Jungle, eventually living amongst and being hidden by a local tribe. (I'll get into more details of this below, but for the sake of the story I won't tell how this played out in this section for those who don't want it spoiled).

Though this book overall seems to concentrate more on the Ledo road itself (which I found interesting) than Perry, it does also shed light on—to limited degrees—the segregation of the U.S. military during World War II (and tensions that at times boiled over into riots and refusals to work), the governing of China during the war, the Naga peoples of Northern India/ Burma and British colonialism in (mainly) north-eastern India. These last two points (particularly Koerner's treatment of the Naga tribes) are where my biggest criticism of the text lie.

Details with Spoilers: The rest of this review is a summation of the parts I found most interesting.

Military Jim Crow and Training Camp Unrest

At the start of World War II the U.S. government deemed its black population unfit for combat—a policy it would continue for the vast majority of its African-American troops throughout the war. Citing science and plain common sense, black draftees were instead trained and sent to do grueling manual labor (under the supervision of white officers).

From the get-go it seems people resented the Jim Crow structure of the military. Shortly after the U.S.'s entry into the war, a group formed in Chicago called Conscientious Objectors Against Jim Crow while editorials in black-run newspapers decried the war saying “the war in Europe means nothing to the Negro” and that no African-Americans should have to serve “in an army that segregates him and his fellow black conscripts as thought they were lepers.” Other critics pointed out that “there are no separate units for American Chinese*, Filipinos, Hungarians, Poles, Swedes, Italians, etc.”

The reality of segregated training camps was terrible. According to Koerner, “Rather than learning how to kill or outwit Nazis, black draftees instead found themselves peeling potatoes and scrubbing toilets. They were housed in the shabbiest barracks and fed cold or putrid food—scraps deemed unfit for white consumption. At camps that doubled as prisons for captured Germans, blacks were appalled to discover how

their treatment compared to that accorded to the prisoners of war. At Mississippi's Camp McCain, for example, African American GIs fumed over the fact that the base's 7,700 German prisoners were allowed to use the superior whites-only latrines and drinking fountains, and were served relatively high-quality meals of roast pork and potato salad." Perry and other black GIs around the same time were being fed largely of bread and water.

"At Camp Wheeler, Georgia, meanwhile, blacks had to awaken at 5:30 a.m.—an hour earlier than everyone else—and clean toilets in the white barracks. At Camp Forest, Tennessee, MPs wielding Tommy guns forcibly removed blacks from the base's whites-only theater. And in Arizona, farmers struck a deal with the War Department to use members of the African American 93rd Division as unpaid cotton pickers."

Resentment and rage soon boiled over into action as fights and riots broke out in a number of segregated training camps. "I remember one night it looked like a small Battle of the Bulge," said one soldier assigned to an artillery battalion at Camp Stewart, Georgia. "Instead of Germans against Americans, it was black Americans versus white Americans on an army post that perpetuated segregation and prejudice. There were three soldiers killed, two or three MPs killed."

In May 1943 after the African-American 364th Infantry Regiment rioted once and was relocated to another camp, and then rioted again (with fatalities), the whole regiment was exiled for standing up for themselves to Alaska to build the Alaska-Canadian Highway. The 364th kicked off a summer of racial unrest on U. S. military bases. "Training camps from California to Georgia were marred by black-versus-white shoot-outs, usually sparked by minor dustups over perceived [sic] mistreatment or disrespect. In a two-week span that June, five training-camp riots south of the Mason-Dixon line resulted in at least twenty casualties." Here and elsewhere, Koerner's use of "black-versus-white" is confusing. In some instances the rioting (and at times gun fights) are between black and white low-level GIs, while during others, it's black GIs on one side and white officers and MPs on the other.

Even on the evening of July 9, when Perry's 849th was shipping out, soldiers in C Company stole beer and got drunk. While marching to their ship, a fight broke out between two soldiers, which quickly turned into a riot when white MPs and officers began to break it up. Perry, who was in Company A, missed the riot, thought certainly would have been influenced by it.

Shipping Out

If the conditions and stark contrast of segregated training camps was bad, the ship that Perry took to India, the West Point, was deplorable—reminiscent of a slave ship. On the way from Asia to the U.S. "POWs were billeted in near the ship's boilers, secured behind thickly barred doors and starved for air and light. It was in these same dank, sweltering quarters [on the ship's trip back to Asia] that Herman Perry would spend his time at sea."

Perry's quarters were "a spartan room with hundreds of cots slung from pipes or bolted to the walls. These canvas beds, stacked four high, were crammed so close together that there was barely room to walk." As one veteran recalled "There was barely enough vertical clearance between bunks for a man to squeeze."

As for a bathroom "a steel trough sloshing with seawater served as a communal toilet. The whiff of a prior occupants sweat and shit lingered in the air, a stench made worse by an utter lack of ventilation. Heat radiating from the West Point's steam valves cooked the room, and Perry quickly broiled in his fatigues and combat boots."

When not confined to these quarters, “Perry's day was spent queuing for chow in the GIs' canteen, formerly a third-class dining room. Whites were served first, of course, and members of the 849th stood in line until their fairer-skinned comrades had finished up. Bare-chested mess-men ladled out lukewarm, gelatinous chili con carne for both breakfast and dinner. (Lunch was not served.) Perry and hundreds of others ate standing at long tables, sliding down towards the exit as new diners squeezed in. At the table's ends, trash cans stood ready to accommodate those who couldn't stomach the acrid stew [and motion of the ship]. The entire process, from queue to cleaned plate, took hours.” GIs then made their way through a dish-cleaning line, the floors of which were covered with vomit.

Meanwhile “nine stories above this human chicken coop” white officers enjoyed accommodations not very different than the West Point's original luxury liner guests.

After weeks at sea—and not knowing where in the world they were going—the West Point's human cargo arrived in India.

Perry and other road-builders were packed into train cars full of benches, given maggot- and weavel-infested food, and told to use a hole in the car's floor as a toilet.

Building the Ledo Road

Though many Americans sent to work on the Ledo Road were from hot and muggy climates, none had ever experienced humidity and heat like that of the wilderness of the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of war, where clothes rotted off people's bodies. A common ditty accompanied the grueling work: “Long may you live/ And when you die/ You'll find hell/ Cooler than CBI.”

In addition to the heat was the rain. “The same rains that rousted tigers from their homes also caused numerous fatal accidents. Men were crushed by boulders that cracked off cliffs, buried alive underneath torrents of mud, or smashed by falling trees. Flash floods, meanwhile, were the special bane of bridge builders. One minute a group of soldiers would be lashing together bamboo poles atop a Burmese river, wondering why a clique of half-naked Nagas were pointing and clucking at their rickety creation; moments later the GIs would be swept off by a wall of water, never to be seen again.”

The Naga Tribes

As for the Nagas themselves, I was left with the impression that they are a diverse group of tribes and families spread out over hundreds (if not thousands) of miles**. According to Naga historians, ancient Greco-Roman texts refer to their people living in this area of central Asia as far back as 0 C.E. And while it is likely no easy task to give an over-view of such a diverse group of people, Koerner seems to rely heavily on anthropological texts (a suspect school of thought to begin with, made worse by the fact that some of the cited texts were written decades before the 1940s) and sort of lumps all the Naga together (as most people do to indigenous cultures). This is done despite caveats like that the Nagas of the Patkai Mountains (where Perry was working) usually had allegiances based on family or those they immediately lived with, not necessarily a regional or Naga identity in general (a not unusual trait for people living without a State.)

Koerner also gives a lot of time to the fact that some (what percentage I have no idea) of the Naga headhunted, including those in the Patkai Mountains. While its a notable trait for sure, the sloppiness of Koerner's ideas around the Nagas left me wondering how proportionate to their lives was this particular trait.

For example, while much time was given to head-hunting, I don't know if we ever got a basic description of the structures and dynamics in an 'average' Naga village in the Patkai Mountains: how large were they, how were decisions made, etc.

Other interesting facts I gleaned from the book are that the British Raj and the Indian state were never able to subjugate or fully control the Nagas of northern India. The best in-roads they ever made were introducing Christianity and opium in the late 1800s to the Nagas to passify them (by the 1940s opium was a currency for certain groups of Nagas). Because of the wide-spread, low-level growing of opium and marijuana (as well as the brewing of rice beer), American GIs like Perry were able to use one or all three as momentary escapes from their hell on earth.

Going AWOL

After Perry shot Lt. Cady—a notoriously arrogant officer and bully—he fled into the jungle. After considering all the dangers—tigers, deadly insects, head-hunting and possibly hostile Nagas—Perry quickly returned to the road. But after a few hours and hearing gun shots, Perry decided the unknown world was better than the lynching Jim Crow-loving one that existed on the road.

After a few days, and with help from an unknown number of other GIs and road builders, Perry had supplies and a new rifle. Stumbling upon a camp of Nagas who were impressed with his resources, they took him in. Even going so far as giving him his own hut, marijuana and opium plants, and the leader insisting that Perry marry his (14-year-old***) daughter. Though Perry was only 6 miles from the Ledo Road, he was a world away and able to live a relatively blissful life for four months when his whereabouts were leaked to the military.

Captured and sentenced to death, Perry made his own justice by escaping from his impromtu death row tent in the stockade. Whether or not he was captured again, I'll leave to you to find out. I will say I did appreciate the contrast between the MP (and later FBI agent) sent to find Perry and Perry's American family—both how they talk about him now and how each recalled when they met the other.

Conclusion

For some reason, Americans have really gotten it into their heads that World War II is the war that everyone got behind and is still a just cause. For this reason, instances of people refusing to fight in it, going on strike in 'vital' war industries during it or instances of the U. S. military committing atrocities—all of which eat away at the image of World War II being the 'good war'—are interesting to me.

Now the Hell Will Start shows how many black people didn't see themselves as a willing part of the war effort; they were largely forced into slave conditions, considered sub-human and disposable during it; and that afterward many black servicemen weren't very affected by the 'victory' over Fascist Germany and Imperial Japan (largely because the only change in the racist power structure in place before the war is it got more powerful in some places afterward because of the post-war prosperity).

Over all I appreciated this book, and the style of writing and the topics kept me interested. While readers should be mindful of some of Koerner's overly-simplified descriptions, Now the Hell Will Start—at least to a novice in the realm of central Asian history, peoples and dynamics like myself—is a good overview of the hierarchies and exploitation brought together by the building of the Ledo Road.

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* This statement—made before their implementation—belittles the use of internment camps (and similar attitudes and infrastructure) used against Chinese-Americans and other 'undesirables' during the war.

** According to one wikipedia entry, the Naga are now made up of 12 tribes united in similar languages and customs. According to a separate wikipedia entry, the Naga are made up of 13 tribes, each with its own unique language and customs.

*** I don't know what to do with this part of the story other than to say it makes me uncomfortable.

Incidentally, Henri Charriere from Papillion when on a cavale that lead him to a Native village also ended up living with and impregnating an adolescent girl—an odd and disturbing trait both fugitives share.

Steven says

I found this story compelling, but I felt like the book was padded.

The main story about Herman Perry is interesting in itself, but it seemed there wasn't enough material to fill a 300-page book. The book covered a lot of information about Sino-American relations during WWII and the building of the Ledo Road. Both of these topics merit (and I'm sure have been covered by) books in their own right. It was interesting to learn about these topics, but I felt they were incorporated into the main story somewhat clumsily.

At times the story would just stop while I caught up with a history lesson. I can see where this is necessary -- I certainly didn't know much about these topics before reading this book -- but the gears didn't shift smoothly.

Learning about Perry, his deeds, and the manhunts that were mustered to pursue him across northern Burma and northeast India during WWII make for very interesting reading. It's definitely a story that needed to be told.

Jeff Brailey says

Brendan I. Koerner's historical work is as interesting to read as it is enlightening. While telling the story of Herman Perry, an African American soldier who murdered a white officer, Koerner reveals the gross injustice perpetrated by the segregated system of the US military in WWII.

If you were in the Army after it was integrated and are not aware of this history, you will be shocked. If you were in WWII and were part of this system, you will feel shame. Either way, this is an important read that helps us understand race relations better.

Sean says

This book is billed as "The greatest manhunt of World War II." If it is, I guess we'll need to look to another war for a good manhunt story. This book is so padded you could use it for a pillow, which you'll need when you fall asleep reading it. The alleged "manhunt" doesn't start till about page 140 (of 330) and only crops up periodically thereafter. The rest of the book is filled with every imaginable tangential detail the author could

find. My favorite example: Perry, the hunted man, is suspected by one brainless officer of having fled to the brothels of Calcutta. So, despite Perry never having gone anywhere near there, we get a chapter detailing the history of Calcutta brothels. Hey, it was mentioned, why not?

Which is not to say that all the random details aren't interesting; some are, especially regarding the treatment of black soldiers by the army. It's just that there's no story holding all of this info together, and there's almost nothing known about Perry aside from what he said at his trial.

The only thing approaching a story in here is the one about the Ledo Road Perry worked on in Burma, but I guess "The greatest useless road of World War II" would have sold fewer books.

Carol says

A true story of a WW II Black G.I, Herman Perry who is sent to Burma to build a road to China for Chiang Kai-shek. Perry endures nightmarish hardships including 16 hr days of breaking rocks under intense heat, malaria, leaches, and racism that push him to murder a overbearing and abusive white Lieutenant. To escape a trial and certain death sentence, Perry flees to the dense jungle of Burma and settles in with a tribe of savage headhunters.

I had heard of the Burma road before and knew it was built by Black soldiers but to learn the history behind this road was fascinating. History lessons in school never reveal shady side of Franklin Roosevelt's involvement with the dictator Chiang Kai-shek, who only wanted the road to loot neighboring countries. And to learn of Roosevelt's family history of heroin trade in China was a bit of a surprise.

This road was built by black soldier's used as slave labor yet black soldier's were not welcomed by the Chinese to travel on this road to celebrate its opening. Perry was seen as a hero to many black soldiers because he fought back against an oppressive racist government that thought black soldiers were only use in war was manual labor and cooks and Perry hid in the last place the army would look for him. Fascinating read.

David says

The opening sentence:

"It is best to use discretion when confronting an emotionally shattered man, especially if he's holding a semiautomatic rifle."

Words to live by.

This is a fascinating book--a mixture of a biography of a black soldier who fled arrest and married the daughter of a headhunter chief, and the two manhunts for him, and also the story of the Ledo Road, an amazing feat of engineering in WWII that the monsoons destroyed just as soon as the war ended.

William says

A story of Black Man (playboy/hustler/blue collar worker) from Washington D.C. who generated the largest manhunt in World War 2 for a fugitive. He went on to live like royalty in isolated primitive tribal areas of Burma. Even fathering a child by the chiefs daughter. Something that Army brass considered impossible for the mentally inferior Black soldiers of time to accomplish..after all he would have to learn the language, customs, survival skills that would surely be more than he could handle. One of those great almost impossible to believe stories just waiting for the Hollywood movie treatment.

Corto says

This is a book about two tragedies. One, the squandered lives of the China-Burma-India Theater in general, and the wasted life of one draftee, Herman Perry.

Nominally, the book is about Perry, a black draftee who kills a white officer, and his escape and evasion through the hills of Burma and India. However, roughly half of the book is about the context in which that event takes place. People who are critical about this book whine about the latter, but it's incredibly illuminating and extremely well written. Admittedly, I only had a bare acquaintance with the CBI Theater (and I lived in Burma for two months, many years ago), I knew a little about prick(ly) General "Vinegar" Joe Stilwell, the exploits and suffering of the proto-Rangers, Merrill's Marauders, the engineering marvel that was the Ledo Road, the Chindits, and of course tales of flying over "The Hump".

What I didn't know was how useless that theater was, and what the vast wastage of life was in effort of (hedging on Chiang Kai Shek being able to contribute a viable fighting force for the Allies, and Stilwell's ego trying to salvage itself), and especially, what life was like for a black draftee.

I knew life was shitty for black soldiers in WWII. I had a great-uncle who'd been an officer, or NCO in charge of black troops who confronted him once in a sit-down protest - but in my mind, that was eclipsed in comparison to the much touted stories of the Tuskegee Airmen, or the 761st Tank Battalion. So, suffice to say, this book was an extreme eye-opener. It's one of those things that I should've been able to surmise, but let's face it, they don't teach you this shit in school. Koerner describes a Jim Crow US Army, where black draftees regardless of geographic origin, are subject to treatment as they would be in the Deep South. Commonplace brutality by military law enforcement. There are widespread stateside riots on bases (occasionally, armed). Punishment and violence meted out by military authorities that are not in proportion to the crimes committed by Black soldiers. Horrible conditions, in transit to Asia with indignity at every step (crowded into the lower decks of transport ships with no ventilation or cooling, no recreation, shitty food – and even denied the rites and recognition of Crossing the Line, etc. The parallels to slave ships aren't hard to discern), and it only gets much worse in theater.

As ordained by bigoted policy, Black troops in the CBI were relegated to crushing manual labor, in the most inhospitable and aggressive physical environment of the war. The flora, fauna, and climate actively worked against the best efforts of the engineers to build Stilwell's folly of a road (which he championed to salve his often wounded pride), and which often destroyed the Army's hardest earned gains. Throw into this black soldiers who are housed in barely humane conditions, still under the heel of a brutal Jim Crow mentality, and are worked to the brink of human endurance and sanity. In that respect, while I can't completely justify the manslaughter committed by Herman Perry, I can understand it.

What follows is Perrys flight into hills populated by active, headhunting tribes, and his pursuit by the US Army. Perry's trajectory after that point, is surprising, and is a testament to the human will to survive and to pursue freedom.

In light of today's political and racial climate in America, it's not an uplifting story, but more of a piece that fits into "why we're here today". (The epilogue of Perry's surviving relatives meeting one of the officers who pursued him, is especially telling.) The fact that it's 2018, and I should've learned about the real context of this story decades ago, is alarming. You can't move forward if you bury the truth, and Koerner is to be commended for his part in illuminating a small part of it.

Koerner, also provides a well-researched coda to Perry's story. The ends are wrapped up as well as they can be, and in that sense, it's a satisfying book.

If you're interested in World War II, African-American history, or, the relatively recent history of Southeast Asia, I strongly recommend this book. It's powerful, and I'm still floored at the utter waste of human life detailed within it.

Zoe says

There are sequences that made my eyes glaze over a bit (i.e. the entire history of the Ledo road), but every aspect that dealt with Herman Perry's life is incredibly interesting and make the book well worth it. A young black soldier who killed a white soldier during WWII in Burma, Perry eluded capture and managed to survive amongst a cantankerous xenophobic tribe that took pride in the number of heads they cut from their enemies.

Truly interesting read!!

Nicholas Karpuk says

I'm a easy sell for a cool title or a awesome summary. I've bought many books off a compelling blurb on the back. "Now the Hell Will Start" has both.

Seriously, say that title aloud. How cool and compelling can a book title get? Combined with the somewhat bleak cover and the description of a black man fleeing through the jungles of Burma during World War 2, and it's a book I was willing to pay full price for in hardback.

The story of Herman Perry would have been fascinating all on its own, but Brendan I. Koerner bites off a much bigger chunk of the history surrounding Perry and presents a compelling view of racism in America during the 2nd World War.

For only used to hearing about Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen, this book was jolt to the system. Finding out that most of the black men who enlisted were shipped off to build a terrible road in deadly jungle was heartbreaking. The book paints the entire forgotten theater of China, Burma, and India as one immense

waste of lives and resources.

The biggest waste was of a handsome, charismatic man like Perry. Even after losing his grip and shooting his commanding officer, Perry was able to survive in some of the most deadly jungles on earth, befriend headhunters, and marry the chief's daughter. A man this resourceful could have been put to so many uses during the war if racism hadn't relegated him to what amounted to slave labor.

For those interested in history, or those who want a different take on World War 2, this is a must read.

Emily says

This is one of the most interesting and captivating books that I've had the pleasure of reading in a long time. The story follows three narratives: the blatant racism that crippled the Army during WWII; the little-known U.S efforts to construct a supply road from Burma to China; and the story of Herman Perry, an African-American road engineer who, under pressure, killed a white officer and then fled into the jungle. As a disclaimer- this type of book (historical biographies of lesser known individuals and events) is one of my absolute favorites. I have to say, however, that this is one of the most compelling books that I've come across. It's meticulously researched and well crafted, without losing the journalistic edge that gives it its style.
