

THE DARKEST JUNGLE¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR CHARLES C. ORMSBY, JR.²

From a harrowing storm-swept voyage aboard a Nineteenth Century man-of-war, to a treacherous march across the crocodile infested swamps of the Isthmus of Darién, *The Darkest Jungle* is a gripping tale of survival and leadership. The year was 1854, and Great Britain, France, and the United States were racing to be the first to traverse the Isthmus of Darién, the narrowest land mass separating the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (located in modern day Panama).³ A successful crossing would be a source of great national pride, and yield geographical data critical to determining the feasibility of constructing a strategic and lucrative shipping canal connecting the oceans.⁴ On 20 January 1854, the twenty-seven member U.S. Darién Exploring Expedition, led by a thirty-three year-old Navy Lieutenant (LT), Isaac Strain,⁵ was the first among the three competing nations to delve into the Darién jungle.⁶ Setting out with only ten days worth of rations, and a “sprint strategy”⁷ to cross the isthmus quickly, the journey quickly deteriorated into a grueling ninety-seven day struggle for survival.⁸ In the end, it was LT Strain’s extraordinary leadership which sustained his men, and prevented a much greater tragedy.

The Darkest Jungle reads less like a history book, and more like a modern thriller. Although some of the earlier chapters move a bit slowly, as they establish the historical and biographical context for the events to come, the story quickly picks up pace as Strain and his party set about preparing for their unprecedented journey. Author Todd Balf masterfully nurtures a subtle, but palpable, sense of impending doom.

¹ TODD BALF, *THE DARKEST JUNGLE, THE TRUE STORY OF THE DARIEN EXPEDITION AND AMERICA’S ILL-FATED RACE TO CONNECT THE SEAS* (2003).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 53d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ See BALF, *supra* note 1, at 7, 21.

⁴ See *id.*

⁵ See *id.* at 8.

⁶ See *id.* at 109.

⁷ *Id.* at 110.

⁸ See *id.* at 216-18, 223. A successful rescue mission pulled the final surviving party members from the jungle after approximately two months, however, it was ninety-seven days before the survivors made it back to their ship. See *id.* at 223.

Balf foreshadows trouble early on,⁹ and increases the tension with each chapter. Before long these subtle hints of danger are realized, as the party faces the horrors of starvation, illness, and extreme exhaustion.¹⁰ Particularly frightening are the unpredictable actions of the indigenous Kuna Indians, who seem to materialize out of the jungle every so often to offer assistance to the desperate party, only to mysteriously vanish just as quickly and take actions to thwart the party's chances of survival. As the party approached one of the largest known Kuna villages, the tribe evidenced its hostility toward the party:

Strain had heard the "blows of axes" on his approach, but on arrival found yet another vacated village. The axe fells had been delivered to the only substantive item left behind: seven large dugout canoes, scuttled on a nearby shingle beach. The owners had made certain they would be impossible to repair and use. . . . He recognized the pattern. The Kuna's sacking of their own villages was a survival strategy that had its precedent during the conquest, and usually presaged a bloody battle.¹¹

Any concern by the reader for the members of the party is slightly undercut by the fact that, although Balf does an admirable job of providing biographical sketches of Strain and a handful of the other party leaders,¹² he fails to bring most of the characters to life. Only about one third of the twenty-seven member party are even named, and only three are fleshed out in any detail.¹³ With the possible exception of those three, there is scant detail about any of the others in terms of their

⁹ See, e.g., *id.* at 65 (sharing that the party attended a farewell gala on the eve of their departure and as they toasted to the upcoming journey, ominous "[h]eat lightning flashed on the distant horizon").

¹⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 202, 218 (noting that when the last members of the party were rescued, "so emaciated were they, that, clothed in their rags, they appeared like specters...they were literally living skeletons, covered with foul ulcers and phlegmons. Their hair, matted and wild, fell to their shoulders.").

¹¹ *Id.* at 124-25. In another instance, heavily armed Indian guides offered to help the party navigate a short-cut through the jungle. *Id.* at 140. The Indian guides lead them away from the riverbank they had been carefully following and vanished mysteriously a few hours into the trek leaving the party to fend for itself. *Id.*

¹² The other party leaders include William Truxtun, a Navy midshipman, grandson of the first Commander of the U.S. Navy, and veteran of the first successful effort to map large portions of the ocean floor; and Jack Maury, a fearless and technically gifted naval officer with expertise in engineering and science. See *id.* at 50-54.

¹³ See, e.g., *id.*

personalities, histories, or even appearance, making it hard to feel anything for them. This minor shortcoming is not Balf's fault however, as he explains that such detailed information on members of the party, to include Strain to a certain extent, is simply lost to history.¹⁴

Although *The Darkest Jungle* reads like a thriller, at its heart, it is a lesson in leadership. Strain's seemingly instinctual ability to maintain the cohesion, morale and general welfare of his diverse party,¹⁵ despite the brutal toll of starvation, exhaustion, injury, and fear, is remarkable. Balf does an excellent job of noting particular aspects of Strain's leadership style, as well as the positive affects of those techniques. Strain led his men by example, and ensured that he and his fellow officers worked equally hard and received the exact same food ration and comfort items as the men they led.¹⁶ This attitude of equality in terms of workload and issued items was very rare at the time.¹⁷ Strain further gained the affection and respect of his men by making judicious use of what he termed a "war council."¹⁸ The war council was a forum in which Strain allowed all members of the party to cast equal votes in making important decisions.¹⁹ Such voting increased morale in the group at critical times, presumably because it gave each member a further sense of equality as well as control over their destiny.²⁰

Strain also knew that effectively leading men in desperate circumstances required giving them a sense of "hope."²¹ When hope seemed lost, Strain rallied his men around a new project or plan in order to relieve their suffering and assist in their progress through the jungle.²² Strain also employed less standard, but equally effective, leadership

¹⁴ *Id.* at 299-302.

¹⁵ *See id.* at 111 (noting that, in addition to a mix of military and non-military members, the party contained two representatives from the New Granadian government).

¹⁶ *See id.* at 120.

¹⁷ *See id.*

¹⁸ *See id.* at 140.

¹⁹ *See id.* (deciding what route they should take); *see also id.* at 177 (describing how the war council was called in contemplation of leaving behind a collapsed party member and to debate whether "the life of one man who could not survive many hours should be regarded before the lives of the fourteen now remaining").

²⁰ *See id.* at 141 (describing how voting at a war council revealed the group's unanimous desire to continue to follow the path of the river they were tracing, as opposed to simply following a westward compass heading or returning to their ship in failure—an idea that "revolted" the party's pride).

²¹ *See id.* at 149, 154.

²² *See id.* at 147, 154.

techniques when conditions became more desperate. When some party members dropped to the ground sobbing and demoralized from exhaustion and starvation, “Strain threatened to either flog or abandon them”²³ to get them to continue. Strain even used psychological techniques to promote the party’s survival. On one occasion, he and a companion began to hallucinate and lose touch with reality.²⁴ Balf describes that, “Attempting to pull them back into the present, Strain bombarded his companion with personal questions—about his travels, about his upbringing, anything that might keep him engaged.”²⁵

Balf’s vivid descriptions of the party’s trek through the Darién clearly reflect a personal interest in adventure. He is a former senior editor for *Outside* magazine, a contributing editor to *Men’s Journal*,²⁶ and the author of another “adventure-gone-bad” book, *The Last River*, which details the true story of a group’s ill-fated attempt to navigate an extremely dangerous river in a remote area of Tibet.²⁷ His enthusiasm for adventure is further evidenced by his personal journey, during his research for the book, across parts of the same dangerous Darién wilderness traversed by Strain’s party.²⁸

Perhaps because they both share a passion for adventure, it is apparent that Balf became a fan of Strain while writing the book. At times, this admiration seems to color Balf’s interpretation of important events. Almost without exception, Balf compliments Strain and supports his leadership decisions, regardless of the consequences. For example, during Strain’s initial beach landing on the Darién coast, there was extremely heavy surf.²⁹ Instead of waiting out the conditions, Strain decided to launch his entire landing party, complete with all of their gear.³⁰ The results were predictably disastrous, with the landing craft overturning and sinking and the party losing a significant amount of the “several tons of contents” aboard.³¹ Fortunately, no one was killed.

²³ *Id.* at 193.

²⁴ *See id.* at 197.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Todd Balf Author Spotlight*, at <http://www.randomhouse.com/author/results.pperl?authorid=1269> (last visited June 13, 2005).

²⁷ TODD BALF, *THE LAST RIVER* (2001).

²⁸ BALF, *supra* note 1, at 283.

²⁹ *See id.* at 105.

³⁰ *See id.*

³¹ *See id.*

Balf's only commentary on this decision is that it was a "calculated gamble," and that Strain must have been "deeply mortified."³²

On another occasion, Strain authorized his twenty-seven-member party to break formation and scramble up a steep, jungle-covered hillside in any manner they chose.³³ The plan was that the party would reconvene in a designated streambed after the climb. During his ascent up the hill, Strain came across an Indian trail that he decided to follow instead. After shouting to his disorganized group to gather, he realized three of the party members were missing, to include the expedition's only doctor who had the bulk of their medical supplies.³⁴ Instead of continuing to the streambed to gather the missing party members, Strain fired shots in the air to signal a recall and then marked a new path with the thought that the missing party members would catch up.³⁵ The three missing members never found the main party and eventually returned to the ship.³⁶ Balf neither takes Strain to task for this blunder, nor hints that authorizing a twenty-seven-man, unorganized scramble up a steep hill in impenetrable jungle with no reliable way to communicate, and then changing direction half-way through the ascent, is not a wise leadership decision. Balf's only significant analysis of the event focuses on why each group may have misinterpreted the echoing sounds of the other's recall shots.³⁷

Balf acknowledges his "largely positive analysis of Strain's survival strategies,"³⁸ and cites information gained from modern-day survival experts to support his opinions.³⁹ In fact, Balf makes frequent reference

³² *Id.*

³³ *See id.* at 122.

³⁴ *Id.* at 123.

³⁵ *See id.*

³⁶ *See id.* at 149.

³⁷ *Id.* The separated party rightly blamed Strain for the mishap, noting that they were still operating under the guidance that the group would reconvene in the streambed, and had no way of knowing Strain would suddenly change course during the ascent. *See id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 307.

³⁹ *See id.* In particular, Balf cites the opinion of Mr. Morgan Smith, founder of the U.S. Air Force's jungle survival school in Panama. *See id.* Although intending to demonstrate that Strain's decisions conform with modern-day survivalist thinking, Balf spends most of the text explaining how NASA hired Mr. Smith to train Apollo astronauts in survival techniques in preparation for a possible reentry landing in the jungle, as well as Mr. Smith's opinion on the most important items to salvage from a plane wreck in the jungle. *See id.* at 307-08. The only specific example Balf cites where Strain conformed with Mr. Smith's modern survival training is his recommendation to follow a river in the hopes of discovering a larger body of water and possible settlements. *See id.* at 307. Interestingly,

to modern events or information to illustrate or prove the validity of his points. Although illustrative, at times these modern-day references unexpectedly snap the reader out of the drama taking place under the thick canopy of the 1854 Darién jungle and disrupt the mood and flow of the story. For example, in the middle of a gripping description of Strain and his comrades stumbling through the jungle and experiencing vivid hallucinations of food brought on by advanced starvation, Balf suddenly shatters the image by breaking into a discussion of 1980s sports psychologists using mental imaging to enhance the performance of modern-day Olympic athletes.⁴⁰

Seeking further to validate and explain information in the book, Balf includes an extensive chapter-by-chapter notes section in the back of the book.⁴¹ At first glance, portions of these notes may strike the reader as defensive in their effort to explain why the sources utilized, as well as the conclusions, are reliable. However, upon further examination, the notes are a useful and interesting elaboration on the resources utilized to write the book. Balf clearly conducted extensive research and made use of varied sources, which include everything from old faded letters⁴² to interviews⁴³ to church records.⁴⁴ He also notes that Strain's original journals regarding the mission are missing, forcing Balf to rely on a presumably reliable secondary source that purports to recount the contents of the original journals.⁴⁵ As noted previously, Balf also gathered first-hand experience regarding the appearance and rigors of the Darién jungle by traveling it by foot himself.⁴⁶ His personal travels were

the final decision to follow the river was made by the war council, not just Strain. *See id.* at 141. In the final analysis, the party's decision to follow the wildly winding river was perhaps the singly most devastating decision they made. *See id.* at 142. By choosing to follow the tropical river, the party embarked on an unbelievably circuitous route through the jungle, which also possibly denied them the advantage of discovering a nearby path cut through the jungle by a previous party, as well as a strategically placed British food depot. *See id.*

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 197-98; *see also id.* at 192 (showing how Balf abruptly jumps into a commentary about the modern U.S. military's jungle warfare school in the midst of describing how Strain wrestled with an important decision regarding whether to continue trying to move the party via a raft in the river).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 297.

⁴² *See id.* at 302.

⁴³ *See id.* at 299.

⁴⁴ *See id.* at 301.

⁴⁵ *See id.* at 297-98.

⁴⁶ *See id.* at 283.

not nearly as extensive as Strain's, but serve to give his descriptions and accounts of the jungle heightened credibility.

The Darkest Jungle contains very little in terms of visual aids. Balf explains that there are no surviving photographs of the expedition's members.⁴⁷ There are also no photos from the journey itself, because the party decided not to be burdened with carrying the type of bulky camera that was available in 1854.⁴⁸ A map of the Darién region is provided at the start of the book, which outlines Strain's route as well as those of the other expedition parties identified in the text.⁴⁹ Although this map is sufficient for reference, more detailed maps identifying Strain's estimated progress throughout the book would be a welcome addition. Prior to the start of each chapter there is a textless page, presumably for aesthetical purposes, which is marked only by the faint artistic outline of portions of the previously provided map.⁵⁰ That space could more effectively be used to illustrate the estimated location of Strain's party within each chapter. Such an illustration would be valuable to the reader in understanding the particular landscape around the party, and help the reader chart the group's circuitous route through the dangerous terrain.

The Darkest Jungle has little competition in terms of other modern books detailing Strain's 1854 expedition.⁵¹ As such, *The Darkest Jungle* is a key resource for military officers interested in the dynamics of leadership on a small unit level. In particular, it illustrates methods by which a leader can guide a group through grueling hardships and still maintain order, discipline, and perhaps most importantly, hope, in order to sustain the group and accomplish the mission. Strain is an excellent example of a leader utilizing a variety of leadership techniques to help his group prevail against overwhelming odds. Equally important are the

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 8.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ See *id.* at iv-v.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 108, 164.

⁵¹ For those interested in a comprehensive history of the Panama Canal, David McCullough's *Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914*, is regarded by many as an excellent source. DAVID MCCULLOUGH, *PATH BETWEEN THE SEAS: THE CREATION OF THE PANAMA CANAL, 1870-1914* (1978); see also Powell's Books, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914 by David McCullough*, at <http://www.powells.com/cgi-bin/biblio?isbn=0671244094> (last visited June 13, 2005). Although *Path Between the Seas* addresses the 1854 expedition, it does not do so in nearly the detail of Balf's work. The lack of similar works may be due in part to the previously described difficulty in obtaining primary sources about the journey. See *supra* note 14 and accompanying text.

lessons that can be derived from Strain's failures and misjudgments, which arguably cost some of his men their lives. Such lessons on leadership are timeless and equally applicable to today's military officers as they were to those of the 1800s.

In the end, *The Darkest Jungle* is a well-written account of one man's heroic efforts to lead his twenty-seven member party across over forty miles of some of the most inhospitable and hostile jungle environment on earth. It is a story of survival, and the leadership techniques that made such a journey possible. Despite the minor drawbacks, those who enjoy stories of adventure and survival or those who seek to learn more about leadership will find *The Darkest Jungle* has much to offer.