

Show how the members of the patrol in “The Long and the Short and the Tall” respond to the pressures of the wartime situation, focusing particularly on the presentation of the characters of Macleish and Bamforth.

Right from the beginning of the play we see a number of contrasting characters of different nationalities thrown together in a wartime situation. Tensions are running high, the ever-worrying threat of conflict with the Japanese looms large over the patrol. The scene is set in a deserted, palm-thatched store-hut deep in the Malayan jungle with the rumbling of machine gun fire in the distance. The constant fear of attack, dislike of war and resentment of their lot, and the differences in character understandably leads to conflict between the various members of the patrol. The first action of the play occurs when an argument between Bamforth, a loud and confident Cockney, and Macleish, a brash and anxious Scotsman, almost results in a fullblown fight between the two. Nerves are further frayed when Whitaker, the radio operator, while trying his best to contact base, inadvertently receives an incoming message from the Japanese. The prospect of the “Japs” advancing ever closer adds to the increasing tension and introduces a thread of excitement to the patrol’s already mixed and heightened feelings. As the harsh reality of the impending situation dawns on certain members of the patrol we see that their characters are subject to change.

One of the main characters that we witness a change in throughout the play is Macleish, an inexperienced Scottish soldier who entered the war not really knowing what to expect while fighting for his country. His character is complex and built up of many different and mixed emotions. His loyalty is to his country, his family, and his fellow Scotsmen, as shown in the quotation below:

Macleish says:

“And what have you got against the Jocks?”

Bamforth says:

“Stroll on! He’s off again! It’s a joke, you thick-skulled nit!”

Macleish says:

“And I’ll not stand for any of your subordinations.”

Macleish is edgy about the war and therefore he is tense and ready to snap. After hearing Bamforth make a sweeping, senseless statement about the Scots, Macleish takes it as a personal blow and feels a moral obligation to assert himself and stand up for the Scottish. He is quite aggressive in his response to Bamforth because he feels threatened and pressurised. He is not used to such disobedience by an inferior army member and, when confronted with the pressure, he cracks and is unable to maintain control over his feelings. It is clear that he is unsuitable for his rank in the army, lance corporal, and is unhappy with the burden of responsibility, yet still he tries to maintain a position of seniority. His arguments with Bamforth and his show of hot temper cause a rift between himself and the privates, which he is aware of and unhappy about. When the Japanese soldier enters the scene, Macleish is confronted with the prospect of having to kill a man. At this point in time it is a task he is not willing to perform and most of the other members of the patrol feel the same way. This particular part of the play displays well how under-trained the soldiers are and how unsuited they are to the role of a soldier. When Macleish is asked to kill the soldier he hides behind a false front, quoting rules and regulations to try and shift the dreadful duty onto someone else. The awkward situation is brought to a halt when

Mitchem re-enters the hut, just in time! He sees the possibility of the Japanese soldier as a useful source of information back at base. The pressure is therefore relieved and the tension is dissipated.

The Japanese soldier is later searched to see what belongings he possesses. The possibility arises that he might have killed an English soldier and stripped him of his cigarettes and case. When Macleish discovers this he displays growing rage as his hatred builds up for the soldier. We can see this particularly in the quotation below. Macleish says:

“I’ll ram it down his rotten throat. I’ll make him eat the rotten thing!”

Although this is merely an empty threat we can see that Macleish’s feelings towards the prisoner have dramatically changed. He reveals a brutal side towards the prisoner as shown in the next quotation:

Macleish:

“I’ll kill him.”

Macleish shows down right hatred towards the prisoner, a large and significant change in his character. His humanitarian side is nowhere to be seen. However, here is a good example of his loyalty to his country and people at the mere thought of a fellow British man being killed by a “Jap”.

The other main character that we get to know in depth is Bamforth. This young, aggressive cockney is one of the first characters introduced. He is forthright and opinionated and always quick to become involved in arguments with other member of the patrol. He puts people down and has no regard for the feelings of the others. He is rebellious in his nature and shows blatant disregard for rules and for his seniors. As a result of his particular dislike for those in authority, he manages to anger Mitchem, Johnstone and Macleish. He does himself no favours by doing this and does not gain any respect from the other members of the patrol. It is one of the quirks of his character that in fact he bears no particular grudge towards individuals but despises their rank and cannot accept a system of hierarchy in which he must be subservient and follow orders.

When the Japanese soldier is captured we see a different side to Bamforth, as we did with Macleish, although the two men’s responses are quite different. Unlike Macleish, Bamforth is at first prepared to kill the prisoner, without a second thought, as can be seen in the quotation below.

Bamforth says:

“Here. Give me hold. It’s only the same as carving up a pig. Hold him still.”

It is hard to tell here whether Bamforth really does not value human life very highly or whether in fact he is acting on impulse without having given the situation much thought. Bamforth is put in charge of looking after the prisoner, and is unexpectedly well suited for his job. Although he does not respect others in authority, he enjoys the feeling of power he has over the Japanese soldier. The Japanese soldier, in sharp contrast, is obviously terrified and unaware at this point that his life is in no immediate danger. He pulls a wallet from his pocket and shows Bamforth photos of his family. Bamforth is somewhat surprised at these photos. The fact that the prisoner is actually a fellow human being slowly begins to dawn on him. It is now that we start to see a more mature, humane and caring Bamforth - an important change in his character! The relationship between captor and captive mellows as the prisoner accepts Bamforth’s authority and he in turn begins to treat the Japanese soldier more tolerantly and a bond of mutual respect grows between the two.

Later on in the play it is decided by Mitchem and Johnstone that the prisoner is of no more use and must be killed. When Bamforth is informed of this, he is

horrified. A full-scale argument breaks out between himself and Mitchem during which the prisoner becomes edgy and realises something is very wrong. In the ensuing confusion, Whitaker is unnerved by the prisoner's panic and lack of understanding and shoots him dead. Everything falls silent as all the members of the patrol take in what has happened.

Bamforth:

"You've got the biggest souvenir of all. You've done it this time Whitaker. Take that and hang it on the front room wall..."

*Bamforth's words are cut short as Mitchem strikes him across the face.*

This is the last we hear of Bamforth in the play. His constant arguing has been halted by Mitchem's authority. He has nothing else to say, he is in shock, he knows who is the boss now.

The wartime experience has had a dramatic effect on most of the members of the patrol, particularly the aforementioned Bamforth and Macleish and it is difficult to state categorically whether they are better or worse people as a result. The characters have been shocked by the whole dreadful experience of war and this has led to definite changes in their attitudes and outlooks. Without doubt, the unexpected arrival of the Japanese soldier and subsequent events made the biggest impression on the patrol and caused them all to re-evaluate their instincts and reactions. Macleish has become more aggressive in his approach to people and has developed a real hatred for the Japanese. Bamforth, however, has undergone quite different changes. He has matured in a very short period of time from the young, aggressive cockney that he was into someone who has learnt to respect the lives of others. This unlikely bunch of soldiers was thrown together in desperate circumstances and forced to interact, to face impending danger together and to make decisions and to respond to situations they had never encountered before. The play has shown that each person is unique and responds to different situations and events in different ways. Some are able to use life experiences to enhance and promote their characters while others become hardened and embittered by them.