



Eric Liddell 1902-1945

Eric crouched ready to run. Along with the world's best runners, he was in Paris on July 11, 1924, competing for gold. His chances looked slim. The 400 meters was not his strongest race.

If you've seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*, you may have thrilled at Eric Liddell's stand for principle. It almost cost him his chance at Olympic gold because the 100 meters was his best race. He dropped out of that event, however, rather than run on Sunday.

Instead, he spoke in a Paris church on the day he might have run. The starting guns popped in the stadium without him. Nevertheless, Eric captured an unexpected bronze in the 200 meter and worked his way through the qualifying heats for the 400 meter. His trial times were not spectacular. It did not seem he could beat the other fine contenders.

Defeat or victory, however, he would accept it. He had told the crowds who came to hear him speak that he did not ever questions what God chose to do. "I don't need explanations from God. I simply believe Him and accept whatever comes my way."

The gun cracked. Eric was out of his crouch and running, head tilted back, arms flailing. If this had been a sprint, he could not have flown faster. When the finish tape drew taut across his chest, he was five meters ahead of his nearest rival. Eric had won the gold in a record 47.6 seconds!

For Eric Liddell, however, this was not the ultimate race. The son of Scottish missionaries to China, he saw his whole life as a race: a race for the kingdom of heaven. That is why, two years after taking the Olympic gold, he sailed to China to become a missionary himself. Having seen the Chinese need for science education, he had devoted himself to science studies at Edinburgh. In China he became a teacher at the Anglo-Chinese school at Tientsin (Tin-sen).

One of the girls attending the school was Florence McKenzie. Eric often borrowed pencils from her classroom and invited her out with his whole Sunday

school class. She was just seventeen when he proposed. She accepted, but they did not see each other for three years when she sailed to Canada to attend nursing school.

The two were finally married in March, 1934. They were the happy parents of two daughters when the Japanese moved to gain total control of China in 1937. Eventually, afraid that his daughters might be taken as hostages, forcing compromises on him, Eric asked his wife to take the girls to Canada. He felt it was his duty to remain in China. By then (1941), they had a third daughter on the way. They parted, hoping to meet again as soon as the Japanese conflict with China was resolved.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war. Japan rounded up all foreign nationals; among them was Eric. They were held at Weihsien (way-shin) in what had formerly been a mission school. Its heat and plumbing had been ripped out, making conditions primitive.

At Weihsien, Eric proved himself a true champion. Although he missed his family badly and was distressed that he had never seen his third daughter, he busied himself helping others. He carried water for the sick and elderly, arranged games, taught Bible classes and grounded youngsters in chemistry with a textbook handwritten from memory.

Those who knew him during those bleak months said that he truly lived out Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

Eric was not one to complain. Few people knew that he was having crushing headaches. He continued his efforts to smile and make the camp a better place despite increasing physical difficulties. Eric was still running his race when he collapsed. He died on February 21, 1945, of a brain tumor and typhoid in the Japanese camp just a few months before World War II ended.

Sir David Puttnam, the producer of *Chariots of Fire*, stated, "In many ways Liddell was the kind of person who, in my heart of hearts, I'd always dreamed of being. . . Few lives have more to teach us about the virtues of honor and probity; i.e. integrity."