BASILDON AND THE BURMA RAILWAY

The Background

A railway route between Burma and Thailand, crossing Three Pagodas Pass and following the valley of the Kwhae Noi river in Thailand, had been surveyed by the British government of Burma as early as 1885, but the proposed course of the line – through hilly jungle terrain divided by many rivers, was considered too difficult to undertake.

The Fall of Singapore

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese Army on February 15th 1942 is considered one of the greatest defeats in the history of the British Army and probably Britain's worst defeat in World War Two. The fall of Singapore in 1942 clearly illustrated the way Japan was to fight in the Far East – a combination of speed and savagery that only ended with the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August 1945.

Singapore, an island at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula, was considered a vital part of the British Empire and supposedly impregnable as a fortress. The British saw it as the "Gibraltar in the Far East". The surrender of Singapore demonstrated to the world that the Japanese Army was a force to be reckoned with though the defeat also ushered in three years of appalling treatment for the Commonwealth POW's who were caught in Singapore. Improvements to Singapore as a British military base had only been completed at great cost in 1938. Singapore epitomised what the British Empire was all about – a strategically vital military base that protected Britain's other Commonwealth possessions in the Far East.

Once the Japanese expanded throughout the region after Pearl Harbour (December 1941) many in Britain felt that Singapore would become an obvious target for the Japanese. However, the British military command in Singapore was confident that the power they could call on there would make any Japanese attack useless. One story told about the attitude of the British Army in Singapore was of a young Army officer complaining that the newly completed defences in Singapore might put off the Japanese from landing there. British troops stationed in Singapore were also told that the Japanese troops were poor fighters; alright against soldiers in China who were poor fighters themselves, but of little use against the might of the British Army.

The Japanese onslaught through the Malay Peninsula took everybody by surprise. Speed was of the essence for the Japanese, never allowing the British forces time to re-group. This was the first time British forces had come up against a full-scale attack by the Japanese. Any thoughts of the Japanese fighting a conventional form of war were soon shattered. The British had confidently predicted that the Japanese would attack from the sea. This explained why all the defences on Singapore pointed out to sea. It was inconceivable to British military planners that the island could be attacked any other way – least of all, through the jungle and mangrove swamps of the Malay Peninsula. But this was exactly the route the Japanese took.

> As the Japanese attacked through the Peninsula, their troops were ordered to take no prisoners as they would slow up the Japanese advance. A pamphlet issued to all Japanese soldiers stated: ***"When you encounter the enemy after landing, think of yourself as an avenger coming face to face at last with his father's murderer. Here is a man whose death will lighten your heart."***

For the British military command in Singapore, war was still fought by the 'rule book'. Social life was important in Singapore and the Raffles Hotel and Singapore Club were important social centres frequented by officers. An air of complacency had built in regarding how strong Singapore was – especially if it was attacked by the Japanese. When the Japanese did land at Kota Bharu aerodrome, in Malaya, Singapore's governor, Sir Shenton Thomas is alleged to have said "Well, I suppose you'll (the army) shove the little men off."

The attack on Singapore occurred almost at the same time as Pearl Harbour. By 9 December 1941, the RAF had lost nearly all of its Front Line aeroplanes after the Japanese had attacked RAF fields in Singapore. Any hope of aerial support for the army was destroyed before the actual attack on Singapore had actually begun.

Britain's naval presence at Singapore was strong. A squadron of warships was stationed there lead by the modern battleship "Prince of Wales" and the battle cruiser "Repulse". On 8 December 1941, both put out to sea and headed north up the Malay coast to where the Japanese were landing. On December 10th, both ships were sunk by repeated attacks from Japanese torpedo bombers. The RAF could offer the ships no protection as their planes had already been destroyed by the Japanese. The loss of both ships had a devastating impact on morale in Britain.

Sir Winston Churchill wrote in his memoirs: ***"I put the telephone down. I was thankful to be alone. In all the war I never received a more direct shock."***

Only the army could stop the Japanese advance on Singapore. The army in the area was led by Lieutenant General Arthur Percival. He had 90,000 men there – British, Indian and Australian troops. The Japanese advanced with 65,000 men lead by General Tomoyuki Yamashita. Many of the Japanese troops had fought in the Manchurian/Chinese campaign and were battle-hardened. Many of Percival's 90,000 men had never seen combat.

At the Battle of Jitra in Malaya (December 11th and 12th 1941), Percival's men were soundly beaten and from this battle were in full retreat. The Japanese attack was based on speed, ferocity and surprise. To speed their advance on Singapore, the Japanese used bicycles as one means of transport. Captured wounded Allied soldiers were killed where they lay. Those who were not injured but had surrendered were also murdered – some captured Australian troops were doused with petrol and burned to death. Locals who had helped the Allies were tortured before being murdered.

The brutality of the Japanese soldiers shocked the British. But the effectiveness of the Japanese was shown when they captured the capital of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, on January 11th 1942. All the indications were that the Japanese would attack Singapore across the Johor Strait. General Wavell, the British commander in the region, was ordered by Churchill to fight to save Singapore and he was ordered by Churchill not to surrender until there had been "protracted fighting" in an effort to save the city.

On 31 January 1942, the British and Australian forces withdrew across the causeway that separated Singapore from Malaya. It was clear that this would be their final stand. Percival spread his men across a 70mile line – the entire coastline of the island. This proved a mistake. Percival had overestimated the strength of the Japanese. His tactic spread his men out for too thinly for an attack. On February 8th, 1942, the Japanese attacked across the Johor Strait. Many Allied soldiers were simply too far away to influence the outcome of the battle. On February 8th, 23,000 Japanese soldiers attacked Singapore. They advanced with speed and ferocity. At the Alexandra Military Hospital, Japanese soldiers murdered the patients they found there. Percival kept many men away from the Japanese attack fearing that more Japanese would attack along the 70mile coastline. He has been blamed for failing to back up those troops caught up directly with the fighting but it is now generally accepted that this would not have changed the final outcome but it may only have prolonged the fighting.

The Japanese took 100,000 men prisoner in Singapore. Many had just arrived and had not fired a bullet in anger. 9,000 of these men died building the Burma-Thailand railway. The people of Singapore fared worse. Many were of Chinese origin and were slaughtered by the Japanese. After the war, Japan admitted that 5000 had been murdered, but the Chinese population in Singapore put the figure at nearer 50,000. With the evidence of what the Japanese could do to a captured civilian population (as seen at Nanking), 5000 is likely to be an underestimate.

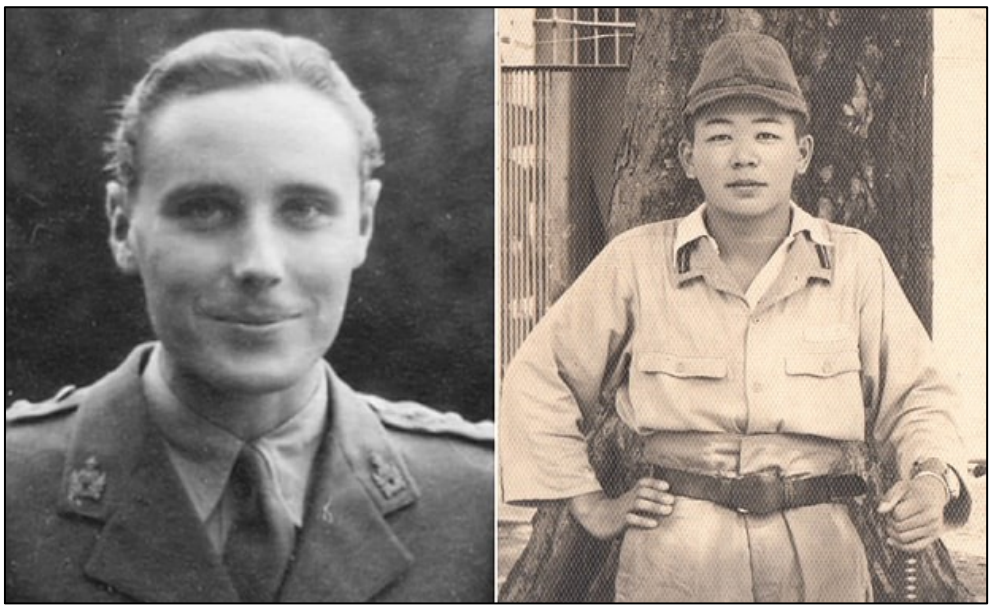
The fall of Singapore was a humiliation for the British government. The Japanese had been portrayed as useless soldiers only capable of fighting the militarily inferior Chinese. This assessment clearly rested uncomfortably with how the British Army had done in the peninsula.

The commander of the Australian forces in Singapore later said:

Sir Winston Churchill had stated before the Japanese final attack:
"There must be no thought of sparing the troops or population; commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire and the British Army is at stake."

Two Soldier's memories

Harold Atcherley said the Allied force of around 85,000 easily outnumbered the 30,000 Japanese soldiers, but the Imperial Army was far better prepared. “The Japanese were constantly outflanking us and used bicycles [to get around the island nimbly] wherever they could. Of our whole Army, only 800 people actually had any training in jungle warfare.” The Allies were forced to surrender in mid-February, leaving Winston Churchill smarting at “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”.



Captain Atcherley, was a 23-year-old intelligence officer in the 18th Infantry Division when he was taken prisoner by the Japanese after the fall of Singapore in 1942.
He was soon forced to begin work on the railway, which took only a year to complete, but cost the lives of around 13,000 prisoners of war and 100,000 native labourers. Japan refused to recognise international agreements on fair treatment of prisoners and her soldiers meted out cruel punishments and torture.

Captain Atcherley worked 18-hour days, clearing a path through the jungle. He was given only 250 grams of rice a day and had to forage for anything else. Of the 1,700 sent to work on his section of the railway, only 400 survived.

Mikio Kinoshita (pictured next to Captain Atcherley) was a reluctant warrior. He had just started work as a station master in his hometown of Osaka when war broke out and he was not keen to fight hundreds of miles away when he was conscripted in 1941.
“I really didn’t want to go,” he said. “It was my duty as a Japanese boy but I didn’t like it at all. I didn’t ever get used to it – the training was so unbearable.”

The Japanese appeared equally surprised, and they soon ran out of supplies for their newly-captured POWs. Sir Harold and his division were taken to a prison camp at Changi, in the east of the island, but were forced to forage for their own food. Conditions deteriorated further, however, when they were sent up to Thailand to begin work on the railway in March 1943. Their captors initially told the men to pack for a “rest camp”. “They told us we should take one-third sick and that it would be much easier to feed us there. That was the last time we ever believed anything they said to us.”

From Ban Pong, they were made to March 200 miles through the jungle to Three Pagodas Pass, where they could begin work. “Monsoon rains had already started in earnest, 24 hours a day,” he wrote. “No roofing on huts where we lived in constant pouring rain.” They worked for up to 18 hours a day, hacking a path through the jungle and then lugging hefty planks of wood to build a double-decker bridge, so cars could travel underneath the railway line.
Their captors gave them only 250 grams of rice to eat, as well as any greenery they could find themselves. Weakened by work and malnutrition, they quickly succumbed to tropical ulcers, beriberi – a Vitamin B deficiency that causes wasting and paralysis – and dengue, a fever spread by mosquitoes.

“Cholera rife and men dying at the rate of 20 per day,” Sir Harold wrote. “Appalling state of tropical ulcers – cases seen myself of legs bared to the bone from ankle to knee. No sleep for the wretched patients, who moan all night long – their only hope for the morning to look forward to a repetition of all the previous day’s agonies. No man deserves such a death.”

The work on the bridge took them only eight months but of the 1,700 men sent with Captain Atcherley to Three Pagodas Pass, only 400 were alive by October. The survivors were sent back to Changi, where another 200 died of disease as they endured another year and a half in the camp, building an airfield.

On 5 August 1945, the day before American airmen dropped the first of the two Atom bombs that forced Japan to surrender, he had no inkling of the breakthrough to come. “All feel that things cannot go on much longer as they are,” he wrote. “Yet there is no sign of anything significant happening to bring about our freedom.”

Bridge 277 - The Bridge on the River Khwai

The most famous portion of the railway is Bridge 277, "the Bridge on the River Kwai", which was built over a stretch of river which was then known as part of the Mae Klong. The greater part of the Thai part of the route followed the valley of the Khwae Noi River

This bridge was immortalised by Pierre Boulle in his book and the film based on it, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. However, there are many who point out that both Boulle's story and the film based on it were utterly unrealistic and do not show how bad the conditions and treatment of prisoners were.

On the part of the Japanese, many resented the movie's depiction that their engineers' capabilities were inferior to those of British engineers. In fact, Japanese engineers had been surveying the route of the railway since 1937 and they were highly organized. The Japanese also accused the film of "glorification of the superiority of Western civilization" because the British in the film were able to build a bridge that the Japanese could not.

The bridge over the River Kwai where thousands of POW's died

Just ten days later, after the second bomb was dropped, Sir Harold wrote again. “The delight and shock of sudden incredible, wonderful news. 3 ½ years to the day and the war appears to be as good as over. It is difficult to believe that in a week or two we might be free.” He sailed back to Britain with the rest of the division, where they were received by the Mayor of Bootle (he wrote they “were worth at least the Mayor of Liverpool”).

Hellfire Pass

Hellfire Pass in the Tenasserim Hills was a particularly difficult section of the line to build due to it being the largest rock cutting on the railway, coupled with its general remoteness and the lack of proper construction tools during building. The Australian, British, Dutch, other allied prisoners of war, along with Chinese, Malay,

and Tamil labourers, were required by the Japanese to complete the cutting. Sixty-nine men were beaten to death by Japanese guards in the twelve weeks it took to build the cutting, and many more died from cholera, dysentery, starvation, and exhaustion.

The cutting at Hellfire Pass was one of the most difficult (and deadly for POWs) sections to build on the railway.

The Burma Railway

As said earlier, in early 1942, Japanese forces invaded Burma and seized control of the colony from the United Kingdom. To supply their forces in Burma, the Japanese depended upon the sea, bringing

supplies and troops to Burma around the Malay peninsula and through the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea.

This route was vulnerable to attack by Allied submarines, especially after the Japanese defeat at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. To avoid a hazardous 2,000 miles (3,200 km) sea journey around the Malay peninsula, a railway from Bangkok, Thailand to Rangoon, Burma seemed a feasible alternative. The Japanese began this project in June 1942.

Abandoned section of Burma Railway in Thanbyuzayat, Burma

The project aimed to connect Ban Pong in Thailand with Thanbyuzayat in Burma, linking up with existing railways at both places. Its route was through Three Pagodas Pass on the border of Thailand and Burma. 69 miles (111 km) of the railway were in Burma and the remaining 189 miles (304 km) were in Thailand.

The movement of POWs northward from Changi prison in Singapore and other prison camps in Southeast Asia began in May 1942. After preliminary work of airfields and infrastructure, construction of the railway began in Burma on 15 September 1942 and in Thailand in November. The projected completion date was December 1943. Most of the construction materials, including tracks and sleepers, were brought from dismantled branches of Malaya's Federated Malay States Railway network and the East Indies' various rail networks.

The Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway, the Burma–Siam Railway, the Thailand –Burma Railway and similar names, was a 415-kilometre (258 mi) railway between Ban Pong, Thailand, and Thanbyuzayat, Burma, built by the Empire of Japan in 1943 to support its forces in the Burma campaign of World War II.

This railway completed the rail link between Bangkok, Thailand and Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon). The line was closed in 1947, but the section between Nong Pla Duk and Nam Tok was reopened ten years later in 1957. Forced labour was used in its construction. More than 180,000—possibly many more—South East Asian civilian labourers (Romusha) and 60,000 Allied prisoners of war (POWs) worked on the railway. Javanese, Malayan Tamils of Indian origin, Burmese, Chinese, Thai and other Southeast Asians, forcibly drafted by the Imperial Japanese Army to work on the railway, died in its construction — including 100,000 Tamils alone.

Conditions during construction

The prisoners of war "found themselves at the bottom of a social system that was harsh, punitive, fanatical, and often deadly." The living and working conditions on the Burma Railway were "horrific", with maltreatment, sickness, and starvation. The estimated total number of civilian labourers and POWs who died during construction varies considerably.
The Australian Government figures suggest that of the 330,000 people that worked on the line (including 250,000 Asian labourers and 61,000 Allied POWs) about 90,000 of the labourers and 16,000 Allied prisoners died.

Life in the POW camps was recorded at great risk to themselves by artists such as Jack Bridger Chalker, Philip Meninsky, John Mennie, Ashley George Old, and Ronald Searle. Human hair was often used for brushes, plant juices and blood for paint, and toilet paper as the "canvas". Some of their works were used as evidence in the trials of Japanese war criminals. Many are now held by the Australian War Memorial, State Library of Victoria, and the Imperial War Museum in London.

Starving Australian and Dutch POWs on the Burma railway.

Some 12,621 Allied POWs died during the construction. The dead POWs included 6,904 British personnel, 2,802 Australians, 2,782 Dutch, and 133 Americans.

Terror of the Kempeitai in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. January 1945. Kanchanaburi (Kanburi) is 50 km north of Nong Pladuk. POW line up for a meal in the POW camp (called Kanburi by the Australians). Many prisoners were brought here from Burma by the Japanese after the Burma-Thailand railway was completed. Note that most prisoners wear rubber clogs on their feet. Most clothing has been lost or worn out.

The Japanese

About 12,000 Japanese soldiers, including 800 Koreans, were employed on the railway as engineers, guards, and supervisors of the POW and Romusha labourers. Although working conditions were far better for the Japanese than the POW and Rōmusha workers, about 1,000 of them died during the construction. Japanese soldiers are widely remembered as being cruel and indifferent to the fate of Allied prisoners of war and the Asian rōmusha.

Many men in the railway workforce bore the brunt of pitiless or uncaring guards. Cruelty could take different forms, from extreme violence and torture to minor acts of physical punishment, humiliation and neglect.

The Japanese treatment of prisoners of war in World War II was barbaric. The men shown in the above picture are part of the Sikh Regiment of the British Indian Army. All of them are sitting in the traditional cross-legged prayer position. The vast majority of Indian soldiers captured when Singapore fell belonged to Sikh community. These photographs were found among Japanese records when British troops retook Singapore.

If you examine carefully the second picture you'll note a marker hanging over the heart of each prisoner and the stakes in front bear of the rifle. Each target position is marked with a number, indicating that the solider in position one is going to shoot the prisoner on position one, and so on.

The most severe treatment was directed at the Chinese who were killed in large numbers by a variety of brutal means. The killings were conducted in many ways including shooting, burying alive, bayoneting, beheading, medical experimentation, and other methods.

American, Australian, and British PoW's were starved, brutalized, and used for forced labour. Some were even used for medical experiments, including live vivisections and assessments of biological weapons. Some PoW's were shot at the end of the War in an effort to prevent accounts of their mistreatment to become public.

The Nazis were methodical in their genocide but the Japanese (who killed twice as many Chinese as Nazis killed Jews) did it with pure barbarity. While Nazi crimes were committed mostly by the SS and generally hidden from regular troops, Japanese war crimes were committed by regular infantrymen.

An Australian POW, Sgt. Leonard Siffleet, captured in New Guinea, about to be beheaded by a Japanese officer with a guntō, 1943

After the end of World War II, 111 Japanese military officials were tried for War Crimes because of their brutalization of POWs during the construction of the railway, with 32 of these sentenced to death. No compensation or reparations have been provided to Southeast Asian victims.

The Civilian Labour

The number of Southeast Asian workers recruited or impressed to work on the Burma railway has been estimated to have been more than 180,000 of whom as many as half may have died. In the initial stages of the construction of the railway, Burmese and Thai were employed in their respective countries, but Thai workers, in particular, were likely to abscond from the project and the number of Burmese workers recruited was insufficient. The Burmese had welcomed the invasion by Japan to end British rule and cooperated with Japan in recruiting workers.

In early 1943, the Japanese advertised for workers in Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies, promising good wages, short contracts, and housing for families. When that failed to attract sufficient workers, they resorted to more coercive methods, rounding up workers and impressing them, especially in Malaya.

Most of the Romusha working on the railway were probably coerced, rather than being volunteers. Approximately 90,000 Burmese and 75,000 Malayans worked on the railroad. Other nationalities and ethnic groups working on the railway were Tamils, Chinese, Karen, Javanese, and Singaporean Chinese.

Malayan Tamils during the construction of Death railway between June 1942 to October 1943

But other documents show that more than 100,000 Malayan Tamils were brought into this project and around 60,000 perished.

The working conditions for the Romusha were deadly. A British Doctor wrote: "The conditions in the coolie camps down river are terrible, They are kept isolated from Japanese and British camps. They have no latrines. Special British prisoner parties at Kinsaiyok bury about 20 coolies a day. These coolies have been brought from Malaya under false pretences - 'easy work, good pay, good houses!'

Some have even brought wives and children. Now they find themselves dumped in these charnel houses, driven and brutally knocked about by the Jap and Korean guards, unable to buy extra food, bewildered, sick, frightened. Yet many of them have shown extraordinary kindness to sick British prisoners passing down the river, giving them sugar and helping them into the railway trucks at Tarsao."

Prisoners of War

The first prisoners of war, 3,000 Australians, to go to Burma departed Changi prison at Singapore on 14 May 1942 and journeyed by sea to near Thanbyuzayat, the northern terminus of the railway. They worked on airfields and other infrastructure initially before beginning construction of the railway in October 1942.

The first prisoners of war to work in Thailand, 3,000 British soldiers, left Changi by train in June 1942 to Ban Pong, the southern terminus of the railway. More prisoners of war were imported from Singapore and the Dutch East Indies as construction advanced. Construction camps housing at least 1,000 workers each were established every five to 10 miles (8 to 17 km) of the route. Workers were moved up and down the railway line as needed.

The construction camps consisted of open-sided barracks built of bamboo poles with thatched roofs. The barracks were about sixty metres (66yd) long with sleeping platforms raised above the ground on each side

of an earthen floor. Two hundred men were housed in each barracks, giving each man a two-foot wide space in which to live and sleep. Camps were usually named after the kilometre where they were located.

Except for the worst months of the construction period, known as the "Speedo" (mid-spring to mid-October 1943), one of the ways the Allied POWs kept their spirits up was to ask one of the musicians in their midst to play his guitar or accordion, or lead them in a group sing-along, or request their camp comedians to tell some jokes or put on a skit.

After the railway was completed, the POWs still had almost two years to survive before their liberation. During this time, most of the POWs were moved to hospital and relocation camps where they could be available for maintenance crews or sent to Japan to alleviate the manpower shortage there.

In these camps entertainment flourished as an essential part of their rehabilitation. Theatres of bamboo and attap (palm fronds) were built, set, lighting, costumes and makeup devised, and an array of entertainment produced that included music halls, variety shows, cabarets, plays, and musical comedies – even pantomimes. These activities engaged numerous POWs as actors, singers, musicians, designers, technicians, and female impersonators.

POWs and Asian workers were also used to build the Kra Isthmus Railway from Chumphon to Kra Buri, and the Sumatra or Palembang Railway from Pekanbaru to Muaro.

The construction of the Burma Railway is counted as a war crime committed by Japan in Asia. Hiroshi Abe, the first lieutenant who supervised construction of the railway at Sonkrai where over 3,000 POWs died, was sentenced to death, later commuted to 15 years in prison, as a B/C class war criminal. After the completion of the railroad, most of the POWs were then transported to Japan. Those left to maintain the line still suffered from appalling living conditions as well as increasing Allied air raids.

The railway was completed ahead of schedule. On 17 October 1943, construction gangs originating in Burma and working south met up with construction gangs originating in Thailand and working north. The two sections of the line met at kilometre 263, about 18 km (11 mi) south of the Three Pagodas Pass at Konkuita (Kaeng Khoi Tha, Sangkhla Buri district, Kanchanaburi Province).

Completion

The Burma railway was an impressive accomplishment. As an American engineer said after viewing the project, "What makes this an engineering feat is the totality of it, the accumulation of factors. The total length of miles, the total number of bridges — over 600, including six to eight long-span bridges — the total number of people who were involved (one-quarter of a million), the very short time in which they managed to accomplish it, and the extreme conditions they accomplished it under.

They had very little transportation to get stuff to and from the workers, they had almost no medication, they couldn't get food let alone materials, they had no tools to work with except for basic things like spades and hammers, and they worked in extremely difficult conditions — in the jungle with its heat and humidity. All of that makes this railway an extraordinary accomplishment." The total freight carried during the war was 500,000 tonnes and two Japanese Army divisions.

Destruction

In an interview made by former POW John Coast, the first wooden bridge over the Khwae Yai was finished in February 1943, followed by a concrete and steel bridge in June 1943; which runs in a NNE-SSW direction. It was this bridge 277 that was meant to be attacked with the use of the first-ever example of a precision-guided munition in American service, the VB-1 Azon MCLOS-guided 1,000 lb ordnance on 23 January 1945 but bad weather scrubbed the mission.

According to Hellfire Tours in Thailand, "The two bridges were successfully bombed on 13 February 1945 by the Royal Air Force. Repairs were carried out by POW labour and by April the wooden trestle bridge was back in operation. On 3 April a second raid by Liberator bombers of the U.S. Army Air Forces damaged the wooden bridge once again. Repair work continued and both bridges were operational again by the end of May.

A second raid by the R.A.F. on 24 June put the railway out of commission for the rest of the war. After the Japanese surrender, the British Army removed 3.9 kilometres of track on the Thai-Burma border. A survey of

the track had shown that its poor construction would not support commercial traffic. The track was sold to Thai Railways and the 130 km Ban Pong–Namtok section relayed and is in use today."

The new railway did not fully connect with the Burmese system, as no bridge crossed the river between Moulmein on the south bank with Martaban on the north bank. Thus ferries were needed.

River Kwai Bridge at Kanchanaburi – 1945 After Allied Bombing

Those who died

Estimates of the deaths directly related to the construction of the Burma railway differ depending upon the source. For the impressed workers from Southeast Asian (Romusha), estimates vary widely, although authorities agree that the percentage of deaths among the Romusha was much higher than among the foreign prisoners of war. The total number of Romusha working on the railroad may have reached 300,000 and the number of deaths among them has been estimated as high as fifty percent.

Prisoner of war workers and deaths on the Burma Railway, 1942–1945

Nationality	POWs	deaths	death rate
British	30,131	6,904	23%
Dutch	17,990	2,782	15%
Australian	13,004	2,802	22%
American	686	133	19%
Total	61,811	12,621	20%

The lower death rate of the Dutch POWs compared to other POWs is attributed to the fact that many of them had been born in the Dutch East Indies, some with local heritage, and were thus more accustomed to tropical conditions than the British, Australians, and Americans. Officers fared much better than enlisted men; their weight loss during the construction was 20 to 30 pounds less than that of enlisted men. The survival of POWs was also due to luck. Some cohorts of workers, especially those in more isolated areas, suffered a much higher death rate than others.

The quality of medical care the POWs received from their medical personnel for Malaria, Cholera, Dysentery and especially tropical ulcers was important. The difference among POW cohorts depending upon the quality and number of medical doctors was substantial. Many European and American doctors had little experience with tropical diseases.

As an example, one cohort of Americans suffered 100 deaths out of 450 personnel. Another American group to which Dr. Hekking, the Dutch doctor with long experience in tropical medicine, was assigned suffered only 9 deaths out of 190 personnel. A Dutch group of 400 workers which included three doctors with extensive tropical medicine experience suffered no deaths at all.

Cemeteries and Memorials

After the war, the remains of most of the war dead were moved from former POW camps, burial grounds and lone graves along the rail line to official war cemeteries. Three cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) contain the vast majority of Allied military personnel who died on the Burma Railway.

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

in the city of Kanchanaburi, contains the graves of 6,982 personnel comprising:

- 3,585 British;
- 1,896 Dutch;
- 1,362 Australians;
- 12 members of the Indian Army (including British officers)
- 2 New Zealanders;
- 2 Danish, and;
- 8 Canadians.

A memorial at the Kanchanaburi cemetery lists 11 other members of the Indian Army, who are buried in nearby Muslim cemeteries.

Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery

At Thanbyuzayat, has the graves of 3,617 POWs who died on the Burmese portion of the line.

- 1,651 British;
- 1,335 Australians;
- 621 Dutch;
- 15 Indian Army;
- 3 New Zealanders, and;
- 1 Canadian.

Chungkai War Cemetery.

Near Kanchanaburi, has a further 1,693 war graves.

- 1,373 British;
- 314 Dutch;
- 6 Indian Army.

The remains of United States personnel were repatriated. Of the 668 US personnel forced to work on the railway, 133 died. This included personnel from USS *Houston* and the 131st Field Artillery Regiment of the Texas Army National Guard. The Americans were called the Lost Battalion as their fate was unknown to the United States for more than two years after their capture.

Several museums are dedicated to those who perished building the railway. The largest of these is at Hellfire Pass (north of the current terminus at Nam Tok), a cutting where the greatest number of lives were lost. An Australian memorial is at Hellfire Pass. Two other museums are in Kanchanaburi: the Thailand–Burma Railway Centre, opened in March 2003, and the JEATH War Museum. There is a memorial plaque at the Kwai bridge itself and an historic wartime steam locomotive is on display. A preserved section of line has been rebuilt at the National Memorial Arboretum in England.

Post-war

After the War, the railway was in very poor condition and needed heavy reconstruction for use by the Royal Thai Railway system. On 24 June 1949, the portion from Kanchanaburi to Nong Pla Duk (Thai หนองปลาดุก) was finished; on the first of April 1952, the next section up to Wang Pho (Wangpo) was done. Finally, on 1 July 1958 the rail line was completed to Nam Tok (Thai น้ำตก, English Sai Yok "waterfalls".)

The portion in use today is some 130 km (81 mi) long. The line was abandoned beyond Nam Tok Sai Yok Noi; the steel rails were salvaged for reuse in expanding the Bangsue railway yard, reinforcing the BKK-Banphachi double track, rehabilitating the track from Thung Song to Trang, and constructing both the Nong Pla Duk–Suphanburi and Ban Thung Pho–Khirirat Nikhom branch lines. Parts of the abandoned route have been converted into a walking trail.

Since the 1990s various proposals have been made to rebuild the complete railway, but as of 2014 these plans had not been realised. Since a large part of the original railway line is now submerged by the Vajiralongkorn Dam, and the surrounding terrain is mountainous, it would take extensive tunnelling to reconnect Thailand with Burma by rail.

Frederick Noel Taylor - A Soldier's story from Changi POW Camp

Before the Japs came into our camp, stories of atrocities carried out by them were spreading, fearing the worst, we had to pile all weapons and ammunition in the open. Then a small party of Japanese checked that everything had been carried out to their commands, the trucks carrying the Japanese then arrived. Standing to attention and faced by an unknown enemy, the stories flooded through my head of Chinese men, woman and children being used for bayonet practice and allied units surrendering under a white flag in Malaya being shot and left for dead.

Our officers were allowed to take charge at first, the Japanese having set up two machine guns at the entrance to some tennis courts, placed us inside them. The following day our officers took charge and marched us to Changi Prison on the North-east end of the island. It was on the way I learnt of the massacre

at Alexandra Hospital, a medical officer, Lieut. Weston had confronted the Japanese outside the hospital with a white flag only to be bayoneted to death.

The enemy soldiers who seemed tall for the normal Japanese, then killed anything that moved, the patients didn't stand a chance. It was later reported that 323 died in the attack, 230 being patients, the rest medical officers and nurses. The hospital couldn't have been mistaken for anything else, all the medical officers were wearing Red Cross insignia and the hospital had a large Red Cross in the grounds, (it was later established that the soldiers that carried out the raid were the Japanese Imperial Guard and the raid was in retaliation for their losses by the Australians the days previous).

Being the nearest to Changi we were the first to arrive, later to be joined by the rest of the captive troops. Food was still being issued by our cooks at this time and it wasn't so bad, but within a week food and water were in short supply, the Japs then issued rice. I soon found myself in the hospital, rice did not agree with our stomachs and dysentery and fever spread throughout Changi Prison. While I was in hospital, a big clean-up of the dead in Singapore was ordered and Divisional HQ was amongst the working party to go, brother Jack came to see me before he departed and gave me his ring and watch to look after for him, I didn't see him again for nearly a year.

In April, working parties started to be taken away, our clothes, boots and belongings were taken from us only to be left with a loin cloth. If we didn't bow to a Jap we received a good beating, at first we hit back but you then found yourself in the guard room where six or seven very friendly Japs would try their best to put you in hospital for a week. Another punishment was to stand you to attention in the hot sun with nothing on, the Japs would stub cigarettes out on your body as they passed, given no food or drink you just feinted, then you were put in the cooler (a bamboo cage), for days on end with just rice balls and salt.

The Sikhs and Bengalis from the Indian National Army were now helping the Japs guard us, if any goods were found being smuggled, they had the authority to give out beatings. This all had the desired effect and you tried to keep out of trouble, but you had to eat to live and smuggling food still went on.

The Roman Catholic Church in Changi

In June we were told to sign a non-escape form by the Japanese, we wouldn't sign, so they put the prisoners together with two machine guns on us. Four prisoners who had previously tried to escape were then shot, the Japs threatened to shoot all of us if we didn't sign. After standing in the sun all day with the threat of death, the offices told us to sign the form, but we wouldn't be bound to it, to escape was one's duty, (Major-General Shamei Fukuei ordered the shootings by firing squad, he was tried after the war and shot on the same spot as the prisoners).

Working parties had increased, and later in June my turn came, I was now feeling a lot better but the food and conditions at Changi were very bleak, rice and green leaves were our diet, the water had to be boiled and the sanitary conditions were terrible, so I was glad to get away. With a party of 600 others we were herded into cattle trucks and driven up Malaya and into Thailand. We were the first working party to arrive at Non Pladuk and were treated well, the food was a lot better than at Changi. Our first job was to clear a large area of trees and put up our attapi shelters, we were told a Japanese workshop was to be built there, then word got around that it was to be the start of a railway line to go 415kms to Burma.

As the Jap engineers started to arrive, a cook house was set up, Jimmy O'Conner was Divisional HQ Cook and he asked me to volunteer with him to help the Jap cooks. We settled down to making manjou cakes for the Japs, we had to grind the rice into a kind of flour by hitting it with a mallet, soya beans were then given the same treatment, then water was added to the rice making a kind of dough, the soya beans were then added and the Japs ate these raw.

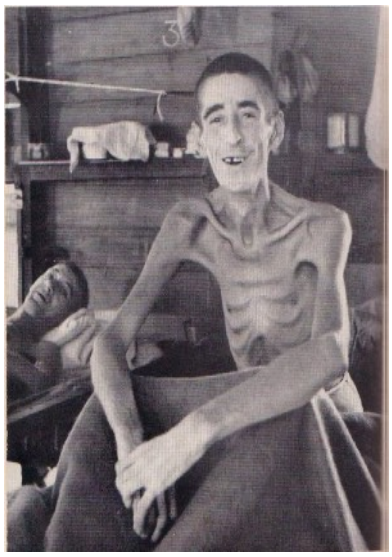
Jimmy had the idea of baking them like we would buns, he talked the Japanese cook into trying this, and they were an immediate success. The Japanese cook's name was Otto, he took us under his wing making about 1,000 manjou cakes a day using Jimmy's recipe.

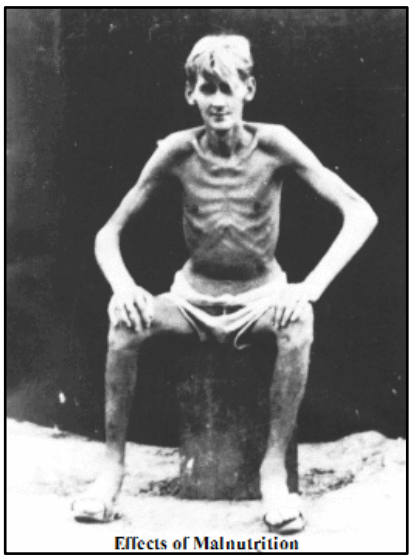
By October the now infamous Death Railway was under way and the guards now arriving were Koreans and Sikhs, they were a lot more sadistic then the Japs, being held under by the Japs for a long time, it was now their turn to serve out the punishment and this they did with gusto. A large bamboo cane was carried by the guards, this was nicknamed the 'bamboo interpreter', if they wanted to get the message across, you would feel it on the most sensitive parts of your body. Prisoners were passing through Non Pladuk to work further up the track, they were expected to clear virgin jungle with next to no food, dysentery, malaria and beriberi with hardly any tools and equipment. Prisoners were returning with various ailments but the large ulcers that ate their way into the legs were particularly nasty, the only way to stop the ulcer was to amputate the limb. Jimmy O'Conner developed bad sores on his arms and legs and the Japs decided he could no longer work in the bakery.

Brother Jack

Unfortunately, Jimmy was sent upcountry where I heard he died, (Jimmy did survive and had a stall on Yarmouth Market after the war). At Christmas 1942 I was told some of Divisional HQ had arrived, so bribing a Jap guard with manjoui cakes, I inquired about my brother Jack, I found him looking very smart, in the gear he had picked up from the Red Cross in Singapore, he looked just like an officer. Going back to Otto, my Jap cook, I explained, tongue in cheek, that my brother was an officer and he could cook, Otto was only too pleased to have an officer working under him, so Jack joined me in the bakery. We worked together for almost 18 months, Otto satisfied with our help was kind and appreciative, he was a good Jap, Jack and myself smuggling out cakes for the hospital, getting the odd clip from a guard here and there but nowhere near as bad as the lad's upcountry.

The Japs wanted the railway finished as soon as possible, so they introduced 'speedo'. The speedo was another way to make us work, 'no work, no food' the sick were not an exception, if you didn't work you didn't get fed. I have seen men so sick they crawled to work, just to receive their rice ration. This verse was written with the despair and disbelief of the situation.





Effects of Malnutrition

Nothing can justify the brutality of the Imperial Japanese Army on the Thailand-Burma Railway. However, it might be wise to mention that in the infamous Andersonville Prison operated by the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War, 12,912 of the 45,618

Union Prisoners died during it's fourteen months of operation. The death rate in the Concentration Camps operated by the British Army in South Africa during the Boer War were just as horrendous and they were mostly women and children.

Thai–Burma railway locations.

1.	**Nong Pladuk (Thailand) to Thanbyuzayat (Burma)**				**0 to 415 km.**
2.	Komma	2 km.	to	413 km.	
3.	Ban Pong	3 km.	to	412 km.	aka. Bhan or Bam Pong.
4.	Rukke	13 km.	to	402 km.	
5.	Taruanoi	25 km.	to	389 km.	aka. Talua, Tuarua.
6.	Tha Muang	39 km.	to	376 km.	aka. Tamuan(g), Tamoan.
7.	Tung Tung	41 km.	to	377 km.	
8.	Kanchanaburi	53 km.	to	362 km.	aka. Kanburi, Kamburi.
9.	Tha Markham	56 km.	to	359 km.	aka. Tamarkan, Tha Makhan.
10.	Chungkai	60 km.	to	355 km.	
11.	Wang Lan	69 km.	to	349 km.	aka. Wanran
12.	Tapon	78 km.	to	337 km.	
13.	Bankoo	88 km.	to	327 km.	aka. Ban Khao.
14.	Takilen	98 km.	to	346 km.	aka. Takiren, Tha Kilen.

15.	Arrowhill	108 km. to	307 km.	aka. Arruhiro, Wang Sung.
16.	Lum Sung	110 km. to	305 km.	
17.	Wampo	125 km. to	280 km.	aka. Wang Yai.
20.	Tha Sao	130 km. to	285 km.	aka. Tarsau, Tarsao, Tha Soe.
21.	Tonchan	139 km. to	276 km.	
22.	Tampi	148 km. to	267 km.	aka. Tampii, Tampie.
23.	Konyu	151 km. to	264 km.	aka. Kanyu, Kanu, Kannyu.
24.	Hellfire Pass	153 km. to	262 km.	aka. Konyu Cutting.
25.	Hintock	155 km. to	260 km.	aka. Hin Tok, Hintoku.
26.	Kinsaiyok	171 km. to	244 km.	aka. Kinsayok, Kinsayoke.
27.	Rin Tin	181 km. to	234 km.	aka. Rinten, Lin thin.
28.	Kuei	190 km. to	285 km.	aka. Kui Ye.
29.	Hindato	198 km. to	277 km.	
30.	Brankasi	207 km. to	208 km.	aka. Prang Kasi.
31.	Tha Kha-Nun	218 km. to	197 km.	aka. Tha Kanun, Takanun.
32.	Namajon	229 km. to	186 km.	aka. Namajo, Tamaryo.
33.	Tamuron Part	244 km. to	171 km.	
34.	Kriankri	250 km. to	165 km.	aka. Krieng Krai.
35.	Kurikonta	229 km. to	157 km.	
36.	Konkoita	263 km. to	142 km.	aka. Konkuita, Konikita.
37.	Taimonta	273 km. to	142 km.	aka. Timontar.
38.	Ni Thea	282 km. to	142 km.	aka. Nieke, Nikki Camp, Niki-Niki, Niki, Nike
39.	Songkurai	296 km. to	121 km.	aka. Sonkurai, Songkla.
40.	Changaraya	301 km. to	114 km.	
41.	Three Pagodas	306.5 km. to	108.5 km.	
42.	Payatonza	307 km. to	108 km.	aka. Paya-thanzu Taung. Paya anzu Taung.
43.	105-Kilo Camp	310 km. to	105 km.	aka. Aungganaung, Anganan.
44.	Anganan 2.	315 km. to	100 km.	aka. Regue.
45.	Kyando.	320 km. to	95 km.	aka. Kyondaw.
46.	Aparon	332 km. to	83 km.	aka. Apalon, Apparon.
47.	Aparain.	337 km. to	78 km.	aka. Apalaine.
48.	70-Kilo Camp	343 km. to	70 km.	aka. Mezalia, Masali, Mizale.
49.	Kami Mezali	349 km. to	66 km.	
50.	Ronshii	345 km. to	61 km.	

51.	Tanzum	358 km. to	57 km.	aka. Taungzan, Taunzan.
52.	55-Kilo Camp	360 km. to	55 km.	aka. Kilo-55 Camp, Khonkhan.
53.	Thanbaya	365 km. to	53 km.	aka. Tanbaya, Tambaya.
54.	Anakwin	369 km. to	45 km.	aka. Anankwin, Anarkwan.
55.	Bekitan	375 km. to	40 km.	aka. 40-Kilo, Betetaung.
56.	30-Kilo Camp	385 km. to	30 km.	aka, Reptu, Retphaw, Rephaw.
57.	Konokoi	391 km. to	23 km.	aka. Konnoki.
58.	Rabao	396 km. to	18 km.	aka. 18-Kilo Hlepauk.
59	Tenoku	401 km. to	13 km.	
60	Wagale	406 km. to	9 km.	
61.	**Thanbyuzayat**	**415 km. to**	**0.**	

Distances between stations on the Thai-Burma Railway.

Those men from the Borough we lost on the Burma Railway

Thomas EFFORD Civilian 24 November 1944. Muntock POW Camp

Robert Charles George FODEN Gunner 1789402 Royal Artillery 51 Coast Observer Detachment. 27 November 1943. Thanbyuzayat Mayanmar.

George Albert GALE Private 5111657 The Kings Regiment (Liverpool) 13th Battalion. 16 March 1943. Rangoon Memorial.

Leonard Frederick JARVIS Private 14218478 Royal Norfolk Regiment 2nd Battalion. 26 March 1945. Taukkyan War Cemetery.

Walter George JOHNSON Corporal 6099144 The Queens Royal Regiment 1st Battalion. 20 December 1943. Taukkyan War Cemetery.

Walter KEEBLE Private 6021172 The Suffolk Regiment 4th Battalion. 21 September 1944. En-route, Missing at Sea.

Albert KENDALL Corporal 6286462 The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) 2nd Battalion. 2 February 1945. Rangoon Memorial.

Leslie George LLEWELLYN Private 6020074 The Suffolk Regiment 4th Battalion. 15 September 1943. Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery

Leslie Arthur George MAPES Lance Corporal 6013785 Royal Norfolk Regiment 2nd Battalion. 24 January 1945. Taukkyan War Cemetery.

George Edward POTTER Private 6019255 The Suffolk Regiment 4th Battalion. 21 September 1944. Konkuta. Ivor Robert HUGHES Signalman 2590580. Royal Corps of Signals 18th Division. 20 August 1943. Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery.

Edward Francis SMITH Lance Corporal 6020758 The Suffolk Regiment 5th Battalion. 14 August 1943. Chungkai Cemetery.

Compiled by Norman Bambridge
Basildon Borough Heritage Society
February 2019.