

THE 'DEATH RAILWAY'

The Burma Railway was a 258 mile railway between Bangkok in Thailand and Rangoon in Burma (now called Myanmar). It was also known as the 'Death Railway'. It was built by the Japanese during World War 2, using about 300,000 Asian labourers and 60,000 allied prisoners of war (POW).

The British had considered building a rail link between Rangoon in Burma and Singapore via an existing line in Thailand in the 1880's and again in 1906. Their 1906 survey concluded that the dense jungle covered mountains, together with one of the world's heaviest annual rainfalls, made the project very unappealing. The engineering difficulties and the likely cost in lives overruled any advantages that could be gained over the existing ocean route. They dismissed the project as being impossible.

In 1942 Japanese forces invaded Burma from Thailand and seized the country from British control. To maintain their forces in Burma, the Japanese had to bring supplies and troops to Burma by a long sea route through the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea. This route was unsatisfactory as it was vulnerable to attack by Allied submarines. The alternative was a single track railway from Bangkok to Rangoon. Originally they intended to use about 250,000 Asian labourers to construct it. After relatively easy victories in Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia, they had a large pool of skilled military personnel.

The first POWs from Changi Jail in Singapore were sent north to Thailand in June 1942 to build the railway base at Nong Pladuk. It consisted of workshops, stores and a large prison compound. Changi Jail became a transit camp for the railway.

The intention was to connect Ban Pong with Thanbyuzayat through the Three Pagodas Pass. Construction started at both the Thai and Burma ends at roughly the same time. Most of the construction materials for the line, including tracks and sleepers, were brought from dismantled branches of the Federated Malay States Railway Network, and from the Dutch East Indies.

One of the POWs, Charles Steel, wrote the following (concealed) letter to his wife from Ban Pong, Thailand:

We marched to Singapore Station... on 22 Oct. and were loaded 27 to a steel closed railway van. We left that night and after 86 hours in the train, arrived at Bang Pong...about 64 kilos from Bangkok, the capital. During that time we passed through Jahore, and the whole of the Malay peninsular. We had an average of under two meals of rice a day but fortunately carried some Red Cross tinned rations with us. It was an amazing experience, albeit very uncomfortable.... We knew when we got to Thailand by the abrupt change in (native clothing).

We are temporary occupants of some flooded sheds. Water is over our boot tops and one sleeps on a double platform down each side of the shed. Vermin and filth is everywhere.... Food is atrocious.

Lieutenant Colonel Toosey, the senior British Officer, protested that the Geneva Convention did not allow POWs to do work that would assist the enemy. Later he accepted the inevitable and cut the best deal possible with the Japanese. He organised a command structure and made sure everyone knew their duties. He made a point of being smartly turned out when he addressed his men. He managed to maintain a reasonable working relationship with the Japanese in spite of receiving regular beatings.

A Japanese commander addressed assembled prisoners:

You are the remnants of a decadent white race and fragments of a rabble army. The railway will go through even if your bodies are to be used as sleepers.

Asian labourers and Allied POWs slaved in some of the earth's densest jungle. Two Japanese engineering regiments totalling 12,000 men controlled the construction, generally with extreme brutality and indifference to the plight of their workers. At any cost the line had to be completed in the time decreed by Tokyo. Without machinery, they had to bridge rivers, build precarious trestles along dizzy ravines, hack through rock choked passes and drive piles in malarious swamps. About 40 camps were built along the route at 5-10 mile intervals.

On 17th October 1943, the two sections of the line met about 11 miles south of the Three Pagoda Pass at Konkuita in Kanchanaburi Province. Those left to maintain the line suffered from the appalling living conditions as well as Allied air raids.

The most famous portion of the railway is Bridge 277 over the Mae Klaung River. (It was only renamed the Khwae Yai river in 1960.) It was immortalised by Pierre Boulle in his book and film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. However the design of the bridge bore no resemblance to that depicted in the film. Nor did the film show accurately the conditions experienced by the POWs.

Ten concrete piers were to support eleven 20-metre steel spans, which gave a length of 238 metres. To allow for high water during the monsoon season, a further nineteen 5-metre wooden trusses were constructed on the northern bank which was prone to flooding. The steel trusses were plundered from Dutch railway stores in Java and arrived in Tamarkan along with an ancient excavator and other heavy equipment. The Japanese were ill equipped to undertake this very demanding engineering project.

The wooden bridge over the Mae Klaung river was finished in February 1943. The concrete and steel bridge, a few hundred yards upstream, was finished a few months later. Both bridges were used by the Japanese for about two years. In the meantime the United States gained air and sea supremacy after victories at Midway and Guadalcanal.

The Allies made at least seven attempts to destroy the bridges. However, in April 1945, bomber crews from the US 458th Heavy Bombardment Group finally succeeded in destroying them. The steel bridge has been repaired since then and is still in use today.

The Japanese High command realised that they could no longer win the war. However, by refusing to retreat from Burma and other land conquests, they hoped to prevent foreign invasion of their country, and the humiliation of 'unconditional surrender'.

Lieutenant Colonel Toosey worked courageously to ensure that as many Allied POWs as possible would survive. He did everything possible to delay and sabotage the construction of the bridges without endangering his men. For example he arranged for large numbers of white ants to be collected to eat the wooden structures, and ensured that the concrete was mixed badly.

Around 90,000 Asian labourers and 16,000 allied prisoners died as a direct result of the railway project. The dead POWs included 6,318 British personnel, 2,815 Australians, 2,490 Dutch, about 356 Americans and a smaller number of Canadians.

The graves of the people who died a brutal death were transferred from camp burial grounds and solitary sites along the railway to three war cemeteries after the war, except for the Americans who were repatriated. The main POW cemetery is in the city of Kanchanaburi where 6,982 POWs are buried. There is a smaller cemetery outside the city with 1,750 graves. There are several museums dedicated to those who lost their lives.

After the war the Railway was in too poor a state for civilian use. Reconstruction was carried out in stages between 1949 and 1958. A 130 km/80 mile section is still in use today. There were plans in the 1990s to rebuild the complete railway; but so far these plans have not come to fruition.

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