

The Bridge on the River Kwai - January, 2011

I first saw the real **Bridge on the River Kwai** in Kanchanaburi just west of Bangkok in 1982 while on assignment for Thai Air.



There were few tourists then. There were actually two bridges during the war—a plain, temporary wooden structure and this nearby permanent concrete-and-steel job. Neither were with the familiar Roman chariot wheel width, but rather a narrow gauge, reflecting the Japanese mentality of the time.



I immediately was seduced by the incredible beauty and tranquility—at juxtaposed opposites to the sadistic brutality of the Imperial Japanese Army, the engineers and the Korean guards. This is the magnificent view POWs had from atop Chung Kai Cutting at which scores worked and died.



In the 16 months building the now famous bridge and the 250 miles of railway to Burma, 16,000 POWS and 100,000 coolies died horrible deaths by beatings, starvation, beriberi, pellagra, malaria, dysentery, typhus and cholera. Many lost limbs from tropical sores. The Asian coolies, with no one to coordinate sanitation and health, died like the flies that carried the cholera which swept them away by the thousands.

The square sections replaced round segments gently removed by RAF B-24s in 1945. Patched shrapnel gouges on the concrete are visible. The movie was filmed in

Sri Lanka, the Alex Guinness character very (very, very) loosely based on Colonel Phil Toosey, head of the adjoining POW camp and a genuine hero. Some scenes were modeled on events. The bridge was stolen by the Japanese from Java.



That extreme dichotomy—beauty and the beast—galvanized me and I return regularly, exploring the rail bed and, indeed, this entire fascinating region rich in history, pre-history, flora, fauna and natural attractions. But there's ghosts everywhere. The same red sunset every night they, too, witness. The same lazy buzz of cicadas, the same coo of doves, the same rustle of bamboo. There's ghosts....



6,982 lie here, not far away, in one of three POW cemeteries. I don't see them anymore, the notes. Their writers are too old now to visit. I'd see them left on graves, always with a flower. "Dad, I didn't know you, but I always missed you. Your daughter—" The most heart breaking? "Ed, when you didn't come home I married. He was a good man and we had two daughters and I now have four grandchildren. But I never forgot you. Myrtle." But I never forgot you...in her '70s she traveled all the way from England...dreams of lives that could have been...echoes of *Eleanor Rigby*....



They were all so young, like Myrtle's Ed, in his early '20s. Nowhere on the planet sobers me so as this cemetery. I was born just 13 months after this horror, for this generation, ended. And mine—through sheer luck of the draw—has enjoyed the greatest Golden Age in history. Do I feel gratitude to those who fought those German and Japanese fucks? You betcha. I've never met a vet since I reached awareness that I didn't thank for making my life possible. These young soldiers were miserable slaves...at an age I was at university partying and then getting established...and I've been able to live an interesting life, doing what I want. I feel so damned...lucky. So undeserving....



They died in droves all along the line but some places were real killers. The Chung Kai Cutting was one—cutting the rail bed through this high limestone spur with basic tools. I purposely didn't rotate this photo because to do so might distort, squash, the 80 foot height. The name Hellfire Pass further down the line says it all about that worst cutting of all. At least 700—69 beaten to death—died in one five kilometer stretch. The hellfire was lit from torches while they slaved all night in the worst section, very similar to this picture but only longer.



“Drill-and-tap” men would sledgehammer holes for TNT. To empty the bores of limestone dust they reached in with a long wire with a disk on the end. I found one of these while exploring deserted, overgrown sections of the railroad. To hold this in your hand, as with the various sized spikes and bridge bolts and bars one finds, is to hold objects radiating such dark and wretched vibrations they burn. *“The last person to hold this was a POW slave living in abject misery and well could have died here,”* the voice in your head screams.



Much of the railway was ripped up after the war. Thailand and Burma are blood enemies, Burma having sacked the Siamese capital city of Ayutthaya 250 years ago. The rails you find all over Thailand used as telephone poles—a thoroughly perplexing sight when first seen. ‘Krupp 1896’ some say.



Unlike Germany, which finally acknowledged and seeks atonement for its own barbarism—making it possible to forgive—the Japanese stolidly, stoically, stubbornly,

ignorantly and arrogantly refuse to do so. And I blame the men. I've been to over 60 countries and I've never seen such an enormous gulf between male and female sub-cultures. Generally speaking, the women are the finest, most sensitive and feminine on the planet; the men, the most ignorant, clod-minded, arrogant and racist.



When I see Japanese tourists, like these asses, on the bridge laughing and happily snapping pictures, one part of me is so disgusted I want to throw them into the Kwai. Yet, another part can't blame them. The historical fact of Japanese utter abrogation of humanitarianism is swept under the futon by their own government, their own leaders, their own media and education system.



In effect, the male elders are keeping what they did—the raping and murder and numerous massacres they delighted in from Nanking to Manila to Hong Kong to Singapore and many more—from the women like they have always done. The WW-II generation responsible doesn't think they did anything wrong. But how can they when Hirohito himself—with whom they identified so firmly they'd die for, as did the Kamikazes—wasn't prosecuted? MacArthur fucked up. Another—unsullied—member of the royal family should have replaced him and he should have swung with Tojo. It's a

highly complex, deeply self-brainwashed culture living in profound denial, with the Japanese abhorrence to losing face playing a role. How does one forgive, trust and respect a nation like that?



Anyway, let's finish with a shot of a pretty Japanese girl. She's an innocent. But him? He doesn't know it but he's wrapped in the male conspiracy of ignorance, arrogance and silence imposed from above. The Japanese, by refusing to recognize and deal with their enormous historic evil streak, leave it lurking just below the surface, waiting to erupt, to repeat itself.