

March 14, 2011

I was back from Laos to The Big Mango, as we call Bangkok, for a day before abandoning The Dragon Lady to shop while I returned to Kanchanaburi on the River Kwai (scroll down to the Bridge on the River Kwai Blah Blah for Tuesday, January 25). I was invited back by **Sir Rod Beattie for a personal field trip of little known sections of the abandoned Death Railway bed, plus Neolithic sites** he discovered in his explorations. He's tramped and mapped the entire railbed, both sections still in use but mostly abandoned, outside of the off-limits Burmese section.



As always, I had a limo convertible pick me up at the mini-bus station.



And it was back to the serene Jolly Frog Guesthouse on the Kwai bank.



In a country with cheap prices, “Kanburi” beats them all. That’s my trusty hammock. My neat, clean and tastefully decorated double with a/c was \$10. If you’re a backpacker on a shoestring, they have singles with fan sharing the can for \$2.60. At the restaurant a huge, delicious, breaded fillet with chips cost me the same amount. I’ve always preferred unique, relaxed guesthouses to stiff, formal, cookie-cutter 5-star accomo.



“Get Drunk for 10 Baht.” That’s 30 cents a drink. No wonder this is a backpacker fave. This is Thailand. You want to start a bar? Set chairs and tables on the sidewalk and line up your booze. Voila. You’re in biz.



Kanburi often subs as Bangkok in movies because The Big Mango's traffic makes it all but impossible to shoot road and street scenes. Besides being one of Thailand's most interesting town/cities, traffic ain't a problem here and they're cooperative. A producer asked me to scout general locations for *Thai Gold* and sequel *Opium Dream* so I jumped down a day early. Here's a few shots.



If this ain't debauched adventurer Lee River's home as described in the books, nothing is.



The large covered market. A chase scene crashes through here.



This is a good start on Chinatown where the sleazy brothel Lee & Tysee hide is.





There's even the Kwai to substitute for Bangkok's Chao Phrya River.





Lots of great alleys for the chase scenes.





Fabulous town with tons of character. If you've got a few million bucks and are interested in launching a franchise of adventure-thriller moves, lemme know. Have you ever heard of an adventure movie *not* making money, and lots of it? I can't think of any. It's one genre seemingly guaranteed to be a winner. The screenplays are on this

website.



But the real reason I'm back is to take Sir Rod Beattie up on his exciting invitation. One of Rod's roles is as manager of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Thailand. An Aussie, he's responsible for the respectful care taken of POW war graves. When I first saw this cemetery in 1982 it was overgrown and neglected. Not since Rod took over.



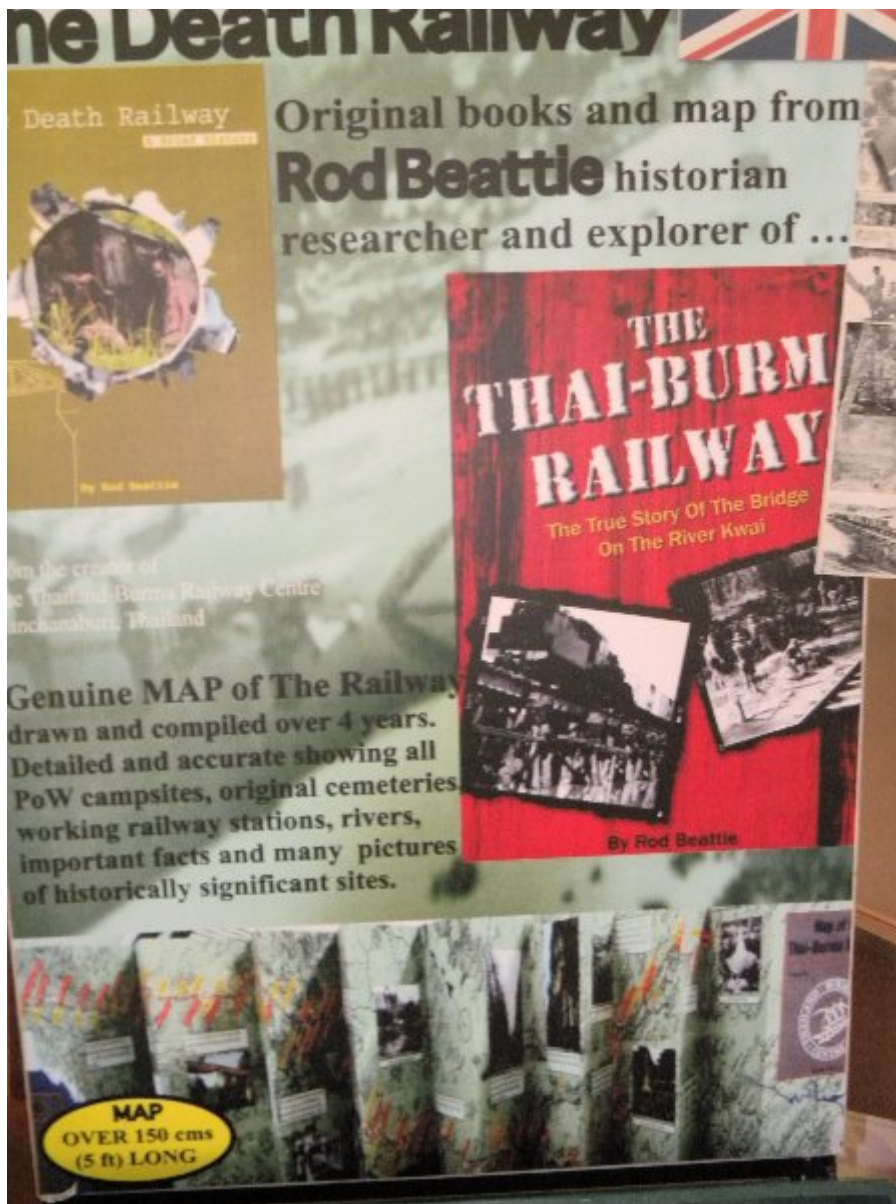
His other—and separate passion—is as builder and Director of Research of his museum which displays thousands of artifacts he found while exploring the Thai length of the abandoned railway bed. So impressive is it in keeping alive the memory of the Japanese colossal war crime against mainly Brit, Aussie and Dutch POWs, as well as coolies, that he was knighted by the Dutch queen. 16,000 POWs and 100,000 coolie slaves died. Lest we forget.







It's the major museum on the horrific experience of building the railway. In the earlier Bridge on the River Kwai Blah Blah I described finding a wire-like device used to clear dust out of the holes hammered into the limestone for TNT. These are two. At the ends are quarter-sized disks.



Rod told me: “What was I to do with all the stuff I found and everything I’d learned? If I wrote a book, 5000 people would read it and that’ll be it. Instead, I decided to open a museum.” Well, he did write a book as well. Two actually. *The Death Railway* and *The Thai-Burma Railway: The True Story of the Bridge on the River Kwai*. He’s poured his life into this magnificent passion.



Rod studying a silver regimetal ladle just donated to the museum.



Learning of my own explorations along the railway since 1982, he offered to take me on a field trip. This was taken back of his museum and are replicas of the steel cars that carried POWs up from Changi Prison in Singapore and Indonesia in 1942 and '43.



Down in the museum's "dungeon," as he calls it, are Neolithic tools, bones and pottery shards he found while exploring the overgrown railway bed. All he strictly considers are property of the Thai people and he's holding them until he finds an archaeologist interested in excavating the sites at which time all will go to an appropriate Thai museum or university.



His greatest discovery. As near as I can determine, it's Iron Age but it would need thermoluminescent dating to establish its age closer.



Tools and pottery shards. Many shards had designs.



I was impressed with the intelligent planning that went into creating this stone axe.



It fits in the hand comfortably.



We spent the day in his land rover. He told me that this quiet country road is one of the few original sections left that the Japanese used while invading Burma from Thailand.



The rest looks like this. A modern highway.



This point on this quiet stream was once the center of an enormous POW camp, though you'd never know unless told. It's now surrounded by a jungle of beautiful coconut and other tropical trees. Nearby is a Boy Scout camp.



Looking back is another adjoining section of original invasion road, running through the camp. You see the light leading to a clearing to the left of the ivy covered trees on the left? There is an unmarked mass grave for some of the thousands of coolies who died.



This is a railway section he cleared halfway up the highway to the Burmese border and is tramped by visitors from a nearby museum he was also instrumental in building and which overlooks Hellfire Pass, the deepest cutting on the railway. All of this was opened with basic steel tools.



Hellfire Pass—the most famous site on the entire railway. It's so called because of the torch light used as the POWs were forced to work all night digging this huge cutting. Scores died, often beaten to death by sadistic guards. A memorial plaque is at left. This place never fails to move me and I've been here several times.



But this long cutting is unknown to all but local farmers and Rod. He's in the process of clearing it too—something he does single handedly. . Throughout he interpreted the sites for me—where bamboo ladders were located because of piles of detritus at the top of the slag ridges formed along either side of the cutting; why some rocks were broken down to football size (for individual carrying); while other were left as boulders (which could be pry-barred over ledges).



This shot is deceiving because of a camera's failure to capture depth. We're in a deep gully which a wooden trestle once spanned. Rod pointed out concrete footings, rusted 10-inch bridge spikes and railway tie dogspikes. He scrambled up and down these near vertical ridges (the one I'm shooting from was vertical) like a spider monkey.



On the very site of the Hintok POW camp was where Rod had built a lovely house overlooking the Kwai. But to support his museum, he sold it and it was reborn as the attractive Hintok River Resort. <http://www.hintokrivercamp.com/> (And as an old travel writer I rarely give free advertising....) Here and in environs he found many Neolithic tools.



It's one of the most unique resort experiences in the world because of its location—which is also close to the Hintok cutting—Hellfire Pass. In this peaceful setting it's difficult to image the brutality that took place here in the 1940s. Accommodation is in safari-style tents.



Inside a tent—very similar to the one The Dragon Lady and I stayed in while on safari in Kenya a couple of years ago. And a damn site better than what the POWs had to live in—lined up elbow-to-elbow in rows sleeping on split bamboo in elongated bamboo huts.



This innocuous sink hole in the middle of the camp is the entrance to one of the limestone caves. He excavated the first 2-3 meters which was full of detritus such as broken toothbrushes and such from the POW days. It was in the next foot or so that he found the tools, terracotta shards and so on.



At another similar sink hole 150 feet away was other POW detritus but because it was next to the then hospital, he conjectures that everything found in this one was from dead men. At a third and larger entrance on a limestone hill adjacent he was able to explore 200 meters back and it's where he found the large pot. He identified a fourth Neolithic site at a spring running through the property and spilling into the Kwai. Both sink holes extend back some distance, sometimes requiring crawling, other times tall enough for him to walk.



It was an enriching day and many thanks to Sir Rod. As one fascinated with the railway for three decades, I found his discoveries, knowledge and insights enthralling. In return, it's my pleasure to sponsor him into The Explorers Club. One doesn't discover a major explorer like Rod everyday. He probably doesn't think of himself as such, but he's an archaeologist, and a significant one—and I'm speaking more of his massive railway research more than his Neolithic interests.



And the dawn came up like Ol' Thunder...an inside joke for fans of protagonist Lee Rivers...and it's actually sunset over the Mekhong...but with my adventure with Sir Rod the sun sets on our adventures in Asia this season. After several more dinners and fetes with our many fascinating friends in Bangkok—no one has an ordinary background—we flew back to the Great White North (via Tokyo's Narita airport just three days before the devastating earthquake).



However, I wisely stopped over in White Rock, south of Vancouver—this is the million dollar view off my Uncle Don’s and Lori’s deck—sending Su ahead to shovel the walks and my truck out of the snowbank.



On the pier at White Rock. Don gave me my first job out of high school in '64 painting new homes (a summer highlighted by seeing the Beatles perform at Empire Stadium) and I lived with him and my late Aunt Dot when I switched to Simon Fraser University in '66.



I came home to this. Didn't Su do a great job shoveling the walkway? That's my gal. (At least I think it is...? It's a worry every year when we explore Southeast Asia. I'm never sure if I brought the same one back. All those Asians look alike to me....)



She did neglect to dig out the Emerald Julian. Sorry St. Julian. Your little peter is still locked in ice.



I'll end this blah blah with an artsy-fartsy shot. It'll be the last green I see for awhile although spring is in the air and I'm already enjoying it. What I missed about living in Bangkok fulltime in the '80s was the lack of seasons (though I've always absolutely hated our Canuck five months of winter). But now I experience just enough to enjoy. Cold—like snow—are four letter words to me.....