

Bobbing Beyond Bangkok's

Bombs & Bullets

February 8 - April 7, 2014



I ducked the fireworks in Bangkok by ducking back into the Jolly Frog on the River Kwai where I enjoyed two, delicious, unbroken months of writing and finished laying down a 72,000 word first draft. I also dropped 23 pounds (three more to go) since New Years to make me a smaller target.



I was so happy about both I went out and celebrated by having a couple of drinks.



But we're jumping ahead. During The Dragon Lady's last week before eagerly flying back February 8th to ICU and the -40 she missed so much there was lots of action. I've been here through 2-3 coups and coup attempts over the years and if not within clanking sounds of the tanks, you wouldn't know anything was amiss. The smiling Thais just go on smiling and living life.



And so did we, taking in a 2.5 hours spa at one of The Big Mango's best. Two masseuses oiled, soaped and kneaded us into nirvana in this private room for two. Try finding this for \$160CAN total back in North America or Europe.



And we dined. One always eats in Bangkok, the food is so fabulous. "Thai" restaurants in North America only rarely taste remotely Thai. Naturally, we enjoyed the fabulous garden of our favorite restaurant, Cabbages and Condoms.



We got together with the Ol' Gang, natch. Three authors here with a total book count exceeding forty. Three of these old friends have jumped over to Canada to join us on two different canoe adventures.



Ummmmm. Pond snails. Delicious. You suck out the meat, ptewing out the little trap door.



Out for another dinner with movie guys Kiwi sheep bonker Kevin and Muskeg Lars.



I'm often getting email asking if I'm okay because of what they see on TV. Really, this is the greatest danger I encountered and it was back in Kanchanaburi. This nasty got into my room in the very early morning through a loose ceiling tile and began buzzing around like a Stuka dive bomber.. They can not only swell a man's arm to twice its size but kill a child.



I also had a gecko but the Thais consider them good luck as they eat insects. Mine was gay. I know because he lived in my closet. I called him Liberace. Kanchanaburi just had its Nude Miss Kwai Contest. It's unfortunate they call it this because "Kwai" means "water buffalo" but then this is a country where the biggest mall chain is called The Big C, there's a shoe store chain named Athlete's Foot and there was a major hotel shaped like a ship sailing into an iceberg. But the girls were succulent! Here's my two favorites, a Thai and a Chinese, both real juiceburgers.



Huh?



Sorry, damn camera is still acting up....



Here's a shot of Thai pussy though. "Stop that! You hurting kitty!" When she yanked the black cat's tail - it was oblivious - I ran for my camera. But *that* was the picture I wish I had grabbed.



I'd write in the morning and have the rest of the day off. Birdman, researching a book on Thai oil massages - I'm serious, he gets up to five a day - visited. I'm thinking of changing his river name to Lube Rob. He leaves a grease trail wherever he goes but, boy, is he relaxed.



There's always interesting people passing through the Jolly Frog. This Kraut couple were in the 12th year of their around-the-world pedal. They brought two dogs with them. In Asia that's called carrying fresh food. Another couple, Frogs, had a 1974 VW Westphalia camper, a year older than our Krautcan, and were doing the same thing.



On a weekend break, I joined Sir Rodney Beattie and his uber railway researcher Andrew Snow from the Death Railway Museum for two days of GPS mapping way up the Death Railway line.



We met this chatty little guerilla from the Karen Liberation Union which is stuck in the No Man's Land between Thailand and Burma. He knew what Sir Rod's metal detector was and explained they used them to locate and dig up Burmese army mines, which they'd then moved onto *their* path, he laughed.



We used it on this freshly cultivated field which was the site of one of the POW camps Andrew's father, who survived the ordeal, stayed. I asked, "What are your thoughts being here Andrew?" "I've been here several times now so it's not the same, but the first few times I'd go off by myself on the edge of the field and imagine him being here, seeing the same mountains he was seeing and so on."



"My dad walked down this road every day...." The road is next to the field. Since *The Railway Man* came out the museum has been getting a lot of emails saying basically, "I always wondered why my dad was such a miserable, mean drunk and now I understand!" Andrew's dad died when he was still a child.



On an earlier scan they discovered an iron spear point, no doubt from the many battles between the Thais and Burmese in days gone by, but pickings were lean this time. The clamshell I found would have been POW food. The tiny shells were spread through a wide area of the field and appear ancient.



The shallow trench was the location of the line going through this palm oil field. It's being covered over and in a year or two will have disappeared. Nearby, though, Rod had made an earlier discovery which took me totally by surprise. On a high bank above the River Kwai there was Neolithic pottery, recognizable by the distinctive cord design, scattered liberally around.



The Hoabinhian Sumatralith on the right is only the second that I've found. The Hoabinhian culture of mainland Southeast Asia largely overlaid the Mesolithic Era here. The other tool is a crude cutting tool. And Neolithic potsherds - all surface finds!



The pretty town of Thong Pha Phum is a living legacy from the Death Railway. 200,000 coolies, mostly Tamils imported from India by the Brits to work the rubber plantations of Malaya, were gang-pressed by the Japanese to slave on the railway. 100,000 of them died, mainly from cholera outbreaks that raged through their camps without the organized latrines like the POWs had, and unmarked mass graves dot the entire course of the 250-mile railway. Many of the survivors were repatriated after the war but some stayed and this now prosperous town became their focus.



Their East Indian and POW background is written onto their faces - and that of much of the town. We couldn't believe the prices. We guzzled four quarts of ice cold beer after a long, hot day whacking through jungle and a big meal of whole fish, green curry, rice and veggies and it came for the three of us to all of \$20.



We bounced through rough country in Rod's Land Rover to reach some sites.



They showed me Sugano's Cutting - arguably the most dramatic and massive cutting on the entire railway. It's a bench cutting, to the left the slope continues falling into the River Kwai itself. It absolutely blew me away. I had no idea it existed and seemed to go on forever.



Sir Rod calls it Sugano's Cutting after Renichi Sugano, the then-young Japanese professional photographer who shot the entire railway. Sir Rod took him to the cutting and Sugano was gracious enough to donate 300 b/w shots to the Death Railway Museum. Here's a couple of his shots of the cutting itself being constructed.





Next January Sir Rod and I are organizing a 10ish day cost sharing canoe trip from near the top of the Kwai to Kanchanaburi where the famous bridge is, staying at resorts, and taking in both the death railway (like Sugana's Cutting) and archaeological sites along the way, including museums and old Khmer empire ruins. It'll include an authentic day's dig in Hintok Cave as you'll see later in this Blah Blah for we made more discoveries! And we know there's more down there. If you're interested in joining us, let me know and I'll keep you informed as to progress in planning. This is the beautiful Kwai now...



...and then. The current is so strong our trip will be more of a float than a paddle - and no portages!



We visited innumerable sections of the old rail bed that I hadn't discovered in my solo research, greatly expanding my knowledge. Here Rod clears jungle overgrowth in one cutting into which a boulder had rolled.





This near pristine section ran on for miles. All this ballast had to be carried up from the river 200-300 feet below and a quarter of a mile away, or broken by sledgehammer from the surrounding solid matrix.



But every couple of hundred yards it was cut by canyons. Andrew's dad worked this section too.



Some were so deeply cut they would have required the construction of four- and five-tiered bridges. It took nimble scrambling for us to descend and ascend each in turn. You can see the bridge footings.





The neat stonework sometimes looked uncannily like archaeological ruins of old buildings in the South Pacific or Peru. So tightly tamped was the ballast that 70 years later there's little or no sagging or slumping. This is the nose of a section of line where it drops off into a canyon.



A lone monk - squatting with his back to camera - chose months ago to set up his retreat right on the nose of another section, which is way off in the middle of spare, bamboo jungle. Here, a friend is visiting who supplies him. The monk reported that at night he "sees ghosts." No wonder....





On another expedition just days after finishing the first draft, Rod and I saddled up and galloped off for our long awaited return to the Death Cave with oxygen. Along the way, he stopped to show me the third authentic site he chose for use in the filming of *The Railway Man*. This cutting, now overgrown, was used for the night scene where the POWs slaved by torch light.



Arriving at Hintok River Camp, the oxygen which owner Khun Suparek procured and had delivered was waiting.



So was our usual comfortable, complimentary accommodation, which is where our upcoming canoe brigade will spend two nights as well (though then we'll have to pay of course). We got our digging clothes on.



Sharpened the ever present machete.



And it was back through the rubber plantation. I don't know what happened...when I ogled, uh, noticed all those beautiful bare breasted native girls in those old *National Geographic* magazines when I was a kid, which got me doing all these fun things as a supposed grown up, I imagined I'd have them as bearers too. But, no, I end up with boys as coolies. Oh well. Sir Rod - take note for next time. The white thing they're portaging is line so we could lay a trail back into the cave as we went, so we wouldn't get lost, or if our flashlights, including our backups, failed.



And back through the bamboo jungle...



...and the vertical descent into the round pit and the staging level of the entrance to the Death Cave itself.



Anticipation was high as we geared up. The entrance down a steep grade into the first large gallery is behind Rod. It's connected to another gallery by a crawl space and that has been our target for three years and for Sir Rod much longer. Years ago he had discovered a burial jar with remains in the first gallery and after crawling through the narrow tunnel to two, had spotted a second, collapsed. But he had to retreat because of the bad air and wisely didn't want to return alone. Then we took up the quest together. Our first year, high CO₂ levels drove us out and we weren't able to procure O₂ until this year. Last year we were able to work the first gallery. Just two months ago CO₂ levels were okay (but not perfect) without apparatus and Rod, The Dragon Lady and I continued excavations and dug test holes all over and returned with a few Neolithic potsherds.



We entered a short way into the first large gallery where we knelt to access the situation. CO2 levels were at an all time high - due to recent pre-monsoon downpours which picked up CO2 in the decaying vegetation and soil which it carried into the cave system. Worse - there was something wrong with our O2 kits! Despite cranking the flow valves up to the max, we both were breathing to the bottom of our lungs, not getting enough oxygen! After eight minutes we aborted the mission. (Note Rod's sweaty shirt; it was hot and humid as hell. That's alliteration. We writers love it.)



We scrambled out and recovered in the staging area. My CO₂ headache - something I'm quite familiar with from this cave - quickly subsided. And we tried to figure out what went wrong...? We discovered that the little, round, plastic valves on the sides of the clear plastic mouthpieces were missing, thus allowing CO₂ to be sucked in as we breathed. Oh, well, there's always another year, when we have the problem rectified - and we'll go down in the middle of the dry season when the CO₂ is at its lowest.



We returned the next day with a candle. Rod's standing at the entrance. As he slowly lowered it the flame reduced until...



...it extinguished. Note the smoke drifting away from the cave. Sometimes the smoke would still, then bend again, as the cave breathed.



Now with time unexpectedly on our hands we decided to check if there was a problem with CO₂ in Hintok Cave, the scene of our 169 Paleolithic finds over the years. It's a good thing we did because we hit paydirt! Well, Sir Rod did, because he descended on the rope and I acted as safety man on the surface. At the bottom he discovered that water flowing into the cave last monsoon had washed mud away in a section we hadn't completely excavated and he came up with this wild boar's jaw.



Most interesting were teeth marks on two sides of the bone, as if chewed. We conjectured that it was done by the owner's dog in the Paleolithic. This turned out to be the smaller of the finds though!



Rod came up with these 11 tools and a potsherd from a large, flat and low pot! It also included, far right, the first microliths found on the site. Microliths were the last innovation in stone tool evolution before the advent of the Bronze Age.



The latest Stone Age finds include the most perfect - and absolutely classic - Hoabinhian sumatralith we've found. They're only in Southeast Asia where the Hoabinhian culture the tool style spawned largely overlaid the Mesolithic Era, as I mentioned earlier. You can recognize a sumatralith because one side is smooth river pebble like this above...



...while the opposite side is flaked completely away but for a bit of the smooth river pebble that is left wrapping around one end and a bit onto the flaked side, like it does here on the right by my thumb. That dates it to 8,000-4,000BC, even older than Madame Su, and brings the number of finds we've brought up out of that little cave to 181. We're saving continued digging until we pass through here on our canoe trip next January, giving participants a genuine archaeological experience. There's no doubt there's more down there and they haven't been seen by a human eye in at least 6,000 years. Participants people are going to have the experience of a lifetime.



The sumatralith is such a classic that it'll be specially mounted so visitors to the soon-to-be-opened Hintok River Camp Museum can view both sides. Construction starts this week with interior walls being knocked down and the building extended to the front, doing away with the open foyer and veranda. It'll be open for ANZAC Day the third week in April, which is commemorated at nearby Hellfire Pass. I just signed off on the display boards I wrote but, alas, I won't be here to help lay out the museum, but Rod's the expert here in any case. Worst - I'll have to wait a year before I see the results of all our fun getting (literally) down and dirty these last years! Here's three examples of our display boards. I wrote the Stone Age ones; Rod, the POW history. I can't embed the pdfs so I have to include them as links.

[Panel%202%20The%20Story%20of%20Hintok%20River%20Camp%20_second%20revision_%20_2](#)

[Panel%205%20Timeline%20of%20Early%20Man%20in%20Thailand%20_revised_%20_2](#)

[Panel%2014%20How%20do%20we%20know%20_revised](#)



The two ten-year-old explorers in their sixties celebrated appropriately with a fine old single malt from the very north of Scotland. The pooch sought shelter with us as another pre-monsoon dump dumped. Sir Rod, a lover of Asian food, eyes it hungrily.



With everything wrapped I said goodbye to Harry the Kraut next door at the Jolly Frog. We'd become good friends and hopefully we'll catch up in Spain.



I headed back to The Big Mango, arriving in time for a parade of some kind. Tens of thousands had joined in though. Also strangely, I saw no elephants or clowns or majorettes or brass marching bands...? Guess their parades are different than ours, they just seemed to blow a lot of whistles. A Canuck friend and real estate heavy hitter, Bill, was visiting so I took him.



We couldn't find cotton candy, so we had hot and sour soup and dim sum.



I see another of these medical clinics has opened, it's apparently a chain. It must still be a little slow as the nurses sit around, though here a patient heads in seeking treatment. Nurses sure dress different than back in Canada, though mind you it is cold there and hot here.



It was great to catch up with friends in Abdul's famous White Room. The Single Malts flowed liberally - and I was introduced to two I wasn't familiar with. Abdul has a collection of 300. Better than collecting stamps, that's for sure.





More catching up was done around the rectangular bar at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand in the penthouse of the Maneeya Building. From the balcony one can sip a Scotch while taking in the riots at a nearby intersection, the busiest in Bangkok.



A jolt struck Bangkok's large but close knit media community when Edmonton born journo Dave Walker disappeared Valentine's Day from Siam Reap, next to Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. We've been friends since about 1986. He was working trying to launch a *Killing Fields* type of movie about Khmer Rouge days and it seems he upset some people, and that country is still crawling with cold blooded Khmer Rouge killers. Indeed, the government is run by old KR. He always

loved living on the edge. In late 1988 the Karen hilltribe, who live in that No Man's Land along the Burmese-Thai border, were caught in one of their periodic vises and getting shot up and he wanted me to join him going in to investigate. No thanks. Not my kinda adventure. I went to Railay Beach instead. A real good guy living his adventurous dream...a dream cut short. Always up, always full of energy, always smiling....



Another friend, John, who's made a ton of money catering the Renaissance Fairs in the States for 40 years, also looked me up. He has a great condo on the beach at Playa in Mexico.



More catching up. Guys from the CIA Secret War in Laos in the '60s: Mac, Air America Chief Pilot Les and Tony.



And The Gang for one last feed. I was having a helluva time keeping my diet discipline.... We'll finish with Miss Congeniality from the Miss Nude Water Buffalo Competition and I'm sure you'll agree she's another knockout.



...Damn camera.... Well, let's finish with flowers then. April is the Hot Season but it's also when several huge trees like the flame tree and others bloom like gigantic flowers. This is one of my favorites, a golden raintree.



And, being assured by friends back in Toontown that spring had arrived after an absolute winter from hell and it was safe for me to return, I flew home via Tokyo and Chicago on April 7, completing my fourth trip around the world!