

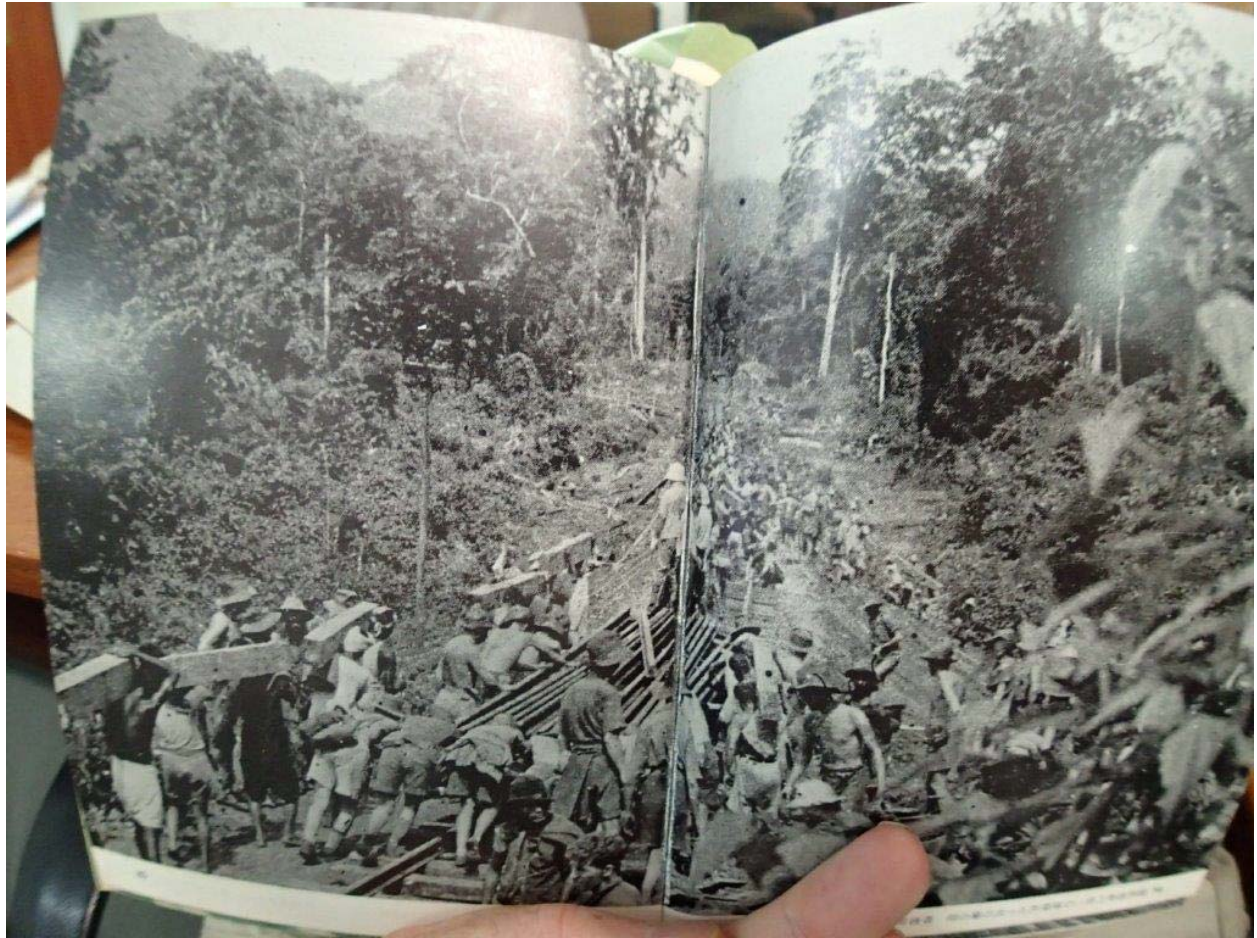
The River Kwai POW Camp Mystery

(& other whodunits)

February 2017



WW-II Thai-Burma Death Railway archaeologist Chris Hodgson with an air force recon photo from 1945 showing Kaorin POW camp five miles outside Kanchanaburi, Thailand. The camp held 900 POWs, Brits, Aussis, Dutch and 10 Yanks. Many were specialists, mechanics, welders, pipefitters etc,



The camp served the vast railway terminus—the largest in the Pacific Theatre—for the 240-mile-long Thai-Burma Railway made infamous in *Bridge over the River Kwai* and *The Railway Man*. Note the thick, first growth jungle they're punching through. All this beautiful forest to the Burmese coast was logged after the war, leaving scrub and bamboo. Thailand only has 7% of its jungle left, half as much as when I wrote a story 30 years ago, with much of it in this corner which holds 2-3 national parks.



Chris, a Limey, spent a year searching out the locations and sweeping them with his metal detector, with emphasis on the camp itself. Note the “Possible PW Camp” on the map. The rail yards to the south are highly camouflaged in the then jungle.



Homemade POW dog tags were common. They were required by the Japanese to be worn and each prisoner was given a number. No doubt many ripped them off after liberation and tossed them away as a symbol of their slavery, the reason Chris found so many.



The slug is an 8mm Ariska, from the standard issue Japanese rifle. But interestingly enough he's also found 9mm, 45 ACP, 7.65 and an older lead bullet and musket balls.



The POWs had their own name for the camp.







Note the positions of the six long barracks. The next shot was taken at their approximate bottom end.



Chris describes the layout of the barracks. It was here that the mystery raised its head: scattered over this field were six Japanese dog tags, and there well could be more. (We're sponsoring Chris into The Explorers Club, BTW.)



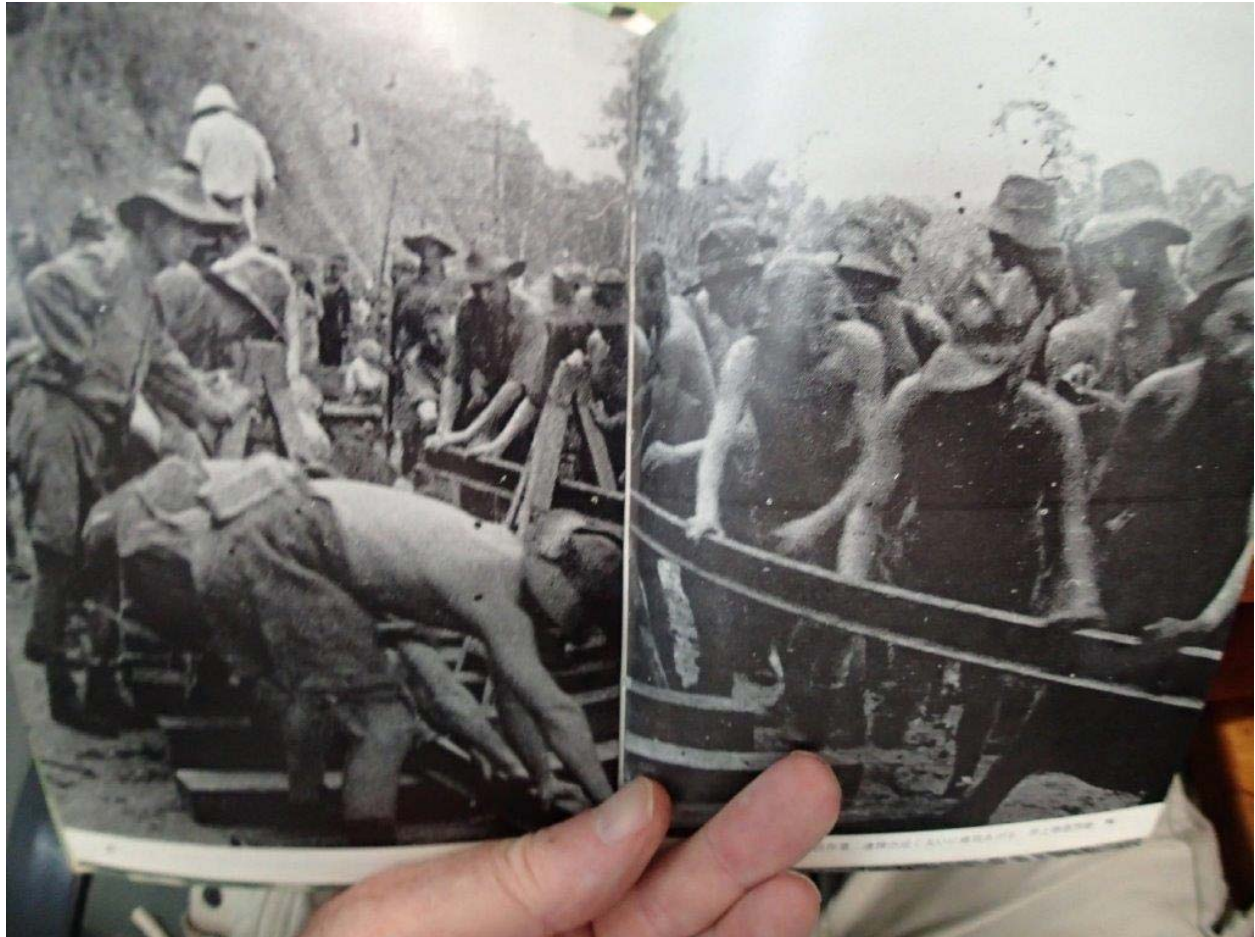
Japanese dog tags didn't bear the names of the owners, rather their regiments and individual ID numbers. To find out who the owners are, Chris has yet to research Imperial Japanese Archives, if they weren't bombed in the war.



Sir Rodney Beattie, who built the outstanding Death Railway Museum and Research Centre, and who is the leading archaeologist, has only found one other in all his years. Here we're seen doing what two fellow Fellows of The Explorers Club do best when not researching the railway or Paleolithic caves: wrapping ourselves around an excellent Scotch. (Thank you Sir Rod.)



So what happened here? A Japanese soldier may lose a tag—but not six. The only logical explanation is the obvious one: they're dead.



And, if so, why? Twenty to 30 guards would have worked at this camp. Some were real sadistic SOBs and given nicknames like Buffhead and Scarface. After the war, some were tried for war crimes. One, a Capt. Nomura, in a drunken rage staggered into a hut at night and beat defenseless men. He received five years. Ironically, we know folk in San Francisco with that name, but it's not uncommon in Japan. As we'll see, Hattori is an even more notorious name here.



In those Japanese records Chris hopes to learn the names of the guards and if they survived the war. The obvious suspicion is that these tags belonged to other SOBs who received field justice shortly after liberation. This was quite uncommon, BTW.



Further circumstantial evidence is provided by the copse at the end of the field. Triangular and narrow, with another field adjoining the other side, it has no reason to be there. It should have been plowed under years ago. But Thais are a superstitious people and especially fearful of ghosts. Locals and the owner don't go near this copse. Because it's local lore that bodies are

buried there. Japanese bodies.



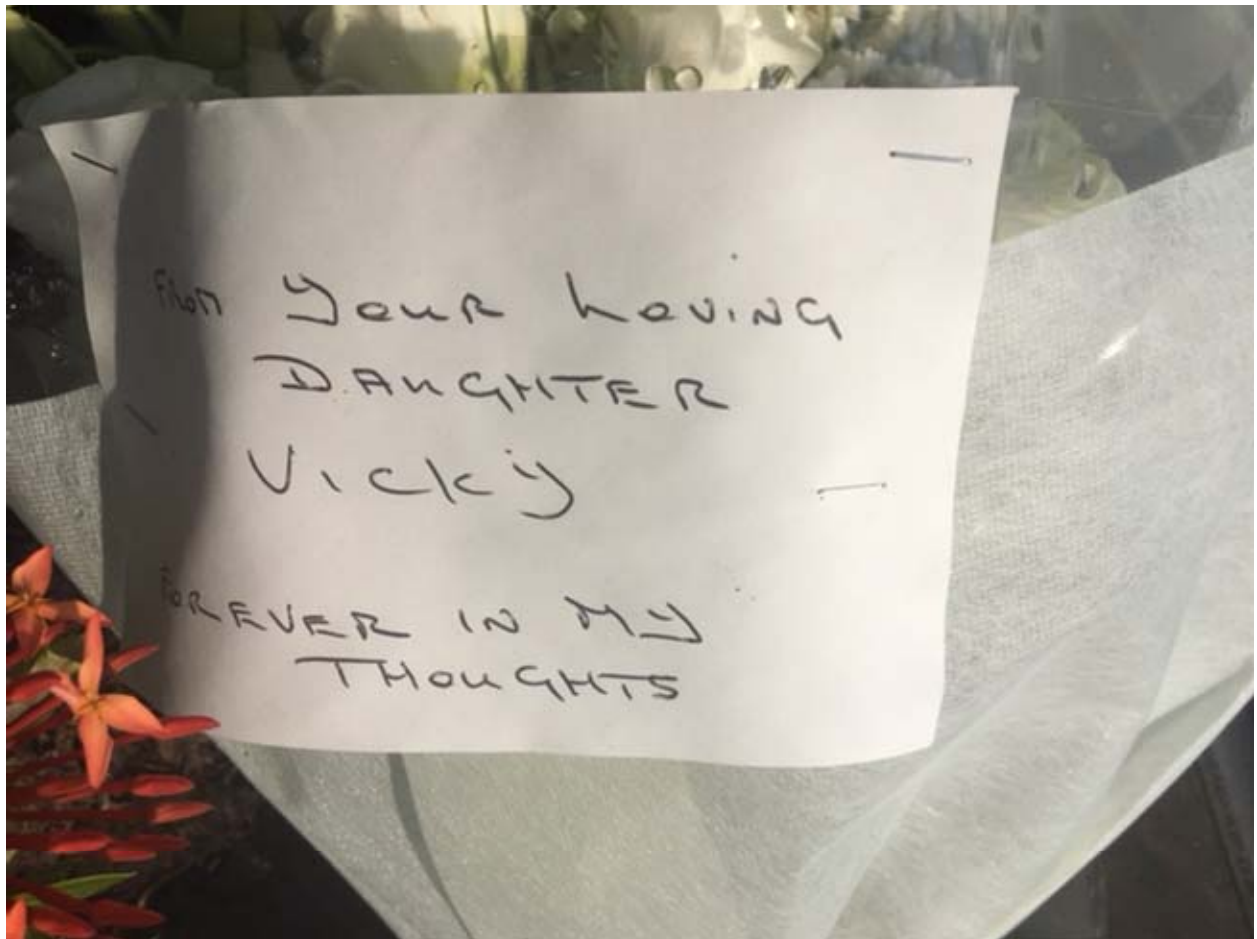
After Chris traces those records (if they exist), he wants to find any remains and have them repatriated. Whether they deserved their fate or not—unlike this lad in the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery in town who certainly didn't—they would have had families.



I don't find heart tugging notes left by wives, girl friends and siblings anymore. There's few of that generation left. Another tiny mystery: this note was blown between two graves, they were 28 and 30 years old respectively, and I couldn't determine which. So I left it in between. I always visit to pay my respects a few times during a Kanchanaburi season.



But descendants visit.



A daughter and niece on a long pilgrimage from the UK. Love never dies.



Sir Rodney's major role at the museum he built (and which led to be knighted by the Dutch, as well as awarded the Australian Medal and the OBE from Prince Charles) is to guide them up the railway to their ancestors' work sites. (Although knighted he retains a good, irreverent Aussie sense of humour: we call him Sir Rodney with the knight in *The Wizard of Id* pictured in mind. Otherwise he wouldn't approve of use of the honorific.)



I have to include the brilliant leaded windows built and donated to the museum by Gerry Cummins and Jill Stehn, renowned Aussie artists. They took two years to create and install.



Not all guards were brutes: a Japanese soldier on the right pretends not to notice while a POW gives water to an ailing Asian coolie. Note the basket in the middle right.



Hidden in it are batteries being smuggled in for clandestine radios. There's several of these subtle details. The devil is in them.



More compassion: POWs share water with wounded Japanese soldiers. Everyone, reduced to this level, is just a human being. This scene was inspired by a like incident written about in a POW's diary, quoted along the bottom.



Tamarkan is the site of the real POW camp portrayed in *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. You'll see two bridges. The left one is the temporary wooden one used until the iron one, stolen from Java, was installed.

I



It's a kilometer upstream from where I sit on its banks writing this. Unlike the \$320CAN we were paying on ripoff Phi Phi Island (see previous posting), here our favorite and long term guest house The Jolly Frog charges \$9. We're much happier here, one of our many homes-away-from home around the world.



I do laps between the two rafts, sharing this stretch of river with a four foot monitor lizard that nests on the bank. Don't worry, it's been told that I'm the consort of the fearsome Dragon Lady so it keeps a respectful distance.



Susan Hattori before the bridge. Another irony: Imperial Japanese Army Major-General Hattori signed the order launching construction of the railway. But Hattori is also a common name in Japan, meaning tailor/Taylor, one of those surnames derived from a calling, like Baker, Black, Smith and Carpenter.



THA
MAKHAM
BRIDGE

6



We had other mysteries. When Su saw this sign, she exclaimed, “Get dlunk for 10 baht!” and disappeared for another three days, like she did on Phi Phi on that all-you-can dlink Booze Cruise.



I looked for her at our friend Tan's Le Best Massage Parlour. We're both normally here every day or other day. It was a mystery where in hell she had gotten to.



An hour's massage is \$5.75, and her masseuses are excellent. It's our favourite massage parlour in the world. But Su hadn't been here.

สุบาร์
Su Bar



I finally found her here babbling incoherently face down under a table. We've been coming to Kanchaburi for so many years, and she's been staggering up and down the strip so many nights of them, they named a bar after her. Shoulda looked here first off. I rolled her to Le Best in a shopping cart where Tan massaged the Thai whiskey out of her like a wet sponge, and she was back breathing fire in no time.



With another bargirl, Pook. Actually Chris' wife.



I shouldn't make sport of her. The Dragon Lady has temples built in her honour all over town. She's not one to mess with, as you can see by her body language. One blast of flames from her throat and you're toast. Burnt toast.



Yet another mystery: what the hell are these three offerings in the local market? The lady was perturbed I shot a picture, but I just played dumb, which I'm very good at since it's not a big stretch. Guesses ranged from pangolins, rats and rabbits to barking deer—and it seems they *are* barking deer, confirmed by local friend Kas, and John Everingham, a photographic legend in Thailand. An endangered species, the few left are poached from the nearby national parks.



But we had recognizable and always delicious Thai food too. Preecha, an engineer retired from the Asian Development Bank, has been our landlord and good friend in Bangkok since 1996. Kas is our landlady, but hails from Kanchanaburi. Since all Asians look alike, I'll make it easy for you. That's Su on the left lecturing them about something. At least I think it's her.



Kas built one of the most beautiful homes I've seen anywhere, with a traditional Thai design. It's hard to portray because of all the vegetation. It's right on the Kwai. A mansion, really.



We spent a great day kicking around together. This is a famous and very old monkey pod tree nearby. Because of its veneration, it's wrapped with banners. An old, huge tree like this would possess a powerful, benevolent spirit. This touches the trunk to receive its blessing for an equally long life. That's Preecha on the left.



It was Chinese New Years and there's several enormous temples, many out in the middle of nowhere.



To my relief, my stupid camera didn't act up like it did on Phi Phi, Railay Beach and Bali's Kuta Beach, substituting vulgar pictures of women's gorgeou-, er, disgraceful bikinied backsides whenever I tried to snap pictures of temples.







20 baht—less than a buck—buys one of these bamboo birdies. Now, how to get it home without losing any feathers....



And the sun sets on our annual sojourn to Kanchanaburi. So tranquil, relaxing...and always fun and fascinating. It's great having close friends wherever we go around the world.