

Nightmares remind vet of Burma railway experiences

-Ian Harvey, Oral History Online



PoW survivor Fred Seiker shares his experiences as a WWII prisoner of war who was forced to construct the Burma Railway, which was completed 71 years ago. This tragic story is a true account which echos the topic of this year's Booker Prize winning novel.

Prisoners who worked on this railway still have problems falling and staying asleep after all this time. Seiker himself suffers two recurrent nightmares that disturb his rest every few months. In one, after stealing a can of fruit, he is tied to a tree for days. Just a few feet in front of him lays a bucket of water that he isn't quite able to reach.

In another, as he is imprisoned within the camp, a Japanese guard shoves a gun in his face, and then forces a hose into his mouth while he is held in place with barbed wire. Once a great deal of water is forced into him, another guard jumps on his swollen stomach.

It would be terrible enough if these nightmares were only nightmares, but they are much more than that. These are memories of actual torture that was experienced by not only Seiker but by hundreds of other prisoners who were forced to build the Burma Railway.

Otherwise known as the “Death Railway”, the tracks were used by the Japanese Imperial Army as a way to move supplies and soldiers to Burma from Bangkok. But the experience of building this railway took a lot more than dreams away from the men who were taken as prisoners in 1942 after the fall of the Indonesian islands and Singapore, it took away their freedom, and, in many cases, their lives.

The movie *Bridge on River Kwai*, which was produced in the 50’s, told the story of how these soldiers were captured and turned into hard labourers for the Japanese.

Over the period of only one year, these men shunted enormous mounds of dirt and carried heavy sleepers from one side of the jungle to the other. The labourers were made up of natives and PoWs, with over 113000 men losing their lives, including 13000 soldiers. The building of the railway is now referred to as the Forgotten War because the main focus of WWII was directed elsewhere.

Award winning author, and son of a war prisoner who worked on the railroad, Richard Flanagan brought to the limelight the horrible experiences faced by the labourers when his book, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, was announced as the most recent winner of the Man Booker Prize.

Seiker, at 98 years old, notes that those horrible days are never far from his mind. He had nightmare back then, and still does. He still has in his possession an iron spike that had been a part of the original Burma railway as a memorial to those who lost their lives. He has also drawn a number of disturbing sketches that detail the torture that he and his fellow prisoners endured.

In addition, Seiker wrote a book entitled *Lest We Forget*, that he published in Mandarin in 1995. This moving novel provides a detailed account of his own experiences during the war, which prompted many readers to send notes to the author. Although he has successfully sold his book both online and locally, it has not been considered a well known book. But the book’s popularity has increased.

In January, Liu Xiaoming, the Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom, wrote a comment in a newspaper about world peace being threatened by Japan not owning up to its aggressive past. Seiker agreed with the ambassador’s comments, and wrote him to let him know this.

Not expecting a reply, Seiker was surprised when he received a response from the ambassador, as well a request for permission to publish Seiker’s comments in Chinese media. It wasn’t long before Seiker found himself interviewed by Chinese press, and busily involved in a documentary that was being made in order to discover even more about his war experiences.

Although Seiker was looking forward to participating in the film, he was very concerned about the possibility of exploitation by the Chinese regime. He made sure that it was understood, both verbally and in writing, that if this happens, the project will be stopped immediately.

He didn't hesitate to comment that he feels that indications of militarism behavior suggested by Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan, is causing unrest, but was careful to keep Chinese leaders out of his appearances.

Seiker was very happy knowing that the experiences he faced during the war will reach more people, especially since the People's Publishing House has published the Mandarin translation of *Lest We Forget*. In fact, 3000 copies of his book were sold during the Beijing International Book Fair that took place in August, and a Chinese film studio is considering making a movie about it. Seiker is amazed and thrilled about the overwhelming interest in his story.

Seiker was born in 1915 in Rotterdam, and, like his father, Frederick, went into the field of engineering. When the war started, Seiker was in the Dutch Merchant Navy and on the island of Java in Indonesia in 1942 when the Japanese attacked. It was from there that he and 18000 others were captured and taken prisoner, and then forced to build the Burma Railway.

In his book, Seiker recalls the horrifying events surrounding an outbreak of cholera in the camp. As his fellow prisoners fell ill, the guards just left them to die, and then forced those who were not sick to burn those who had died. This made death become part of a daily routine, and made life just as horrible as death.

When looking back on his experiences, he describes the torture and abuse he endured as the most degrading it could be. But he explains that he also felt the overwhelming and undefeatable spirit of man when he found himself in a position where he, and those around him, would die for each other. During his time in the PoW camp, Seiker witnessed both the very best and the very worst of humanity.

Even after the railroad was built, it was two years before he knew he would finally regain his freedom. Within a few days of Japan's surrender due to the atom bombs that were dropped by the Americans, the prisoners noticed that the Japanese guards were no longer there. The most amazing feeling came over him as Seiker realized he was finally free.

After the war, Seiker moved to Grays married his wife, Edna, and the two of them had a daughter. But even though his wife was instrumental helping him recover from his initial shock following the war, his marriage eventually fell apart. He had a very difficult time living as a civilian after his experiences, which is very common for war veterans, [The Telegraph](#) reports.

He recalled a time when he shared stories of his war experiences with friends, but they did not believe him. This was extremely upsetting, and caused him to begin keeping the stories to himself and trying to deal with them on his own. This internal struggle caused him to become angry and argumentative with others.

It wasn't until 50 years after the end of the war, in 1995, that Seiker was finally once again able to share his stories. He explains that his experiences with near death have helped him to appreciate the small things in life.