CHAPTER 24

THE BURMA-THAILAND RAILWAY

IT has been seen that large numbers of prisoners were moved from Singapore and Java in 1942 and 1943, and that some of the survivors of these forces were returned to Singapore in late 1943 and early 1944. The destination of these forces at the time of their departure was not known, and while they were absent little information was obtained from the Japanese about how they were employed.

The first main Australian force to leave Singapore was "A" Force, 3,000 strong, commanded by Brigadier Varley. Drawn principally from the 22nd Australian Brigade, it was organised on a three-battalion basis, with an engineer group and a medical group (the latter commanded by Lieut-Colonel Hamilton[1] and drawn mostly from the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station).[2]

Although at first commanded by an Australian, and entirely Australian in content, it was soon diluted as other parties were merged with it. The force sailed from Singapore on 15th May 1942 in two "small very dirty steamers"—*Celebes Maru* and *Tohohasi Maru*. Only limited space was available, drinking water was scarce; the rations, consisting of rice and stew, seldom reached the consistency of thick soup. On the 17th a small sloop and two other ships carrying Dutch and British prisoners and some Japanese troops joined the convoy off Medan on the east coast of Sumatra. On the 20th the ships reached Victoria Point, Burma, where Green's[3] battalion and a medical and engineer detachment (1,017 strong in all) were disembarked. At Mergui, on the 23rd, Ramsay's battalion (1,000 strong) and 500 British troops from Sumatra were also disembarked.[4] Two days later the rest of the convoy reached the peninsula on the Burma coast near Tavoy.

> So ended a 12-day journey (wrote Brigadier Varley in his diary) which will always remain vivid in the minds of all. The congestion of the men in holds; diarrhoea, dysentery, bad latrines etc. I camped on top deck under a tent which leaked like a sieve. As we had rain daily and nightly we had to sit up in our capes to keep bodies dry. Little sleep obtained, all things getting wet. A very small hospital was on this deck which contained Japanese syphilis patients when it was raining. The (sea) captain of this ship was . . . of the N.Y.K. line. . . . He seemed a very decent chap, was apologetic about room on his ship, was under orders therefore [beyond] his control.

For the next few months each battalion was employed at its separate destination on airfield construction. Conditions were not severe. At Mergui the force of 1,500 men was at first crowded into a school capable of

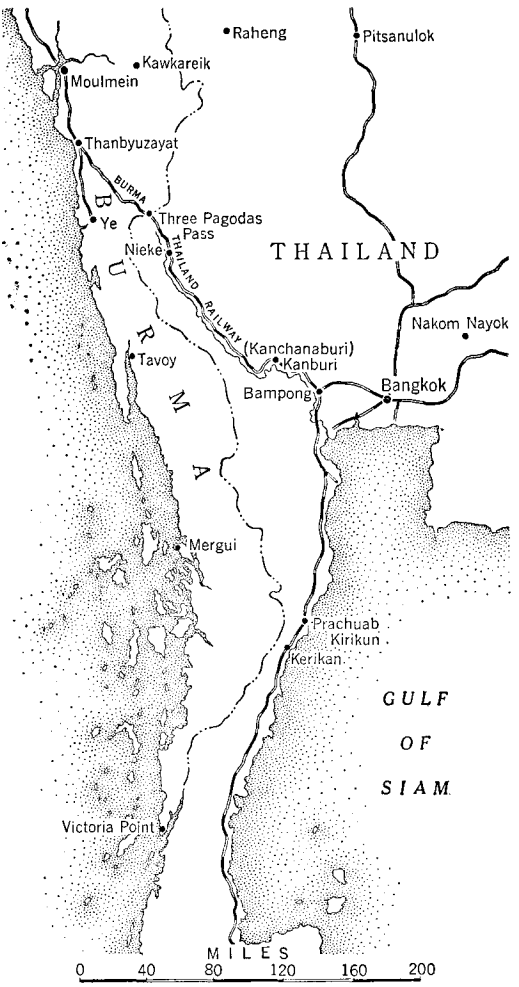
[1] Lt-Col T. Hamilton, NX70505, ED. (1st AIF: Pte 30 Bn.) CO 2/4 CCS 1940-42. Surgeon; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Coatbridge, Scotland, 30 Mar 1899.

[2] The battalion commanders were Lt-Col G. E. Ramsay, and Majors D. R. Kerr and C. Green. Lt-Col C. G. W. Anderson was second-in-command to Varley; later Anderson took command of a battalion.

[3] Lt-Col C. E. Green, MBE, WX3435; 2/4 MG Bn. Warehouse manager; of West Perth, WA; b. Perth, WA, 30 Jul 1902.

[4] An Australian surgeon, Lieut-Colonel Coates, accompanied the British troops.

accommodating about half that number, but this gave way to a barracks, which though built largely of bamboo and atap was by far the best they were to encounter as prisoners. A canteen was established, and when work was begun on the aerodrome the poor diet was supplemented by the purchase of eggs, bananas and bread. After some initial misunderstandings the prisoners were treated fairly by Japanese standards. At Victoria Point the Japanese were considered reasonable in their demands for working parties, and, as at Mergui, after a period payments were made to the men and a canteen was established. Accommodation, at first inadequate — the Japanese said they had but recently arrived themselves and had had no time to prepare for the prisoners — later improved, and by June a generous rice ration permitted a considerable amount being used for the production of flour. At this stage the men were receiving better meals than at any time since they had become prisoners. The attitude of the Japanese at this time is indicated by their leniency towards some prisoners who admitted to having gone outside the wire to trade with natives; these were fined three days' pay (Japanese) and the proceeds of the fines were handed back to their unit to purchase extra rations.[5]



At Tavoy progress on the airfield was delayed partly by the primitiveness of the equipment (although this was a feature of all Japanese undertakings to which prisoners were allotted[6]), partly by the rains and sabotage,

[5] Later the Japanese, evidently having forwarded the report of this episode to higher authority, warned Green that any men caught outside the wire would be shot.

[6] At Victoria Point, for example, prisoners were required to straighten nails with stones; at Tavoy, when a party of surveyors was called for, the Japanese were surprised when the prisoners failed to bring with them the necessary surveying equipment.

but also because the Japanese at Tavoy as elsewhere seemed totally unprepared for the arrival of large numbers of prisoners. A fortnight passed before proper guards were posted, and a longer period before the Australians were set to work with picks, shovels, chunkels (large hoe-like instruments) and bags and poles for carrying earth. They were at first billeted in a large hangar "covered with broken rock", evidently prepared for concreting. Rice and some pork and vegetables were provided, but no cooking utensils and little water except from a well which was out of bounds, and in any case lacked a bucket or rope with which to draw the water. A second hangar was occupied by about 1,400 Dutch prisoners. In June conditions improved somewhat when the force was moved to huts. At the end of the month regular fortnightly payments were made to workers and thereafter the rations were supplemented by local purchases from the Burmese. Payment was at the rate of 25 cents a day for working warrant-officers, 15 cents for N.C.O's and 10 cents (about 2d in Australian currency) for privates.[7]

The payment of the men made it possible to buy small quantities of canteen supplies in Tavoy, and Varley observed an immediate drop in sick parades; he concluded that this was "partly psychological" and a result of the pay and better food. "With reason and common sense," wrote Varley, "it is apparent . . . that the tropics to live in are not the horror which we have been led to believe. The men are working daily and getting wet almost daily and yet in spite of bad food for months are quickly getting into good health with reasonable food."

Some optimistic estimates of the duration of the war seem to have been held at this time, and there is a record of a wager of £1 between Brigadier Varley and Colonel Anderson that the war with Germany would end by the beginning of November 1942. The strange circumstances in which members of the force found themselves seem to have resulted in some slackening of standards, particularly among the officers. Varley recorded:

> They have no life—no command, and show signs of slack training. This has been particularly noticeable among AIF this war. All junior officers, or rather a big majority, also NCO's seem to desire to curry favour with the men and are frightened to take full command. Result is that the men soon sum them up as weaklings and discipline generally is undermined. . . . No Army has ever achieved success without strict discipline. The AIF of 1914-18 had it, despite the exaggerated claims of some to the contrary.[8]

The laxness of the Japanese and the friendliness of the Burmese during the early period encouraged some men to attempt to escape, and in June

[7] Theoretically officers were paid the Japanese equivalent of their army pay, but a large sum was banked on their behalf by the Japanese, and board and lodgings were deducted. As a result officers received perhaps less than a quarter of their entitlement. However, this was still far in excess of what any man could earn, and it did not fluctuate in proportion to the number of days worked. In February other ranks' pay was increased by 15 cents a day to bring the daily rates for warrant-officers to 40 cents, for NCO's to 30, and for privates to 25.

[8] Varley had served as an infantryman in the old AIF and tended to draw analogies between it and the AIF of 1939-45, sometimes to the latter's disfavour.

a group of eight led by Warrant-Officer Quittendon[9] of the 2/4th Anti-Tank were recaptured after making such an attempt. Despite the protests of the Australian leaders, the eight men were executed without trial.[1] This was a stern reminder both of the difficulties of escape, and of the penalty likely to be incurred. Nevertheless attempts to reach freedom persisted.

By the end of July the airfield had been sufficiently repaired to allow aircraft to land, but the rain, which had begun with a few showers, now increased to a deluge and halted the work.

> We watched fascinated (wrote one soldier) as great clouds brought a solid wall of water sweeping across the drome with the dull roar that heralded its approach for five minutes before the huge drops splashed down upon our sweating bodies. Immediately figures and forms fifty yards away became blurred and indistinct and anything beyond fifty yards was obliterated by the torrent.[2]

In August and September the battalions at Mergui and Victoria Point were gradually concentrated at Tavoy, where work on the airfield continued. Varley endeavoured to maintain the maximum numbers at work, thereby reaping benefits for the men in pay, improved rations, and exercise.[3] The physical condition of the Tavoy group was then very good and comparable with what it had been before they became prisoners. On the other hand Varley found it noticeable that men from Mergui or Victoria Point were not as fit.

By 16th September all work on the airfield had finished, and later that month the movement of "A" Force by ship to Moulmein and thence by rail and road to Thanbyuzayat began. That month a working party of 200 were sent to Ye under Captain Hellyer[4] where they were employed on bridge construction and road repair work. This party was exceptionally well treated. On 3rd October Brigadier Varley reached Thanbyuzayat where he met Colonel Nagatomo, chief of the No. 3 Branch (or Group) of the Thai Prisoner of War Administration and learnt from him the proposed organisation of his force. Varley's headquarters would include a General Affairs Department of 10; a Foodstuffs Department of 17; a Property Department of 17; a Medical Department of 12. The rest of the force would be divided into groups (*kumis*) of 48 to 49 led by a lieutenant (*kumicho*); two such groups would make a *han* under a section commander

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[9] WO2 M. W. Quittendon, VX45344; 2/4 A-Tk Regt. Fireman; of Windsor, Vic; b. 5 Jun 1905. Executed by Japanese 6 Jun 1942.

[1] The others were Sgt C. Danaher (of Ascot Vale, Vic), Bdrs T. Cumming (Northcote, Vic) and A. W. Glover (Ouyen, Vic), L-Bdr A. A. Emmett (Ouyen, Vic), Gnrs J. A. T. Wilson (Yarram, Vic), A. Reeve (Colac, Vic) and A. H. Jones (Fish Creek, Vic). All were members of the anti-tank regiment. Varley who was compelled to attend the execution noted in his diary: "The spirit of these eight Australians was wonderful. They all spoke cheerio and good luck messages to one another and never showed any sign of fear. A truly courageous end."

[2] R. H. Whitecross, *Slaves of the Son of Heaven* (1951), p. 40.

[3] Workers, in addition to being paid, also received a better ration than non-workers. Later when medical troops were not employed on their routine duties, Varley sent them also out to work in order to get the benefit of increased rations and pay, a step with which Colonel Hamilton, the senior medical officer, agreed.

[4] Maj L. H. Hellyer, NX12561; 2/15 Fd Regt. Public servant; of Artarmon, NSW; b. Leichhardt, NSW, 18 Nov 1908.

(captains and above) known as a *hancho*.[5] The battalion organisations already in existence at this stage persisted. When the concentration of "A" Force was completed Varley, for the first time since his arrival in Burma, would be able to exercise limited authority not only over the "A" Force detachments, but also over the whole of Group 3 (soon to aggregate some 9,000 troops).

The purpose of the Japanese in sending prisoners to Burma and (as will be seen later) to Thailand was to make a railway linking those countries so as to improve the communications of their large army in Burma. In June 1942 these depended on the long and exposed sea route to Rangoon by way of Singapore and the Strait of Malacca and a road from Raheng to southern Burma through Kawkareik to Moulmein, which was unfit for prolonged heavy traffic. The building of the railway which began at Thanbyuzayat in the north and joined the Thailand system at Bampong, 421 kilometres (263 miles) distant, was completed in November 1943, when the various working parties working north from Bampong and south from Thanbyuzayat met about Nieke.

The Japanese plan was that the labour force would be composed of prisoners of war and coolies, under the direction of a railways headquarters at Kanburi. Japanese units engaged in construction would be known as the *Southern Army Railway Corps*. Two railway regiments—the *5th* based on Thanbyuzayat and the *9th* on Kanburi—would work from opposite ends of the line towards the centre at Konkoita. The total number of Japanese employed would be about 12,000. Most of the materials and equipment could be obtained locally, deficiencies being supplemented by bridging material, steel rails and rolling stock from Japan. The Japanese estimated that the work could be completed in 14 months, and at the latest by December 1943.[6]

The railway workers were organised by the Japanese into Groups or Branches; some branches had as few as 2,000 workers, others as many as 12,000. Two prisoner of war groups—Nos. 3 and 5—functioned on the Thanbyuzayat side of the railway; four—1, 2, 4 and 6, plus about 10,000 workers who came under Malayan Prisoner of War administration (as distinct from the Thai one)—worked forward from Bampong in Thailand.

In the northern or Burma sector the work consisted chiefly of clearing dense undergrowth, felling great trees and making embankments and cuttings. In the hilly country the track followed natural gradients and for this reason high embankments would be rare. The track in this sector did not follow a river and there was no good road. Consequently supply difficulties would be accentuated during the wet season. The area to be

[5] Finally the Australian staff included: Brigadier Varley, head of bureau; Captain R. S. Griffin, Staff Captain; Lieutenant J. A. Varley, General Affairs; WO2 P. R. Levy, French Interpreter (Nagatomo preferred to conduct interviews in French); two typists and four batmen. There was a similar staff representing the Dutch.

[6] This information has been drawn from SEATIC Bulletin No. 246, "Burma-Siam Railway", dated 8 Oct 1946.

traversed followed an old British survey line abandoned before the war because of the difficulties involved, including the fact that several diseases were endemic throughout the area.

Two days before Varley arrived at Thanbyuzayat work on the railway had begun when "A" Force led by Green's battalion arrived at Kendau, 4.8 kilometres from the base headquarters. On the 5th Anderson's battalion, based at the outset on Thanbyuzayat also began work—consisting at that stage of building an embankment by means of moving earth from the sides of a 50-foot wide strip of cleared jungle and undergrowth.[7] These first arrivals were rapidly followed by other groups—Dutch, British, Australian and American—and between the 29th and 30th October two new Australian groups, Williams and Black Forces, commanded by Colonels Williams and Black,[8] which had arrived at Moulmein on the 25th from Java by way of Singapore, also began work on the line. Williams Force was based at Tanyin at the Kilo-35 camp and Black Force (593 Australians and 190 Americans) at Beke Taung, a camp at Kilo 40. Living conditions at Tanyin are described as

> the best experienced . . . on the Burma section of the railway. The important factor in the treatment received by the prisoners was the character of the Japanese Camp Commandant. . . . Lieutenant Yamada ranked as one of the best commanders that the force came under. . . . In appearance rather grim and forbidding . . . he nevertheless exercised intelligence and tolerance in his camp administration. He rather stretched the rules of the Imperial Japanese Army in regard to prisoners to ensure that Lieut-Colonel Williams received treatment in accordance with his rank. When once he did complain that he himself was not being saluted as he moved about the camp, it was as if to say: "Look here fellows, after all I am the boss here; the least you can do is pay me a little respect occasionally."[9]

At this stage a daily work quota was fixed by the Japanese, each prisoner being required to move .6 cubic metres of earth. Under this system the Australians found that by working hard they were able to complete their daily quota before the fierce midday heat. A ten-minute rest period every hour was permitted but the weekly day of rest, begun at Tavoy, ceased.[1] When the Japanese discovered that the Australians were able to complete their quota early, they increased the amount of earth to be moved. In October the prisoners were ordered to sign undertakings not to attempt to escape. After Varley and Green had been imprisoned and told that they would not be released until they had signed the parole forms, Varley advised his men to do so, as he considered that sufficient evidence of compulsion existed to make the declaration invalid.[2]

The declaration read:

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[7] In mid-October Anderson's Force moved to Alepauk (Kilo-18 camp).

[8] Lt-Col C. M. Black, ED, NX70821. CO 2/3 Res MT Coy. Business manager; of Bondi Junction, NSW; b. Sydney, 10 May 1898.

[9] E. F. Aitken, *The Story of the 2/2 Australian Pioneer Battalion*, p. 157.

[1] Eventually the Japanese agreed to every tenth day being observed as a day of rest.

[2] At a meeting with Nagatomo Varley was told that "Japan believes in and acts according to her signature of Hague Convention and International Law so far as is necessary. It is very necessary all soldiers sign parole. I cannot do my best for prisoners who have the intention to escape. All my orders must be obeyed. I will insist on this. I have the power to imprison or shoot for disobedience."

I the undersigned hereby swear on my honour that I will not under any circumstances attempt to escape.

In November Group 3 was distributed between camps at Thanbyuzayat and Kilo 40, the main forces being Green's battalion at Kendau (4.8 kilos); a Dutch group at Wagale (8 kilos); Anderson at Alepauk (18 kilos); Williams at Tanyin (35 kilos) and Black at Beke Taung (40 kilos). Hitherto the chaplains of "A" Force had been kept together and afforded no special facilities; but at Thanbyuzayat, once work on the line had begun, Brigadier Varley pressed Colonel Nagatomo to distribute the chaplains among the various camps, and at length this was agreed to.

In November some 200 Korean troops, described by a medical officer as "purely amoral coolie vermin . . . brutal by nature as well as by orders", arrived at Thanbyuzayat to take over guard duty at all camps in Burma. "We are not looking forward to this," noted Varley in his diary, "as our guards here are the best we have had."[3] Varley continued to press for better rations and accommodation, and more medical supplies, but not always successfully:

It is so difficult and heart-breaking to fight for the lives of our men . . . and meet a brick wall on all occasions (he wrote). . . . I have asked that representations be made for a Red Cross ship. Medical reports . . . show deficiencies in drugs. I have asked for beds to keep the sick off the bare boards, where they lie, many without a blanket, losing condition quickly. . . . I have been informed no beds are available. I have asked for rice bags, canvas or any material to make beds. A form of bamboo matting used as walls in native huts is available, but no timber to make the frames. This sort of nightmare goes on.

Cholera broke out in Moulmein and Rangoon a couple of weeks ago and there has now been one death in the village a few hundred yards from our camp. I still cannot get drums (44 gallon) to boil water for men to drink. Water has to be boiled in the kwalis given to cook rice. This is not sufficient and water is a great source of danger.

That month Varley ordered the sale of personal effects of the dead, such as watches, fountain pens, propelling pencils, and the payment of the proceeds into a Red Cross Fund to buy food for the sick. Only wallets and photographs were to be retained for transmission to next of kin. This was a radical departure from normal procedure, but these were exceptional times; it would in any case have been impossible to carry any accumulation of such articles with the force, or adequately to safeguard them.[4]

The summary execution of the Australians in June did not discourage prisoners altogether from leaving the compound and at Thanbyuzayat in November, a Dutch[5] prisoner who went outside the wire dressed in a sarong to trade with the natives was arrested by the Japanese. He pleaded that he had gone outside the wire to buy bananas, but having no money,

[3] The Koreans were regarded by the Japanese as an inferior race, and in many instances received treatment little better than that accorded the prisoners. Being themselves treated as inferiors they attempted to treat prisoners as inferiors, and their failure to establish a moral superiority led to frequent incidents.

[4] Soon after this order was issued Nagatomo requested that personal effects be handed to him. "He said he would send them to Tokyo for dispatch to Australia after the war," wrote Varley.

[5] About 50 per cent of the "Dutch" prisoners were Asians.

had traded his shirt. Lieutenant Hosoda,[6] the Japanese commandant at that time, not only forgave him—an Australian at Mergui had been executed for a similar offence—but evidently feeling sorry for the prisoner, gave him money to buy bananas.

Unlike most of the other forces, "A" Force contained a large proportion of over-age Australians—principally members of the 2/3rd Reserve Motor Transport Company to which special conditions of enlistment had applied —and these presented a particular problem in the conditions prevailing on the Burma-Thailand railway. In November 1942 Varley proposed to Nagatomo that the older men, men unfit for heavy work, and the chronic sufferers, be employed on vegetable growing, and on other specialised work such as the repair of boots and clothes, then in a "deplorable condition". However, nothing more seems to have been heard of this proposal, which would have had the effect of earning working pay and rations for partially fit prisoners, and of keeping the force better supplied with clothing and boots.[7]

In December Varley organised a scheme of voluntary contributions from officers' pay towards a Red Cross Fund to be set up to buy extra food for the sick. All camps were prepared to contribute all pay in excess of 20 rupees a month—the officers of Group 3 were paid at higher rates than those of other groups—and such sums were at length paid to a Public Receiver, who accepted the money and issued receipts. The money was then handed to the Red Cross Representative, Mr Murchison, who spent it on hospital patients, patients in R.A.P's, and on improved rations and comforts for those with chronic disabilities who were unable to earn pay.[8]

In December 1942 four more prisoners—three Dutch and one Australian—were executed for attempted escape. The Australian was considered mentally ill by the Australian doctors—as indeed he was—and a plea for mercy on these grounds was made to the Japanese by Varley. At first they seemed willing to spare him; then, without warning, he was taken away and executed. When Varley reproached the Japanese commandant, Lieutenant Naito, he replied that the Japanese medical officer considered the prisoner "mentally sound", and that, as the Dutch officers had been executed for attempted escape, "he had to be fair".

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[6] Hosoda, noted Varley, was "very humane, bought food for sick at his own expense; helped us in any way he could. Limited by higher command."

[7] At this stage many of the prisoners were in rags; some went to work in underpants or swimming trunks, others with a piece of cloth around their middles like natives.

[8] The rates of pay laid down in Singapore for officers were:

Lt-Col	220.00	Dollars, ticals, rupees or yen per month, according to the prisoner's locality.
Major	170.00	
Capt	122.50	
Lieut	85.00	

These took effect from 16th August 1942. Deductions were made by the Japanese for food, clothing, light and lodging, and these varied from time to time. In Thailand from August 1942 these deductions amounted to 60 ticals a month for all officers; from August 1943 to March 1944 to 20 ticals a month; from April 1944 the deduction was 30 ticals for field officers and 27 for captains and below. In practice the most an officer in Thailand could receive was 30 ticals a month, the rest being placed in a savings account. In Burma, however, officers were allowed to draw up to 70 rupees a month. In the case of junior officers the amount drawn was much less after lodging had been deducted.

In January a second group of prisoners—Group 5—joined the prisoners labouring on the Burma side of the railway. These had come principally from Java and were a mixture of Australians, Dutch and Americans; they operated independently of Group 3. Soon after their arrival Varley wrote to Colonel Nagatomo pointing out the desirability of segregating nationalities into separate camps. He also asked whether the Australians and Americans in Group 5 could be exchanged with an equal number of Dutchmen in Group 3, where in addition to being with their own countrymen they would be with comrades from units to which they had previously belonged. Nagatomo agreed to consider these proposals, but said that a draft of Dutchmen must go to Kun Knit Kway (the Kilo-26 camp) where the Australians of Group 5 were already established. "This is most undesirable," commented Varley, "as they (the Dutch) are a potential reservoir of dysentery . . . also these men will not be able to do much work as they have all been very ill."

Meanwhile Anderson Force at Alepauk had been reinforced by 200 British troops. The number of the sick began to increase. At the beginning of November one man in every three had been classified as too sick to work; in December 300 of the 600 in camp were sick, most of them suffering from leg ulcers or stomach ailments. Varley, who visited all camps for the first time that month, considered Green's camp at Kendau the best, and the Alepauk camp the worst. Many huts had been damaged by time and weather. Portions of roofs had collapsed and been removed.

Between 12th and 25th December Ramsay Force also had begun its labours on the railway, based at Kun Knit Kway. It was then they began to realise, wrote a chronicler of the period, that

> so far we had been on a picnic. . . . Conditions were much worse than any we had so far experienced; the huts were only partly weather-proof, food was as bad as at Mergui, work was severe, being set on a piece-work basis. To make matters worse we came, for the first time, under the Korean guards, of whom the less said the better.[9]

On 3rd January Anderson Force moved to the Kilo-35 camp at Tanyin, where they joined Williams Force.[1] Although the staple ration continued to be rice, the cooks had now acquired some dexterity in its preparation. The men experimented with cake-making and prepared "coffee" from carefully roasted rice grains. Each day small parties scoured the surrounding jungle for logs of wood, and at night roaring fires were built, round which "groups of men talked together with the fire-glow lighting their faces against the dark of the surrounding jungle".[2]

By mid-January the deaths in Group 3 totalled 73 (including 24 Australians), a remarkably small number considering the circumstances in which the force was placed. That month Thanbyuzayat was organised as a base hospital for the sick, then numbering 600. In February an out-

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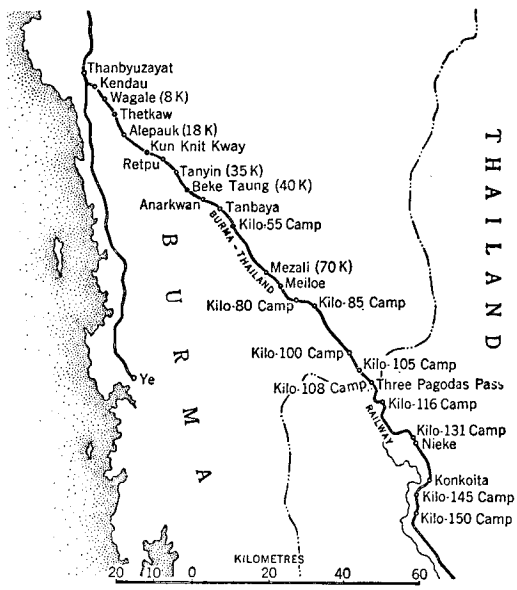
[9] *Men May Smoke*, p. 63.

[1] Despite the conditions at Alepauk only one man died of sickness in the period spent there by Anderson Force.

[2] R. H. Whitecross, p. 66.

break of pellagra—a vitamin deficiency disease, which ulcerates tongues, gums and lips—affected 80 per cent of the troops at Tanyin and Anarkwan, but by the end of the month it had cleared up. That month a group of three men from Thetkaw camp made a carefully planned and determined attempt to reach India. They were Major Mull,[3] Sapper Bell[4] and Gunner Dickinson.[5] The group reached a few miles north of Moulmein when Dickinson fell out exhausted. As had been agreed, the others went on. Dickinson was recaptured by the Japanese, taken to Thanbyuzayat, and executed without trial. Mull and Bell went on and had reached 100 miles farther north when they encountered a pro-Japanese native patrol. (The Japanese offered substantial rewards to native peoples for the capture of prisoners, and this contributed to the difficulty of escape.) Mull was killed in the encounter, and Bell badly wounded. He was returned to Thanbyuzayat and shot.[6]



"A" Force camps

From February-March onwards the work became steadily harder, each railway detachment stepping up the amount of earth to be moved by each man until finally the quantity was over two cubic metres a day, whether a man was healthy or sick, big or small.

In March the Japanese announced that all "no duty" (sick) prisoners would be sent to the Retpu (Kilo-30 camp) which had been organised as a hospital area;[7] that the group headquarters would move forward from

[3] Maj A. Mull, NX12243; AASC 8 Div. Traveller; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Lahore, India, 8 Apr 1896. Killed 10 Mar 1943. Mull had served as a captain in the British and Indian forces during the 1914-18 War.

[4] Spr A. J. Bell, VX73827; 2/6 Fd Pk Coy. Metallurgist; of Malaya, and Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 14 May 1913. Executed by Japanese 16 Mar 1943.

[5] Gnr K. J. Dickinson, VX57167; 2/15 Fd Regt. Surveyor; of Bendigo, Vic; b. Collie, WA, 24 Dec 1903. Executed by Japanese 2 Mar 1943.

[6] Like most of the escapers, Bell's behaviour at the execution ground was exemplary. He thanked Lieutenant Naito, who was in charge of the firing squad, for his courtesy and for the privileges extended to him. He shook hands, refused to kneel or sit in a tied position as was the Japanese custom, stating that he would die on his feet, and asked Lieutenant Naito to pass this on to Brigadier Varley. Afterwards Hamilton and Varley were taken to the place of execution. Naito drew up the Japanese guards, and they presented arms to the dead man. "The whole of Bell's behaviour since returning to this camp has been most gallant," commented Varley.

[7] The hospital was organised by Colonels Coates and N. M. Eadie, and Major S. Krantz of the A.A.M.C. "The route home," declared Colonel Coates to the patients of the Kilo-30 camp, "is inscribed in the bottom of every man's dixie. Every time it is filled with rice, eat it. If you vomit it up again, eat some more; even if it comes up again some good will remain. If you get a bad egg, eat it no matter how bad it may appear. An egg is only bad when the stomach will not hold it."

Thanbyuzayat to Meiloe (Kilo-75 camp); and that Anderson and Williams Forces, then at Tanyin, would be combined. They would be known as the "No. 1 Mobile Force", which would lay rails, beginning at Kun Knit Kway. At this stage there were some 9,534 prisoners under the command of Brigadier Varley, including 4,465 Australians, 481 British, 194 Americans, and 4,394 Dutch, but not including about 1,850 in Group 5. The bulk of the Australians—Green, Ramsay and Black Forces—were based at Meiloe. A British-American force was laying rails towards the Kun Knit Kway and the Dutch were concentrated round camps at the 45 and 70 kilo marks. The Kilo-75 camp at Meiloe where Green, Ramsay and Black Forces were based at this time, was set mainly in a valley surrounded by thick jungle. A river ran beside the camp, huts were good, but mosquitoes and sandflies were a torment.

In April the line was heavily reinforced with coolie labour; an article in a Rangoon paper which was delivered to the camp at Thanbyuzayat by the Japanese stated that the youth of Burma were being enlisted into either the Blood Army or the Sweat Army—to defend or work for their country. "These," commented Varley as he witnessed some 2,000 coolies marching past his camp early in April, "must be . . . part of the Sweat Army."

That month Colonel Coates at Retpu complained that a Japanese medical officer had ordered many convalescent patients back to their camps. "Same old trouble," wrote Varley, "Japanese engineers at camps sending men to hospital who cannot do a full day's work and Japanese administrative staff under Colonel Nagatomo sending them back to camp." Nevertheless, it seems evident that the relations between Varley and the Japanese on the Burma side of the line were better than existed elsewhere in Burma or Thailand. This was partly due to Varley's perspicacity in keeping the maximum number of men at work, and his continued efforts to improve conditions,[8] but also because Nagatomo (hamstrung though he may have been in some respects by higher authority) and most of his officers, were reasonable to a degree that would have astonished senior officers charged with liaison between their troops and the Japanese at other times and places. It was largely because of this reasonableness that Varley was able to arrange for truckloads of canteen goods to be delivered in turn to camps in the dry season and the movement forward of "yaks" with Australian drovers which helped to minimise the inevitable losses on the way forward. Some evidence of the amiable relations that existed between the Japanese and their prisoners at Thanbyuzayat at this time is provided by the enthusiasm with which regular sports meetings were attended by both captors and prisoners alike.[9] In May the Retpu hospital was closed and all patients were transferred to Thanbyuzayat. Thenceforward the

[8] The best results seem to have been achieved by officers who deferred to Japanese authority on minor matters, and concentrated on taking a definite stand on vital matters affecting the men's lives and health.

[9] At a sports meeting held in April some of the Australians dressed up as "young ladies" to add colour to the scene, and these, amid scenes of great hilarity, pursued an interested Japanese guard some 200 yards to the guardhouse, from which he—evidently having lost "face"—refused to emerge.

Japanese planned to hold hospital patients at each camp. At a conference with Nagatomo that month Varley pressed for assurances that transport would be available to take canteen goods to camps during the wet season, as it would be useless continuing to place orders with merchants without such assurances, and he complained about the length of working hours in outside camps, which he considered was contributing to the increased sick rate. Nagatomo assured Varley that transport would continue to be provided; but said that, while he agreed with Varley, the fixing of working hours rested on the railway commander. Nagatomo said he would ask him whether the hours could be reduced. "Unfortunately he has done this before," commented Varley, "and the Railway commander has not agreed. I have no direct access to him."

In fact, as Varley was now learning, the Japanese Army worked in water-tight compartments; each unit was usually hostile to other units and all were contemptuous of the Korean guards, who never questioned or remonstrated against any order or requirement of the Japanese engineers.[1]

Varley had continued to press Nagatomo to issue orders forbidding the striking of prisoners, and in May this was done. Nagatomo asked Varley to instruct "all P.W. not to treat Japanese guards with disdain" as their looks and actions sometimes irritated the guards. Nagatomo added that the language problem was the greatest barrier to happy relations.[2]

Most camps had one, sometimes more, Allied officers who possessed a smattering of Japanese, and as some camps lacked official interpreters, it was often upon this flimsy thread of understanding that relations between Japanese and prisoner were largely balanced.

Despite Nagatomo's orders, striking of prisoners persisted. The Japanese Army dispensed with charge sheets, trials, and the necessity of finding the accused guilty for minor offences, and permitted two or three-star privates to beat up one-star privates, and one-star privates to beat up Korean guards. Thus it was inevitable that prisoners should be struck, because they were considered of least account of all.[3] The commonest form of immediate punishment consisted of a series of full-arm blows on either

[1] The railway engineers usually took no part in the administration of the prisoners' camps. These were normally commanded by subalterns, warrant-officers, NCO's or private soldiers of the Japanese Army. The officer commandants were often lazy and inefficient, but warrant-officers and NCO's were mostly active energetic men, with considerable powers of decision. They carried great responsibilities, for camps of 2,000 were frequently under their command.

[2] The language problem is illustrated by the following incidents recorded in Varley's diary at Thanbyuzayat:

"Lt Naito (who spoke English) asked an Australian driver what was wrong with a truck which would not start. 'The battery is flat,' replied the driver. 'What shape is it usually?' asked Naito. On another occasion when told that there was 'a short' in a vehicle's electrical system, Naito is reputed to have said: 'Make all shorts longer.' "

[3] Any Japanese soldier of whatever rank, if alone, "had no hesitation . . . in giving orders to a battalion [of prisoners]; but in response to orders from a rank one step higher than his own he was an automaton. The Emperor was God, but to O.Rs. any officer was a demigod. Similar prestige attached to seniority among officers; the Japanese commander of Ps.O.W. in Burma was known to bash his second-in-command till he lost his feet and then kick him down the stairs, injuring his back severely: he was then sent out in disgrace to a working camp where he stayed in hospital for six weeks under the care of a P.O.W. medical officer. Nevertheless there were some curious features. A guard commander during his tour of duty, though holding no rank, was supreme in his own domain and even the camp commander could not or would not interfere with one of his guard during a period when he was regarded as the direct representative of the Emperor. Consequently redress for offences by a guard commander or his guard could not be obtained."—Major W. E. Fisher, "Medical Experiences with Ps.O.W. in Malaya, Burma and Siam, 15 Feb 42 to 16 Aug 45".

side of the face—"face-slapping" as it was known—but so small was the self-control exercised by the average Japanese that any convenient weapon, be it bamboo stick, shovel, or even crowbar might be used. Beatings were followed by a period of standing to attention, usually for a number of hours, but sometimes extended to days. Other punishments consisted of holding aloft a heavy weight, or holding at arm's length a pail of water, the prisoner being beaten whenever his arms relaxed.[4]

Meanwhile the No. 1 Mobile Force had begun rail-laying from Kun Knit Kway. The move to that camp was but the first of a series of such moves, involving long hours of work, under the supervision of brutal Korean guards, poor rations and few medical supplies. On 26th April the force moved to the Kilo-45 camp; in May to the Kilo-60 camp. At this stage it entered a period of abject misery. The Kilo-60 camp had been occupied by about 700 coolie labourers, and cholera, smallpox and dysentery stalked the area. Coolies lay dying or had been buried in shallow graves.[5] The wet season commenced and from dawn to dusk under leaden skies the jungle dripped its moisture until already miserable shelters became a reeking bog of mud in places a foot deep. For most prisoners it was their second "wet". Cholera broke out, and the medical officer, Captain Richards,[6] and his two assistants fought selflessly without drugs or outside help for a time to stave it off. At length the Japanese, alarmed lest cholera wipe out the entire mobile force, issued anti-cholera serum. When the epidemic died down only 34 of the camp of 600 had died. At Beke Taung (Kilo-40) a malaria-infested area where men of the mobile force worked for a time on ballasting the line, no quinine was issued by the Japanese sergeant in charge for four weeks, and the health of the men deteriorated rapidly. Sixteen died at the camp and 80 of the remaining 122 subsequently died.

At the Meiloe camp where Black, Green and Ramsay Forces had settled, conditions were little better. The force seems to have been systematically under-supplied with rations, and in May workmen were leaving camp at 9 a.m. and not returning until 4 a.m. That month the force was moved to Kilo-105, and for six days before the move the prisoners—fit and unfit alike—were required to work at an inhuman pace. Light duty men worked from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.; no-duty prisoners joined them from 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. On the day of the move, men who had completed work that morning were required that evening to begin a 30-kilometres march with all gear to Kilo-105. When the Dutch Kilo-70 camp closed and they were moved to the Kilo-108 camp 800 sick were left behind.

Reports of conditions prevailing at these up-country working camps continued to reach and worry Brigadier Varley, who decided that various

[4] A particularly horrifying feature of Japanese punishment was their tendency to strike prisoners in vital places, or to kick, punch or hit with stick, rifle or fist, half-healed ulcers, swollen faces, or broken limbs.

[5] In view of their Greater East Asia doctrine, it was remarkable that the Japanese should exhibit so little concern about the treatment of the native peoples under their dominion. Those employed on the line as coolies, admittedly with only elementary conceptions of hygiene, sanitation and health, suffered a far greater degree of hardship and loss of life than the European prisoners.

[6] Capt C. R. B. Richards, NX70273; RMO 2/15 Fd Regt. Medical practitioner; of Summer Hill, NSW; b. Sydney, 8 Jun 1916.

sections of the line had to be completed to a prescribed schedule and that the "Japanese will carry out schedule and do not mind if the line is dotted with crosses".[7]

In June, except for the Mobile Force, the principal camps were forward of the 75-Kilo mark at 105 and 108, where there were about 1,900 Australians and 2,500 Dutch respectively. At each camp most of the men were employed on road building, as the railway had not been commenced in that area. At the Kilo-105 camp half the troops were without boots and many without shirts or shorts. No holidays were being granted by the Japanese at this stage.

Meanwhile, the Thanbyuzayat headquarters and hospital sited close to a railway marshalling yard and workshops had been thrice visited by Allied bombers, and substantial casualties had been inflicted on the prisoners. Earlier in the year, when the Japanese had issued orders that all prisoners must go to their huts during air raids and remain there under threat of being shot, Varley had pointed out that the huts would not provide protection, and had asked permission to dig slit trenches and lay out a Red Cross of red gravel and white sand.[8] The Japanese approved these requests, but refused to allow the prisoners to construct a symbol —a white triangle on a blue base—to indicate the presence of a prisoner-of-war camp. When on 1st March the area was visited by three Allied bombers, the Japanese guards, according to one diarist

> became very excited, rushed about in all directions, shouting, fixing bayonets, loading rifles; nobody was allowed outside the huts on penalty of being shot, and we were not allowed to use slit trenches. . . . The Japanese remained in their slit trenches for about half an hour after the planes had gone.

In June two heavier raids resulted in the transfer of the group headquarters elsewhere. The first of these was on the 12th, when two bombs, evidently aimed at the railway line and workshops, dropped within the compound. Nine were killed (including five Australians) and 8 wounded (including 2 Australians).[9]

On the 15th a second and heavier raid, apparently directed at the camp, took place. Eight bombs fell in the camp area and a number outside among native coolie lines. Seventeen were killed (including 13 Australians) and many wounded (including an estimated 27 Australians).[1] Next day the Japanese ordered the evacuation of Thanbyuzayat to camps

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[7] At this stage (24 May) 90 Australians had died or been killed in Burma, and 26 British.

[8] The Japanese could not supply any materials for the work.

[9] As an aftermath officers from the Japanese Department of Propaganda interviewed Varley and asked him what he thought of the bombing. Varley said that the bombs were aimed at the railway line near the camp, and some casualties among the prisoners were men who were working on the outskirts of the camp near the line. He (Varley) was sure that if the Red Cross was maintained the camp would not be deliberately bombed unless, as happened on the 12th, Japanese soldiers fired at the planes from within the camp. However, there was always the likelihood while the camp was sited beside a legitimate target—the railway yards—that it would be hit.

[1] Varley and Black were both wounded. Varley although only lightly wounded had miraculously escaped greater injury. He was temporarily relieved as commander of No. 3 Group by Lt-Col Hamilton of the CCS. Varley's adjutant, Captain Griffin, who at all times "had conducted himself in accordance with the standards of the highest tradition of an Australian officer", was among the dead.

which had fallen into disuse at the 4, 8 and 18 Kilo marks, but refused to provide trucks or railway accommodation to move either the patients or their equipment. Many of the men had not walked more than a few hundred yards for months. Many had scarcely left their beds. Now they were asked not only to make the journey on foot, but to carry all their bedding kit and mess gear into the jungle, to camps where they would be hopelessly overcrowded.[2] Soon after the establishment of his headquarters at Kilo-4, Nagatomo informed Varley that difficulty was being encountered in getting forward rations to the Kilo-105 and Kilo-108 camps —a difficulty that Varley had long foreseen and feared—and that, as it was "useless taking rations there for men unable to work", he proposed bringing back the sick to the Kilo-55 camp. Varley asked that the sick under Colonel Coates at the Kilo-75 camp also be brought back to the Kilo-55 camp, and Nagatomo agreed. Subsequently Varley and Nagatomo went forward to these camps to arrange the movement of the sick, of whom there were about 1,500. At the Kilo-105 camp Varley found a Japanese N.C.O. blitzing the sick parade to get more men:

> He stated (wrote Varley) that Lieut-Colonel Nagatomo had ordered that more men be sent to work. I disbelieved this . . . ordered a sick parade and sent the interpreter to Lieut-Colonel Nagatomo asking him to make an inspection. . . . The sick included hundreds with tropical ulcers varying in size up to a small saucer. Nagatomo was astonished. He ordered that numbers going to work be left to doctors, and he asked what medicines and drugs . . . were required.[3]

In September the Mobile Force had reached the 108-Kilo mark, having in the meantime occupied camps at the 70, 80 and 95-Kilo marks. At this stage it was learnt from Nagatomo that rails would have to be laid by prisoners of Group 3 as far as the 150-Kilo mark, where they would meet parties from Thailand. The men were riddled with tropical ulcers, plagued by dysentery and beri beri, and were working shifts of 24 hours on and 24 off as the Japanese sought to complete the line to schedule. Railway trucks followed the force carrying supplies of rails and sleepers. Locomotives shunted trucks so that the leading bogies carrying the sleepers and rails reached to the very end of the line. Sleepers were then unloaded and dropped in position along the embankment. Next the lengths of rail were run off the bogies in pairs, one from either side:

> Eighteen or twenty sweating men would grasp the rail and holding it up the leading end, quickly run it clear of the bogie and jump clear as it fell on to the sleepers with a resounding Clang! It was pulled into position against the last rail and connected with fish plates and bolts. Spikes were then driven into the sleepers to hold the rail at each end and in the middle. When this had been completed on both sides, the train moved forward to the end of the newly-laid line, where the process was repeated. As each pair of bogies was cleared, they were manhandled off the tracks to make way for the next pair carrying another sixteen rails and sleepers.
>
> Following the laying gangs at a slower pace came the back spiking gang. Their job was to spike the rails to each sleeper, one spike on each side of the rail on the

[2] At the Kilo-8 camp, for example, there was hardly a roof of any kind for a camp of 1,600 men.

[3] On a later visit to the Kilo-55 hospital camp, Nagatomo, having witnessed a leg amputation under primitive conditions, expressed concern and offered to arrange for future cases (of which there were then about 30) to be taken to the Japanese hospital at Moulmein.

straight and two spikes to each sleeper on the curves. Spiking teams were made up of four men: one auger-man who drilled holes in the sleeper with a heavy auger; and one bar-man armed with a steel bar weighing about 25 lb, whose job it was to lever the sleeper tightly against the rail as the remaining two members of the team drove the spike home with lusty blows of 12-lb hammers.

It was all hard work, performed at high pressure. By the time the sun began to drop towards the west the auger-man was certain that his arms would drop off as he drilled his next hole; and the bar now weighed much more than 25-lb, and as fatigue began to tell, the blows of the hammer men were not always accurate and the spike was sometimes bent. If the Jap engineer saw the work stop for a minute for a bent spike to be straightened or pulled out, he bounded along muttering or screaming abuse, and laid about him with his heavy metre stick.[4]

On 17th September the force moved to the Kilo-116 camp, "the worst yet occupied by any P.W.", close to the Burma-Thailand border, a shockingly filthy area where one hut, hastily-cleared of its cholera-stricken occupants to make way for the new arrivals, housed the entire force. Another four or five huts were used to house native labour. The hut could accommodate only half the force at one time, but this presented no special difficulty as 24-hour shifts were being worked and thus only half the force was in camp at the one time. On 30th September the force moved on to an incomplete camp at 131 Kilos, which had formerly been occupied by coolies. Line-laying ceased in this period, because shale cuttings had collapsed farther along the line, and the force was occupied putting ballast beneath sleepers, and restacking sleepers already stacked (a whimsical Japanese method of keeping worn-out men working). The Dutch at the Kilo-108 camp were moved forward to Nieke to hasten the completion of work in the cuttings. On 13th October the Mobile Force (reinforced by 300 Dutch prisoners) recommenced line-laying at a frightful pace. At one stage the men laboured for 33 hours without a rest. By 16th October the two lines had linked about the 145-Kilo mark, and prisoners from Burma were now regularly encountering other forces working north from Thailand.

On 20th November Memorial Services were held by order of the Japanese for the men who had lost their lives at all camps in Burma and Thailand occupied by prisoners of Groups 3 and 5. Large inscribed crosses were erected at the cemeteries, and a letter of condolence was read by Colonel Nagatomo to the assembled prisoners at the Kilo-55 camp and by his representatives at other camps. Two days' rest was granted. That month the Japanese informed the prisoners that fit men would remain in the jungle to maintain the line;[5] "light sick" would go to Bampong in Thailand, and "heavy sick" to a hospital near Bangkok. The food in most camps was now so poor that, although the major work was completed, the death rate began again to rise, particularly in the Kilo-55 hospital camp; and Varley, growing perhaps tired of the repeated failures of Colonel Nagatomo

[4] R. H. Whitecross, p. 99.

[5] The quota of fit men set for Groups 3 and 5, both of which were now under command of Varley, was 4,000—far more of course than could be mustered. There were in fact no fit men, only men who were fit compared with others who were sick. Of 884 men in the Mobile Force at this stage, only 24 were graded as fit, including Colonel Williams.

to improve matters, asked for the right to correspond with a representative of a neutral power appointed by the belligerents for the purpose.

Much of the boxed meat received during this period was green and flyblown, and the small cattle (weighing between 100 and 150 pounds) that found their way into the camp were often diseased and would normally have been condemned. The green portion of the boxed meat would be cut away, the maggots washed off, and the remainder of the meat would be eaten. The wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job were sometimes required to decide whether or not diseased cattle should be used in the cookhouse. One battalion commander who lacked the qualifications needed to decide whether or not an animal should be eaten, developed the practice of asking each of his butchers in turn what he would do if it were thrown out. If the majority said they would eat it themselves, the animal was added to the camp rations.[6]

In December 1943 a godsend in the form of a consignment of Red Cross supplies was received by Varley from Thailand addressed to "British POW Burma" and consigned from the Swiss Consulate at Bangkok. It was left to Varley and the Senior British officer, a captain, to distribute. The British officer said that as the goods were addressed to "British P.O.W." he would not agree to the goods being distributed to other than English prisoners.[7]

> I was staggered by this un-British sentiment (wrote Varley) especially when our Red Cross scheme has been helping English troops the same as all others in the past 14 months. English officers of course have contributed, but owing to their shortage of numbers, and being mostly of junior rank, their contributions have not been in proportion to others. Further . . . the Australian Red Cross officers have borrowed R.6,000 from the Dutch and in this they have likewise benefited, and the Dutch have shown their spirit of cooperation by making the loan.

In the event Varley ordered that the Red Cross supplies be distributed to the most dangerously ill of all nationalities, and this was done.

That month and in January the prisoners began to move eastward in batches to Thailand, where they were reunited with other forces and met comrades they had not seen since Changi. The fit remained in the jungle until the end of March, where they were employed principally in cutting fuel for locomotives, before they too were moved by rail to Thailand.[8]

Group 5 (1,800 strong) which had belatedly been placed under Varley's command, had come from Java, as mentioned earlier. It was a principally Dutch force, but also contained 450 Americans and 385 Australians.

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[6] At the Kilo-105 camp several boxes of meat arrived in so bad a state that the Japanese commandant complained of the smell. The meat must be eaten forthwith, he declared. The Australian commander replied that it was too bad to eat. The Japanese then ordered the meat to be buried since "I cannot put up with the smell". "His house was 300 yards from where we were," commented the Australian commander . . . "and we had the meat!" Eventually much of the consignment was eaten.

[7] The goods comprised 5 cases of peaches, 5 of jam, 5 of sauce, 13 of sardines, 7 of green peas, 54 of biscuits, 5 of butter, 275,000 cigarettes and 55 cases of soap.

[8] Throughout the period a radio set had been operated at great risk by Lieutenant Watchorn and Sapper T. Stephenson of the 2/12th Field Coy (of Drummoyne, NSW), which kept the men abreast of world events and their optimism at a high level.

The senior officer was Lieut-Colonel Tharp of the 131st U.S. Artillery Regiment; the senior Australian officer was Major Robertson of the 2/6th Field Company. Like Black and Williams Forces, it had left Java in October 1942 for Singapore, but unlike those forces had spent rather longer at Changi, and had not embarked for Burma until 9th January. On its way north the convoy (two transports and a small naval escort) was attacked by Allied aircraft. One ship was sunk with the loss of about 400 Japanese and about 40 Dutch prisoners, and the *Moji Maru,* carrying the Australian and American prisoners, was damaged.

> Moji Maru twice near missed by bombs (says the report of the force). Last stick holing starboard side severely, killing 7 PW's, wounding many others. Many Nips killed and wounded. After-gun blew up killing its crew; forward gun, trained aft, narrowly missed blowing the navigating bridge to fragments. . . . Behaviour of PW's excellent. As ship circled round picking up survivors from the other vessel, sick bay organised on after-deck by Captain Lumpkin, USA and Commander Epstein USN together with Australian, American and Dutch orderlies. Captain Kennedy[9] is to be especially commended for his work in organising cookhouse to get tea and hot water ready and generally in controlling the troops. RAN personnel . . . also Cpl Imlach,[1] Ptes French[2] and Coe[3] were generally outstanding in work of organisation and rescue of Dutch PW's.[4]

On the 17th the troops reached Moulmein, where all prisoners were lodged at the gaol. There they were organised into national groups, each group being broken up into working platoons or *kumis,* as with "A" Force. Between 24th and 28th January the prisoners, now known as "Thai POW Branch 5" were moved from Moulmein to Kilo 18 (Alepauk) on the Burma-Thailand railway. The group commanders were taken to Thanbyuzayat where they met Brigadier Varley and spent a few days before rejoining their forces learning something of the general procedure and requirements of the working parties. On the 26th, accompanied by Japanese guards, all *kumis* began work on railway tasks, with officers acting as foremen. At the outset the task of moving earth to the embankment was set at 1.5 cubic metres a day; holidays were granted every tenth day, and impromptu concerts were organised. Some picnic soccer was also played, the Korean guards joining in and "behaving like a lot of happy gutter kids". The daily task was increased as time passed and the hard work and poor food ("sufficient to keep people just alive who are not engaged in toil") combined to take toll of the men. By 17th March 96 Australians were on sick parade, but a light duty *kumi* helped the Australians to maintain their working quota. Water sufficient only for cookhouse requirements could be drawn from the camp well, but men were permitted to bathe at streams as they returned to camp from working

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[9] Capt J. Kennedy, TX2084; 2/3 MG Bn. Manager; of Hobart; b. Hobart, 18 May 1912.

[1] Cpl W. Imlach, TX3354; 2/40 Bn. Timber worker, concrete worker, hard rock miner, bullock driver, navvy; of Myrtle Bank, Tas; b. Launceston, Tas, 16 Apr 1906.

[2] Pte J. St G. French, NX36988; 2/2 Pnr Bn. Labourer; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Armidale, NSW, 2 Jul 1919.

[3] Pte J. C. G. Coe, VX39468; 2/2 Pnr Bn. Chauffeur; of Moonee Ponds, Vic; b. Kingston, London, 6 Jan 1916.

[4] Diary of Maj L. J. Robertson, RAE, Commanding Australian Personnel of Thai POW Branch 5, Burma 1943-44.

parties. Each national group maintained its own cookhouse. Cattle were sometimes delivered on the hoof. The rice ration generally measured up to the promised scale, but the bulk of the vegetable issue comprised melons—wryly described by one Australian "as water standing up". However, a canteen was established, and the rations were supplemented by items bought locally, such as duck eggs, vermicilli, tomatoes, *gula* (sugar) and cigarettes. The working men were paid every ten days at fixed rates, and, with the introduction of regular pay, all ranks began to contribute two days' pay in every ten for the purchase of extra food through the canteen for general messing.[5]

In mid-March Group 5 moved to a new camp, sited in rugged, heavily-timbered hills, about Kilo 85. This was in an area partly cleared of jungle; the accommodation consisted of huts newly built of saplings, with bamboo and atap roofs. The Australians were employed in "clearing, cutting and filling tasks". The administrative staffs were whittled down as the Japanese endeavoured to increase the strength of working parties. Early in April the force moved on foot through thick dust to a new location at Kilo 80. There in a bamboo-encrusted hollow, set in thick jungle which prevented any breeze through the camp the numbers of sick increased and it became increasingly difficult to produce work-party quotas. The Japanese threatened that if their demands were not met officers would make up the numbers; and they conducted strict inspections of the sick. Rations improved but working hours lengthened as the Japanese kept the prisoners at work until dark or later to complete the Kilo-80 section of the railway. The longer working hours took toll of the weaker men, and by 6th May, of a total of 322 Australians in camp, it was difficult to muster 220 for outside work. That month *kumis* were returning to camp regularly after midnight, having begun work in the early morning. By 29th May, all work on the Kilo-80 section having finished the force was marched to a camp at Kilo 100, carrying full packs and bedding, the last half of the march being through ankle-deep mud.

At the Kilo-100 camp the total Australians numbered 344; 170 of these were on railway tasks, 75 were sick and the rest were employed as camp staff and on improvements. In June the Australians were finding difficulty in producing the requisite number for working parties and these were made up by levies of the halt and the lame.[6]

At this stage the Japanese stated that the delivery of rations was temporarily impracticable, because of a bridge break near Kilo 75. They reduced the rations of outside workers to two and half normal meals a day, and of inside workers to one and a half. The amount of work required was correspondingly reduced. The low death rate among the Australians convinced the Japanese that they were healthier than other nationalities,

[5] The daily rates of pay were: warrant-officers 40 cents; NCO's 30 cents; privates 25 cents.

[6] "The prevailing wet," wrote Major Robertson, . . . "seems to be having a bad effect on the spirits of the weaker-hearted. . . . Refusals to go on camp duties for improvements in camp accommodation and hygiene have recently become more frequent. These men are actually thought little of by the majority of their comrades, the term 'bludger' being applied. It is regretted that a *few* of the officers are sometimes showing a *tendency* to act like disgruntled ORs."

and proportionately larger demands were made on them. Blitzes continued to be carried out on sick parades, and light duty men formed a percentage of the working parties. The commander, Major Robertson, was frequently slapped for failure to produce the requisite numbers. On 22nd July one Australian[7] and two Americans died of suspected cholera.

Sections of the camp were isolated, and working parties reduced. On 2nd August Captain S. Hugh Lumpkin, the medical officer to the force, died after a short illness "undoubtedly aggravated by the mentally torturing task of caring for our sick at all times" especially during the blitz period. The outbreak of cholera was halted, but deaths from other causes continued. In the 72 days to 20th August 62 died at the Kilo-100 camp, including 4 Australians. Some of the deaths were attributable to the depression caused by the damp, dank surroundings and the unsuitable food. The resultant loss of appetite prevented recovery. At this time the strengths of the national groups were: Australian 301, American 363, Dutch 834. The truth of the Coates' dictum that the route to survival lay in the bottom of the troops' dixies seemed to be confirmed by a check made of the eating habits of the troops at this time. This revealed that the Australians ate "all their rice and could eat more"; that the Americans ate less than their issue; and the Dutch, though perhaps more accustomed to a rice diet, ate still less.

By 23rd September the dead numbered 168, including 14 Australians. At this stage because of "decreased cost of living", the amount deducted from officers' pay for board and lodging was reduced to 20 rupees a month. The scale of payment to officers when this took effect was:

	Gross	Board and Lodging	Bank	Nett
Major	170	20	120	30
Captain	122.50	20	72.50	30
Lieutenant	85.0	20	35	30

The general result, adds the report of this force, was "no change in actual pay". In September, although men had continued to die at Kilo 100 at the rate of nearly four a day, and by the end of the month the total dead amounted to 183, only 14 of these were Australians.[8] The troops were then being employed on napping and carrying ballast to the track between Kilo 100 and Kilo 105 for Burmese to lay. On 12th October the first steam train passed the Kilo-100 mark; three Dutchmen died that day bringing the total deaths to 208. That month the Japanese issued instructions that the use of certain words, long since popularised by British and Australian soldiers, must cease. The Japanese soldiers were becoming contaminated!

There was a general improvement in camp conditions at this time. The rain began to ease, rest days became more frequent, rations began to

[7] The second Australian to die in Robertson's force since the work began.

[8] At this stage some 30 Australians had died at Kilo 80, which had been established as a hospital area for Group 5, and at other camps along the line.

improve and snakes, "said to taste between fish and rabbit", were abundant. By the middle of October the diarist of the Australian force was able to note that "two days have passed without a funeral". On 12th November the camp received its first mail—six letter cards dated January 1943, all addressed to Java. On 20th November, memorial services, ordered by the Japanese at the cemeteries at Kilo 80 (hospital area for Kilo 100) and Kilo 100 took place, and a "day of feasting" was declared. The work party call up at this stage amounted to 50 per cent of camp strength, working on railway maintenance on a day-on day-off basis. Early in December 1943 "Thai POW Branch 5, Burma" was abolished and the Java Party came under the administration of Group 3. On the 27th began the evacuation of light duty and hospital cases to base camps in Thailand. The departure of Colonel Tharp on the 29th left Major Robertson the senior officer in camp. In January most of the remaining Australians (127 in all) and the remaining Dutch and American prisoners moved to Kilo 105. The gradual reduction of the force by transfer to base camps in Thailand continued until 23rd March when the force was considered wound up. Australian deaths in Burma and Thailand totalled 67. In the period during which Group 5 worked independently of Varley's command, 54 (of 385) Australians, 98 (of 456) Americans, and 322 (of 1,160) Dutch died. The lowest death rate (14 per cent) was suffered by the Australians; the highest (27.7 per cent) by the "Dutch"—largely Asians. The total strengths and deaths in Groups 3 and 5 in the period 15th September 1942 to 20th July 1944 by nationalities showed, however, different proportions:

	Total strength	Deaths	Per cent
Australians	4,851	771	15.8
British	482	133	27.5
Americans	650	128	19.6
Dutch	5,554	697	12.5
	11,537	1,729	

In addition 33 Australian, 17 British and 237 Dutch prisoners died in Burma before work began on the railway. Up to January 1944 the death rate in "A" Force was 13.06 per cent; in Group 3 13.43 per cent—far lower rates as will be seen, than those suffered by any of the forces in which Australians were employed in Thailand.

"During the whole of this tragic period of misery and suffering, Brig Varley's strong personality, his vigorous and fearless championship of the troops, careless of rebuffs and determined to leave no stone unturned for the better treatment of the men, won for him the grudging respect of the Japanese," wrote Lieut-Colonel Anderson, "and I have no hesitation in saying was probably instrumental in preventing a far greater tragedy than that which took place."

While Groups 3 and 5 had been thrusting the railway southwards from Thanbyuzayat towards Nieke, other groups of prisoners had been working

northwards from Thailand, as has been mentioned, to meet them. The first Australians to reach the southern end of the railway belonged to Dunlop Force (900 strong) from Java, which arrived at Konyu on the Menam Kwa Noi River on 24th January 1943. There they joined Dutch and British prisoners who were part of the major transfer of prisoners from Singapore which had begun in June of the previous year, gained momentum in October and November, and was soon to be further accelerated.

In Thailand the work forces normally were organised into battalions of about 600 including about 30 officers. From Bampong some of these battalions were taken forward to work camps by truck; others whose members were weak when they set out from Singapore and further debilitated by the heat, crowding and poor rations during a four to five days' train journey, were marched northwards, as a rule at the rate of about 12 miles a day, but sometimes in longer stages, and always by night. The staging camps were inadequate and sometimes filthy, and many marchers spent their nights in the open—a great hardship during the monsoonal season. The prisoners were escorted by Korean guards commanded by Japanese N.C.O's. For administrative purposes the labour battalions were organised, as in Burma, into groups. Irrespective of seniority the Allied commander of a camp occupied by the Japanese group headquarters was regarded by the Japanese as the Allied Group Commander for all matters concerning records and pay. However, his command over other camps in the group was almost non-existent, and the poverty of inter-camp communication together with the typical water-tight compartments in which each camp worked, usually made local commanders the final arbiters of all matters in dispute. In each camp the senior battalion commander acted as Allied camp commander, but where increases or changes in camp strength produced a more senior officer, the seniority of the latter was seldom recognised by the Japanese.

The work-party organisation in Thailand varied between camps, and also from one period to another. At the end of 1942 it had been common for one officer to be sent out with 25 to 30 men; later one officer to 100 men was equally common; and later still, when officers were themselves employed on the line the practice of sending out an officer with other-rank working parties fell into disuse.[9]

In speeches and in private conversations the Japanese officers and men, as in Burma, soon made their attitude towards the prisoners clear.

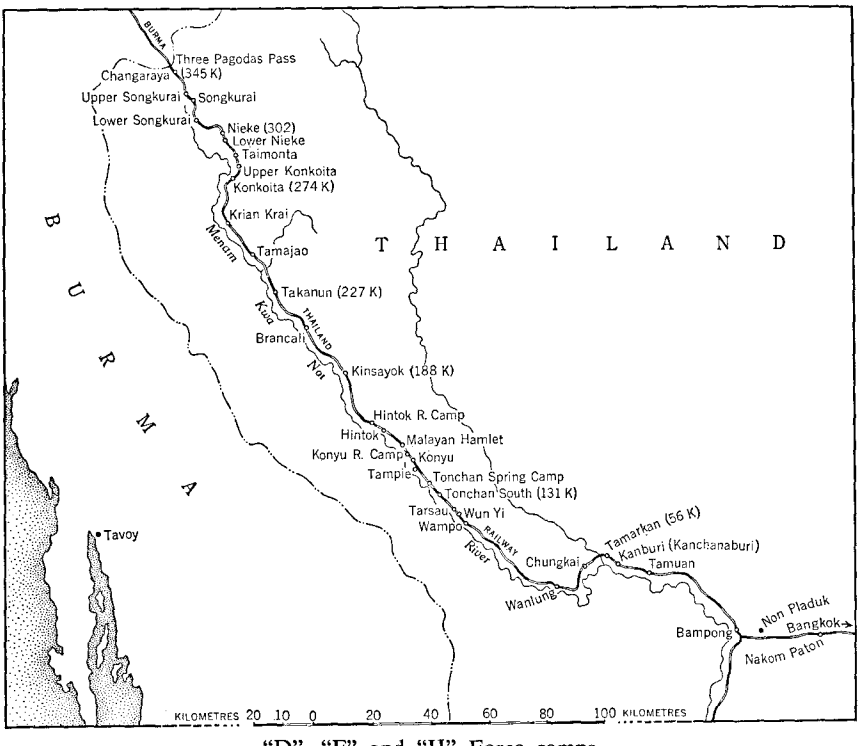
During 1942-1943 (states an Australian report) the Japanese claimed to know nothing either of the Hague or the Geneva Conventions. Those who admitted some knowledge of International Law and these conventions expressed what can be taken as the Japanese Army attitude that a signature to the Hague Convention by Japan was binding only on the Government and not on the Army.

They took the view that it was dishonourable to be taken as prisoners and that, therefore, prisoners of war had no rights or status and were slaves of the Emperor

[9] It is doubtful in any case whether the presence of an officer was of any value; they were consistently ignored by the Japanese, and not infrequently made the object of special spite.

for life. We must be punished for fighting against Japan and made to correct our anti-Japanese ideas. . . .

The Japanese did not consider human life of any value when viewed in the light that the railway must be pushed on regardless of the cost. . . . Discipline was enforced by brutality; for example, when standing to attention in front of a Japanese soldier should a prisoner's heels be one inch apart he would be severely beaten. Bashings and other forms of punishment for minor offences were common.[1]



"D", "F" and "H" Force camps

In the Bampong to Nieke sector in which Dunlop and succeeding forces were to be employed, the country was at first flat and open with sparse low bush, but once Wanlung was reached the jungle became thicker and great clumps of prickly bamboo, some as high as 60 feet with bases as thick as a man's thigh, awkward and dangerous to clear, menaced the wayfarer. Farther on the country became hilly, and at Wampo, where a rocky hillside fell steeply into the Kwai Noi River, a great triple-tier viaduct 200 metres long was built. Beyond Tarsau the country rose sharply and became wild, hilly and rugged and covered with dense jungle. This high ground continued beyond Kinsayok and at length began to fall towards Takanun. Between Takanun and Tamajao three or four great cuttings were made. In this area the gradients were often steep and a great

[1] Report on Conditions, Life and Work of P.O.W. in Burma and Siam 1942-1945, Brig C. A. McEachern.

many ravines had to be bridged. Near Konkoita the Kwai Noi diverged westward from the track which crossed a tributary and then continued to Nieke.

The Kwai Noi, navigable as far as Takanun in the dry season and as far as Konkoita in the wet, was of great importance during the construction of the railway, both as a means of transport and for its water supply. Also it was rich in fish, although the prisoners seldom were able to take advantage of this.

The jungle was full of exotic orchids, beautiful butterflies and lizards, and "of every kind of biting insect both by day and night". The scenery was often wildly majestic. The rainy season began in May, was at its wettest in July and August, and ended in October. For the next three months the climate was cold. The night temperature sank as low as 45 degrees Fahrenheit and men shivered and prayed for the sun. In February, March and April the weather became hotter and hotter and the camps and roads were deep in dust.

Dunlop Force was organised into two battalions each about 450 strong commanded by Majors Greiner[2] and Woods[3] designated "O" and "P" Battalions respectively. Two other battalions "A" (337 strong commanded by Captain Hands[4]) and "R" (a purely Dutch battalion, 623 strong commanded by Captain Smits) also came under Dunlop's command. The first task of the force was to clear a camp area of bamboo so that huts could be built, but after two weeks of fruitless labour the camp site was abandoned, and on 12th March "O" Battalion (followed a week later by "P") moved to Hintok. "Q" and "R" Battalions also moved from the Konyu area at this time. During the period spent at Konyu the troops had slept in the open, but at the primitive Hintok Road camp, about two or three miles from the river, there were a few dilapidated huts and bamboo leantos which had previously housed Indonesian troops in so filthy a condition that they were eventually burnt. The incoming troops at once set to work to build bamboo platforms and erect tents, but the Japanese allowed the prisoners no time to make the area habitable and immediately began to draw upon them for maximum numbers for working parties. From the first camp staff was kept to a minimum.[5]

The difficulties imposed by the smallness of the camp maintenance staff were enhanced by the distance of the camp from the nearest barge-point, and stores had to be manhandled over rough hills a distance of 7 kilo-

[2] Maj H. G. Greiner, ED, VX45534; 2/3 MG Bn. Grazier; of Tongala, Vic; b. Echuca, Vic, 19 Feb 1908.

[3] Maj F. A. Woods, MBE, QX6100; S/Capt 21 Bde 1940-41; 9 Div 1941; LO between HQ British tps and HQ AIF Java 1942. Stock dealer; of Ramsay, via Cambooya, Qld; b. Sydney, 5 Aug 1910.

[4] Capt J. L. Hands, WX3335; 2/3 MG Bn. Bank officer; of Perth, WA; b. Bunbury, WA, 4 Mar 1916.

[5] Only 70 were allowed for all administrative and maintenance work for a camp of about 1,000. This allowed 29 cooks, 15 medical personnel (including two doctors, Majors A. A. Moon and E. L. Corlette), 11 clerks, 6 men for anti-malarial work and hygiene, 5 for water duties, 1 bugler and three batmen for the Japanese. Dunlop continued for the time being to be employed as an administrative officer. Cookhouse staffs were usually kept by the Japanese to a minimum of between 1 and 4 per cent of the camp strength. As they were often required to cut their own bamboo for firewood and carry all rations from railhead or riverside their casualties, contrary to popular belief, were often high. At Konyu in 1942-43, for example, the casualties were as high as 50 per cent.

metres. Although Japanese transport frequently used the road, the Japanese engineer officer refused to allow his lorries to be used for this purpose, and as a result the carriage of stores fell heavily on the camp duty section, including officers and volunteer railway workers who made the trip at the end of the day's work.

An almost insuperable obstacle to the work of camp construction, however, was the lack of tools and materials, and it was only with the greatest difficulty at Hintok that deep trench latrines were dug and ultimately provided with timbered roofs and flyproof covers. The timber for the work had to be obtained by felling jungle timber and laboriously splitting it with wooden wedges. While wire was sometimes available for nail-making, at most times wooden pegs had to be manufactured.

It was not surprising that camps should suffer, when similar deficiencies extended even to the railway works. There, for example, a singular lack of good spades existed, although these might have been considered fundamental to any earth-moving project.[6] A lack of means of earth transport made it necessary to devote a large proportion of the labour force to remedy this deficiency by the most primitive means—in bags, on stretchers, or in baskets. In deep cuttings it was common to see a chain of 20 men passing baskets behind two men with digging tools.

The ingenuity of prisoners knew no limits, particularly where the majority stood to benefit. At Hintok, for example, a complete water system, manufactured from bamboo, piped water from a dam several hundred yards to a system of showers and dixie washing points, and was also used to cool condensers in a water distillery plant.[7]

Shelter at Hintok consisted of bamboo and atap huts for both the workers and sick, but in many cases the accommodation for the sick was infinitely the worse of the two.[8] Hospitals were built at a pace which usually lagged behind the number of sick. The Japanese largely disregarded deterioration of huts and tents, gross overcrowding became the rule, and these habitations became infested by rats and other vermin. Bedding was the roughest of bamboo, sometimes even without blankets, let alone mattress or pillows, and, as a rule, the sick lay massed together on continuous bamboo platforms with their feet directed to the only passage through the hut.

For the workers the Hintok section of the line presented special difficulties. It was extremely rocky, with large embankments and deep cuttings, and some of the working camps were so sited that workers had to march over rough hills in all six to seven miles daily.[9] They usually left camp in darkness between 7 and 8 a.m. (Japanese time) and the march and the day's work frequently kept them out for as long as 16 hours a

[6] This lack was accentuated after the arrival of large numbers of native workers on the line, when tools of poor quality (for example shovels manufactured from oil drums) were supplied to the workers.

[7] Bamboo served for making huts, beds, brooms, brushes, baskets, water containers and other things.

[8] Workers lived 20 to a leaky hut 16 x 14 feet.

[9] Others had to walk up to 10 miles.

day. By 7th April 85 had been evacuated unfit for work to Tarsau where a hospital had been established and 121 were sick in camp out of a total strength of 873 men. Dunlop attributed this deterioration in the men's health to inadequate rations, inadequate camp staff, lack of footwear and primitive accommodation and medical arrangements.

The primitiveness of the accommodation at Hintok Road camp in comparison with that at other camps was soon remedied, and by May it was recognised as one of the best camps in the area.

> It was a purely Australian camp (wrote a British officer who passed through Hintok with "H" Force on 9th May) and was surrounded by a bamboo palisade. . . . We spent the night under an atap roof on a very wet floor and the Australians were as friendly as they could be—there was little enough they could do to help us for their rations had been skeleton stuff for months. They had however a fair M.I. room that patched us up generously. Several things were unusual about Hintok. The latrines were made of wood, were clean and sixteen feet deep; they had made a complete water system out of hollow bamboo pipes and had rigged up showers in a bath place entirely carpentered from bamboo; and they had a silver bugle blown by a first-rate bugler, who made the calls sound more beautiful with the mountain echoes than I'd ever believed a bugle could sound.[1]

The rations referred to above usually consisted of inferior rice, varying in quantity between 7 and 13 ounces a day depending on the type of work done, and a little dried vegetable and fish, often in a decayed state. In one 10-day period the Hintok camp of 886 men received 33 pounds of pie melon. They were "grossly deficient in proteins, fat and vitamins", in the opinion of Colonel Dunlop, and this combined with their inadequate calorific value rapidly resulted in malnutrition disorders and lowered health.[2] The men were paid when employed on heavy work at rates that prevailed elsewhere. One-third of all such pay was contributed to a messing fund to purchase extra rations through canteen sources and to provide for the sick.[3] When men were evacuated from Hintok it was arranged to send down to base hospitals 10 cents a man a day to assist them. As the number of sick increased, however, this arrangement became a heavy strain on the meagre wages of officers, who were not permitted to use their bank balances for this purpose.

At the end of March the first of "D" Force had begun to arrive in the area and a portion of "S" Battalion of that force brought the strength of the Hintok camp to about 1,000. The commander of the force, Lieut-Colonel McEachern, having arrived, Dunlop was able to persuade the Japanese to relieve him of his duties as an administrative officer, and in April McEachern took command at Hintok.

"D" Force represented a substantial reinforcement of 2,780 British and 2,220 Australian prisoners. The Australians had been drawn mainly

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[1] J. Coast, *Railroad of Death*, p. 104.

[2] Also the rations, having been plundered before delivery by the Japanese, often bore little relation to the amount which the prisoners were compelled under threat of punishment to sign for.

[3] In particular, eggs supplied by this means saved many lives.

from the artillery units of the 8th Division, and were organised into three battalions.[4] The senior medical officer was Captain Hazelton,[5] there were seven other medical officers and 30 medical other ranks. The Australian portion of the force had left Singapore in four drafts between 14th and 18th March. Like preceding drafts they were taken to Bampong in enclosed steel rice trucks 18 feet by 8 feet into which 36 men were crowded during a journey that took between four and five days. There were no washing facilities or sanitary arrangements, and prisoners were issued with only one pint of water a day, and beaten for attempting to obtain more. At Bampong they were searched, before being taken over the newly-constructed line in open flat rail cars to an open and unguarded area at Kanburi. There for a time they were left to fend for themselves; the many Japanese in the area appeared uninterested in the newcomers, and for a week no parades were held nor instructions received by the force. The men traded personal possessions with local merchants and stall holders, and "everywhere groups of men boiled billies and brewed coffee, fried eggs and bananas and sweated over hot frying pans. Life became one long feast."

At the end of a week this agreeable interlude was shattered by the arrival of a number of aggressive, shouting guards, from whom the prisoners learnt that the week's freedom had been the result of a mistake. It took the guards two days to round up prisoners from the surrounding countryside.

The railway at this stage had progressed no farther than Kanburi and "D" Force was to be employed on embankments and cuttings and difficult tasks along the line where progress had fallen behind schedule. As has been noted, part of McEachern's battalion had gone to Hintok. A second battalion ("T"), of which a record has been preserved, was moved up to Tarsau by trucks and based at Wampo beside a detachment of 200 Japanese engineers who were reasonable in their demands. At the end of two weeks, when a small embankment on which they were initiated to railway work was completed, the men were marched downstream to an old-established camp, whose occupants were the diseased and dejected survivors of an English prisoner-of-war group, and a detachment of brutal guards. There a huge embankment under construction near the camp was well behind schedule and had to be completed in two weeks. The workers were split into two shifts—one to labour at night and one by day. Groups of six Australians were set the task of digging earth and carrying it in stretchers to the top of a high embankment. On arrival the Japanese engineers marked out a plot of ground 6 feet by 3 feet to be dug to a depth of six feet, and indicated that when it was finished the prisoners

[4] "S", "T" and "U", commanded by McEachern, Major E. J. Quick and Captain Newton respectively.

[5] Capt A. R. Hazelton, NX35134; AAMC. Medical practitioner; of Artarmon, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Nov 1915.

would return to camp.[6] Despite various subterfuges the men soon began to feel the strain. At night

> Great fires burnt everywhere and the groups of sweating bodies stood out as they slaved in their pits. A Jap had one man standing on a rock holding a crowbar over his head. Another Jap had two men chasing each other round a tree for hours on end. Yet another . . . had set an unfortunate Englishman the task of rolling a massive boulder up the embankment. Like Sisyphus, the Englishman laboured with his stone only to find it rolled back two feet for every foot gained. Men who had collapsed, lay where they fell until the end of the shift.[7]

After a fortnight's constant work about 100 Australians had fallen out; the rest, now near the point of exhaustion, were ordered to continue until the task was finished. In a nightmare effort, they worked for thirty hours straight. "At its end" (wrote Bombardier Clarke[8]), "we carried dozens of unconscious comrades back to our tents and fell into one of the greatest slumbers of all times."

Thence the Australians were marched north to Konyu, where the main camp was situated on a bamboo-covered plateau about three miles above the river. A second camp on the river (Konyu 2) was the loading point for stores delivered by barge. The Australians were marched to a new area and set to work to construct Konyu 3. Within the day, before the camp was near completion, half the strength of the battalion of 380 men was ordered to commence work on a cutting—"Hell Fire Pass" as it became known. This was in two sections, one about 500 yards long by about 25 feet high, and the other about 80 yards long by 80 feet high. At first the daily task was set at 1½ metres a shift, but within two days it was increased to 2 metres; by the end of the week it had been set at 3 metres, and the layer of earth having been removed, the prisoners were encountering solid rock. Shovels were issued to some men; 8-lb hammers and steel drills to others; and, as the metallic chink of hammers echoed round the hills, ant-like groups of men moved boulders and baskets of rocks out of the now shallow cutting.

By June, rail-laying parties had reached the cutting and the pressure was intensified to speed up its completion. The equipment at the cutting was reinforced by an air compressor, and a dozen Cambodian jack-hammer operators were introduced. Elephants also arrived, and more prisoners, including the fittest of "O" and "P" battalions, Newton's battalion of "D" Force, a battalion of the newly-arrived "H" Force, and some British prisoners. The hours of work lengthened until they reached 18 a day, and this continued for about six weeks until the cutting was completed.[9]

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[6] Much of the railway work was complicated by a lack of experienced Japanese engineers. The best were employed on the more difficult tasks such as bridgework; the least experienced on embankments. Some of these found it difficult even to calculate a task, and if, for example, a task required the moving of 15 cubic metres of soil, that amount had to be taken from a rectangular hole 3 x 5 metres, and 1 metre deep, and no other shape was allowed.

[7] Hugh V. Clarke, a bombardier in the 2/10 Field Regiment, in an unpublished MS.

[8] Bdr H. V. Clarke, QX17307; 2/10 Fd Regt. Cadet-surveyor; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 27 Nov 1919. Clarke has published numerous short stories and sketches of prisoner-of-war life.

[9] Captain Newton estimated that 68 men were beaten to death while working in the cutting.

At night the cutting was lit by about a dozen carbide lamps; by huge lamps constructed of 18-inch long bamboo containers, 4 inches in width, filled with dieseline, with rice sacking for wicks; and by bamboo bonfires.

A second major engineering project in this area was the "Pack of Cards Bridge", Hintok, so named because the bridge, 400 yards long by 80 feet high, fell down three times during construction. It was built of green timber, fastened with wooden wedges, spikes, bamboo ties, rattan or cane rope, and wooden dowls.

> Three weeks ago there was nothing there at all (wrote a prisoner); now there is not only this vast bridge but steam engines bumping slowly over it. . . . Two thousand pre-dynastic slaves . . . had built the entire thing in 17 days! . . . It was characteristically Japanese, not only because it was a crazy wooden bridge that nevertheless functioned, but because no other nation in the world in 1943 would have bashed and bullied, and sweated and slaved prisoners to such fantastic lengths for such an object.[1]

Thirty-one men were killed in falls from the bridge to rocks below, and 29 were beaten to death there.

The wet season had begun on 22nd May, with a 72 hours' non-stop downpour, and camps became "seas of mud walled in by bleak ramparts of jungle or bamboo". Canvas tents began to rot, and footwear, clothing and bedding rapidly deteriorated. Cholera broke out among the native labourers, and despite rigid precautions spread to the prisoners of war. At Konyu the first case occurred on 16th June; at Hintok three days later. Within two months there had been 150 cases at the Hintok camp of which 66 were ultimately fatal. The Japanese greatly feared cholera and patients were relegated to the most deplorable tents in a low-lying area, somewhat downstream of the camp, and frequently covered with several inches of water. Men who caught the disease on railway work were left to lie where they fell until word was sent to the hospital staff.

As the wear and tear on working battalions increased it became increasingly difficult to maintain the numbers required by the Japanese, and pressure upon the sick was increased to the point of "frenzied sadistic brutality".

> Work parades (wrote Dunlop) ultimately became a deplorable spectacle with men tottering with the support of sticks and carried piggyback on to a parade ground, unable to work, in order that fixed figures could be met. Lying cases were frequently carried to the engineers' lines and ordered to work with hammer, axe etc., in a sitting position. The sick were frequently treated with special savagery in order to discourage illness.

As was usual in Japanese working camps, the administration of the prisoners was divided between the local Japanese camp commandant and his staff, with many Korean guards, and the Japanese engineers, who took charge of the workmen and directed their daily activities. Generally speaking the camp commandant and staff were responsible for the hopelessly inadequate camps and medical arrangements for the prisoners; but most of the brutality and actual violence came from the engineers.

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[1] J. Coast, *Railroad of Death*, p. 96.

The engineer company in charge of the Konyu-Hintok area was commanded by Lieutenant Hirota ("Konyu Kid"[2]), a particularly cruel and sadistic Japanese, whose appearance on the line was invariably associated with waves of brutality. Blows and kicks were a routine measure of punishment and exhausted men who fell out of working parties were beaten and otherwise maltreated. To the sick Hirota displayed a special kind of savagery. On occasions prisoners suffering from diarrhoea and dysentery were not allowed to leave the line. In his treatment of the sick he was abetted by the medical N.C.O., Corporal Okada. Once towards the end of April, when the camp was about to be inspected by a visiting Japanese general, Okada undertook to reduce the hospital numbers by marching about 50 men to a hiding place in the jungle.[3] Although the men were obviously ill, with large tropical ulcers, protein oedema and other disabilities, they were handed over to the engineers to roll 40-gallon oil drums over a rough hillside track and down a steep gradient for several miles to the site of a compressor. If they allowed the drums to get out of control they were beaten.

The relentless demands for fixed numbers of workmen made the lot of medical officers most difficult, because the Japanese were prone to make reprisal raids on the hospital, from which sick were turned out indiscriminately if the required numbers were not produced. Endless daily parades with "heart-breaking comparison" were required to keep the most severely ill in hospital. Frequently men with inflamed and festering feet or ulcers of the legs were made to work on rocks or in rough jungle, and men with diarrhoea and dysentery were not permitted to cease work except during recognised rest periods. Men falling with cholera were left to lie for hours in soaking rain rather than allow workmen to carry them back to hospital. Sometimes men unable to carry on died as a result of beatings. Hostility and pin-pricking tactics towards the sick were everlasting. At times all sick men were required to do some task, and dangerously-ill patients were ordered to kill a stated number of flies with swats. Medical personnel who attempted to protect their patients from Japanese brutality were frequently beaten or stood to attention for long periods.

The Japanese tended to regard sickness as shameful, and to maltreat the sick in the mistaken belief that this would discourage them from falling ill. Camp commanders were repeatedly ordered to allot all rations to the workers and told that it did not matter if the sick died.

In this period the evacuation of the increasing numbers of sick from up-river camps was haphazard and unmethodical. The usual method was by hitch-hiking on empty barges or lorries, but frequently this resulted in sick awaiting transit for days often without attention and with little food. At Tarsau and other places on the Kwa Noi River barge-loads of

[2] The prisoners frequently bestowed nicknames upon their captors. Some of these names—"Snake Hips", "Frankenstein", "Leather Lips", for example—seem to have been derived from physical characteristics; others—"the Boy Bastard", "the Turd", "the Maggot"—to express the loathing with which some of the more brutal were regarded by the prisoners.

[3] Visits of high officials were invariably associated with intense pressure upon the sick to secure favourable working figures.

emaciated men frequently arrived, and many died during transportation. Extreme over-crowding occurred at so-called base hospitals, where no warning of the sick who came flooding in could be given.

Yet primitive though such hospitals undoubtedly were, to the human derelicts arriving from working camps on the railway they were "like entering the gates of paradise". At Tarsau, for example, huts were waterproof, the camp was clean, and the food more plentiful than the prisoners had known for weeks. At this period in its history Tarsau was divided into two camps—the hospital area on the river bank, and a smaller camp near by in which fit men were housed. The fit worked on roads in the area, but for the sick work was a thing of the past. The fit camp was divided also for eating purposes into three nationalities, British, Dutch and Australian. The vegetable peelers, who were allowed to keep their peelings, were mainly Australian.

During these grim days the mortality among troops in the Konyu-Hintok area varied from between 12 per cent in the battalions of Dunlop Force to as high as 50 per cent in others. In the period of unrelenting pressure men of various races and differing physiques suffered approximately the same mortality, because, no matter what reserve of physical strength and fortitude an individual possessed, in the long run he was driven to the same level of complete exhaustion and breakdown.[5]

Between 20th August and 2nd September the Japanese began sending large numbers of sick by barge to base hospitals and concentration areas in southern Thailand, reducing the strength of the work forces by as much as 50 per cent. In mid-September, the Hintok sector having been completed, the force was moved to the Kinsayok area. There they remained on railway work until January, when they were returned to Tarsau and thence to Tamuan. Although "D" Force never reassembled as an entity, its total mortality was reckoned at 18 per cent, rather less, as will be seen, than the rate experienced by other forces containing Australians which were employed in Thailand.

"F" Force, the sixth main party containing Australians to depart from Changi, was one of the largest—about 7,000 men including 3,662 Australians and a similar number of British prisoners—and unlike preceding groups it retained its identity throughout the eight months it was away. When it was being formed in April 1943 the Japanese said that the reason for its move was to transfer a large body of prisoners to an area where food was more plentiful and the climate healthier than on Singapore

[5] The drain on working battalions in the Hintok area is illustrated by the following figures for 12th August 1943:

Bn	Total Strength	Hospital River Camp Hintok	Hospital Hintok	Elsewhere in Hospital, Konyu and Tarsau	Total in Hospital
O	407	102	87	68	257
P	401	94	67	84	245
S	468	110	41	217	368
T	451	47	86	373	420

Island.[6] The force commander was Lieut-Colonel S. W. Harris of the 18th British Division.

Lieut-Colonel Kappe commanded the A.I.F. contingent, which consisted basically of the 27th Brigade supplemented from other units. This brigade had been kept intact since capitulation. The senior medical officer, who commanded nine other medical officers, one dental officer and 221 other ranks of the medical corps, was Major Stevens.[7]

There were then not 7,000 fit men at Changi, but the Japanese insisted that the size of the force must not be reduced and that 30 per cent of unfit men might be included. The Australians accepted this order with reservations, and finally perhaps not more than 125 unfit Australians were included. In the British force the number of unfit men was estimated at nearly 1,000 with consequences which will be described later.

The force began to leave Singapore on 16th April in a succession of thirteen trains (the first six for the A.I.F.) made up of enclosed steel trucks into each of which 27 or 28 men were crowded. After five days of extreme discomfort, hunger and thirst, each trainload arrived at Bampong, where the men camped under filthy conditions. There they learnt that a march lay ahead, although its extent was not revealed. All heavy kit and stores, including medical stores and tools, were dumped by order of the Japanese in an open space at the side of the road in Bampong, and no guard was allowed. The Japanese had available some six-wheeled lorries and one ambulance. These carried Japanese stores on their first trip north; but few completed a second run, and none a third, as monsoonal rains destroyed long stretches of road. The result was that most of the heavy stores and three-quarters of the medical supplies of "F" Force remained at Bampong. Before the march began most of the men either jettisoned their surplus clothing or sold it to Thai traders.

From Bampong the prisoners marched 180 miles northward, along jungle tracks to the Nieke area, marching by night and resting by day over a period of seventeen days. Control on the march was virtually impossible, as torches had been confiscated during a search at Bampong. Long stretches of road were corduroyed, and snags and holes made marching in the dark difficult and dangerous. Many men wore out their boots and marched on blistered feet. Although some seriously ill men were permitted to remain at Bampong, the guards forced most of them to go on, and before the march was over virtually every fit man was carrying a sick man's gear as well as his own.

Treatment of the sick varied from camp to camp. At some camps medical officers were allowed to leave behind such men as they considered unfit to march. At others they were subjected to much interference and

[6] There were other blandishments that suggested the Japanese were either concealing the facts or were ignorant of conditions in Thailand. Bands were permitted to accompany each 1,000 men and gramophones were promised after arrival; canteens were to be established within three weeks; no restrictions were placed on the amount of equipment that could be taken, and transport was promised for the carriage of heavy personal equipment, camp and medical stores and men unfit to march. There were to be no long marches.

[7] Maj R. H. Stevens, NX39043; 2/12 Fd Amb. Medical practitioner; of Kew, Vic; b. Armadale, Vic, 3 Mar 1899.

sometimes were beaten. For example, at Tarsau a Japanese medical officer and Major Bruce Hunt[8] agreed that 37 prisoners were unfit to travel; the corporal of the guard would consent to only ten remaining. The production of a letter from the Japanese medical officer had no effect on the obdurate guard. When the time came for the prisoners to move off, Hunt fell in the 37 men apart from the main parade, and stood with Major C. H. D. Wild, the interpreter, in front of them. The corporal approached with a large bamboo in his hand, and spoke menacingly to Major Wild, who replied in placatory tones.

> The corporal's only reply (reported Hunt) was to hit Major Wild in the face. Another guard followed suit and as Major Wild staggered back the corporal thrust at the major's genitals with his bamboo. I was left standing in front of the patients and was immediately set upon by the corporal and two other guards—one tripped me while two others pushed me to the ground. The three then set about me with bamboos, causing extensive bruising of skull, back, hands and arms, and a fractured left 5th metacarpal bone. This episode took place in front of the whole parade of the troops. After I was disposed of the corporal then made the majority of the sick men march with the rest of the troops.[9]

Repeated check parades at comfortless and sometimes shadeless staging camps interfered with rest periods; Thai bandits attacked and robbed stragglers. Towards the end the night marches "had become grim endurance tests, and even the fittest were suffering severely".[1] No Australians died during the march, but all were very weak and many were seriously ill, particularly with dysentery.

Colonel Harris, who was taken ahead in motor transport to Lower Nieke with the Japanese commander, Colonel Banno, found that virtually no preparations had been made to house and feed the force. Thus when Colonel Pond's battalion (700 men) arrived at Konkoita "no meal was provided until cooks drawn from the ranks of tired men had prepared the usual watery onion stew and rice.[2] No cover was available and men were compelled to lie out in the open in a scorching tropical sun until 1100 hours."[3] When the men moved to a camp area they found that few huts were roofed and those were occupied by coolies; the whole area was filthy and dying natives were lying unattended on the ground.

Pond's battalion was employed on bridge and road construction while the succeeding parties marched through, but on 15th May the Japanese medical men said that cholera had broken out among coolies in the area

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[8] Maj B. A. Hunt, MBE, WX11177. (1st AIF: 30 Bty AFA.) 2/13 AGH. Medical practitioner; of Perth, WA; b. Sydney, 23 Feb 1899.

[9] In an appendix to "History of 'F' Force", by Lt-Col S. W. Harris.

[1] Report of Activities of AIF, "F" Force. At Changi in May 1944 Colonel Kappe and Captain Curlewis completed this report, a document of about 50,000 words, on which the present summary is mainly based.

[2] The Australian battalion commanders were: 2/26 Bn, Maj C. P. Tracey; 2/29 Bn, Lt-Col S. A. F. Pond; 2/30 Bn Maj N. McG. Johnston. A fourth battalion formed of other than infantry was commanded by Maj J. H. Parry of the AASC.

[3] The prisoners in "F" Force seem to have suffered undue hardship because the Japanese administration of the force was based in Singapore, and there was jealousy between the administrations there and in Thailand. After the monsoonal rains began in May the road from Bampong was useless except to six-wheeler vehicles. Although the river rose and was navigable by mid-June as far north as Nieke, and in fact was used that far by the Japanese engineers and Thai tradesmen, it seems never to have been used for the carriage of sick and stores for "F" Force.

and the battalion was hurriedly marched on to Upper Konkoita. Between that day and the 17th, 1,800 Australians including Major Tracey's battalion from the headquarters area at Lower Nieke reached Lower Songkurai. There on the 16th several cases of cholera were diagnosed among the Australians and others.

Lower Songkurai camp consisted of bamboo huts all of which were roofless except that there were eight tents to cover the officers' quarters. There were no kitchens, and so little water that washing was impossible. There was no hospital accommodation. The prisoner-of-war officers pressed for atap for roofing and urged that enough men should be spared from roadwork—to which all fit men had immediately been allotted—to improve the camp. Gradually an isolation centre and a hospital were built. Cholera vaccine was obtained, and by 25th May all troops had been inoculated; but not before five men had died of the disease. The arrival of more tents, and atap, enabled the huts to be roofed. A secondary wave of cholera began at this time, and before it was got under control a total of 110 had died.

> It was at this stage that Major Bruce Hunt [the senior fit medical officer] made an impassioned and dramatic appeal to the men which finally dispelled the lethargy that had been so apparent, and imbued the men with a new spirit of determination to fight the crisis out. It was one of many such addresses that Major Hunt gave at this and other camps, all of which had an enormous effect on the morale of the force.[4]

On 30th May Majors Johnston[5] and Hunt and the two "battalion" commanders at Lower Songkurai wrote a strongly-worded protest to the senior Japanese officer demanding that work on the railway cease, that medical and other supplies be delivered and that the area be evacuated as soon as the men's health would allow. The letter had the effect of obtaining a four-day suspension of work.

At the end of May "F" Force was distributed among five main camps: No. 1 Camp at Lower Songkurai, about 1,800 Australians; No. 2 Camp at Songkurai, about 1,600 British; No. 3 Camp, Upper Songkurai, 393 Australians; No. 4 Camp, Konkoita, 700 Australians; No. 5 Camp, Changaraya, 700 British. There were a headquarters and hospital at Lower Nieke (soon to be moved to Nieke) of about 200 of each nationality. About 550 Australians and 800 British prisoners had still to reach the regions allotted to "F" Force.

The camps suffered as a whole from a grievous shortage of cooking utensils and food containers, and practically no tools were available either to the prisoners or to the Japanese. Each party had left Bampong carrying some containers and medical stores, but, as the sick gathered at the various staging camps, the containers were left with them and the medical stores were used up in their treatment. Some cooking utensils and containers which had arrived by lorry before the rains began were sent

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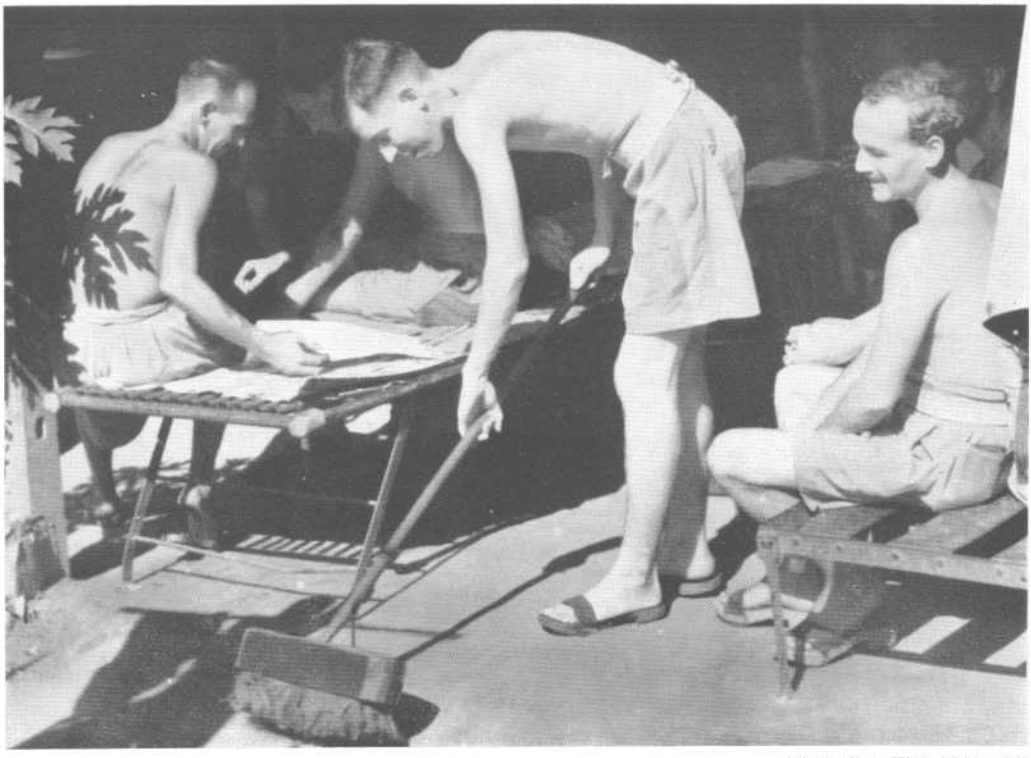
[4] Report of Activities of AIF, "F" Force.

[5] Lt-Col N. McG. Johnston, ED, NX70427; 2/30 Bn. Public servant; of Neutral Bay, NSW; b. West Maitland, NSW, 10 Jan 1906.



(*Australian War Memorial*)

(*Australian War Memorial*)

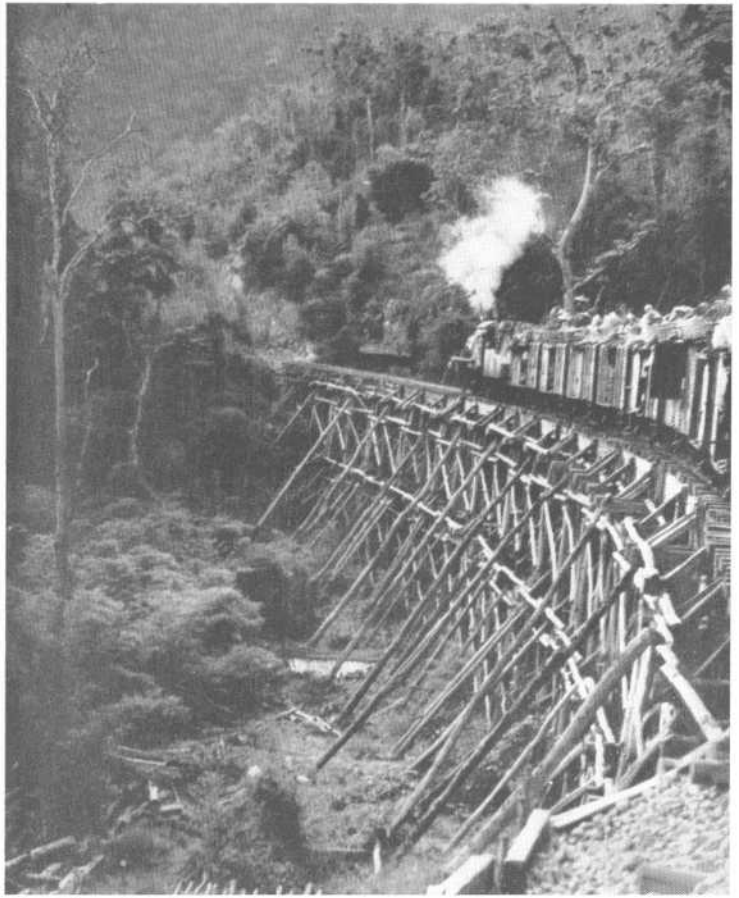
News bulletins, illicit, and prepared and circulated at great risk, ranked in importance second only to food in the prisoners' lives. *Top*: The broom wielded by Lieutenant R. F. Wright had a wireless set built into its head. *Bottom*: Wright demonstrating the way news was received.

(Ex-Servicemen's P.O.W. Subsistence Claims Committee)

Steel rice trucks were used by the Japanese to move prisoners from Singapore to Thailand. These trucks, 16 feet long by 8 feet wide, normally carried 30 prisoners of war and their belongings.

(Ex-Servicemen's P.O.W. Subsistence Claims Committee)

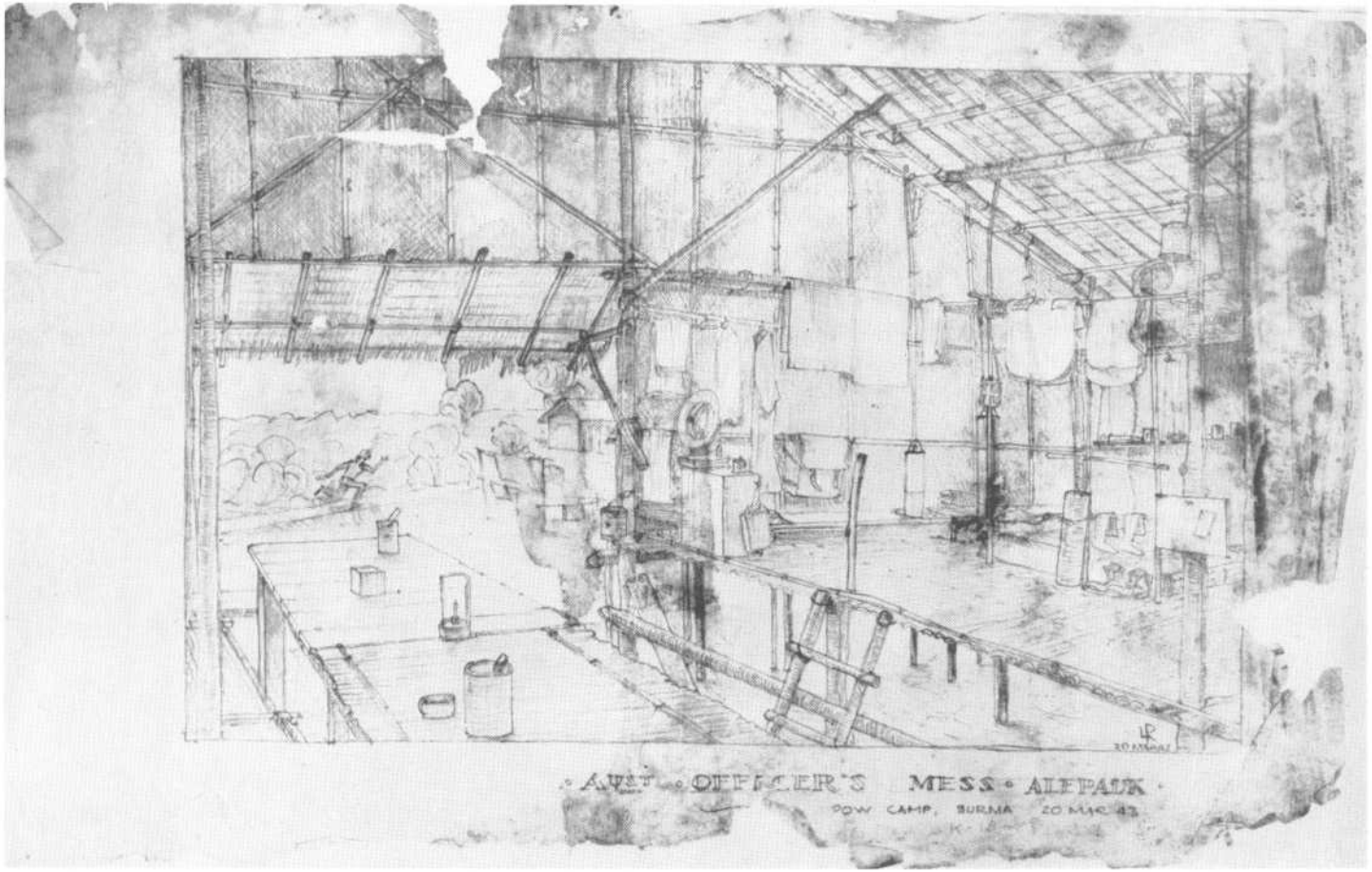
A river barge transporting stores and sick prisoners of war on the Menam Kwa Noi River, Thailand.



(Australian War Memorial)

(Ex-Servicemen's P.O.W. Subsistence Claims Committee)

The Burma-Thailand railway and the main road.



Reproduction of a sketch by Major L. J. Robertson, preserved during captivity, of the Australian officers' mess at Alepauk camp (kilo-18) on the Burma-Thailand railway.

to Lower Songkurai, in expectation of further deliveries. Even so this camp was still poorly provided. Other camps were formed with practically no containers and almost no medical stores.[6]

At Upper Songkurai, a small compact camp close to a water-supply, with a cookhouse near the sleeping quarters, this lack was a serious inconvenience. At the Songkurai and Changaraya camps it was a disaster. The cookhouse at Songkurai, for example, was a quarter of a mile from the camp, and as the numbers of sick increased there was no efficient way of distributing food to the main hospital half a mile away, or to the still more distant isolation hospital. The result was that officers and convalescents spent the entire day trudging through never-ending rain carrying meals to hospital patients in the few buckets and containers that could be spared.

In June, though the fight against cholera at Lower Songkurai had been won, malaria was beginning to make itself felt. The men, now becoming weaker and weaker, many with no boots and all with their clothes in tatters, were being cruelly over-worked. Soon 1,300 out of the 1,890 men at Lower Songkurai were sick; by the end of June 120 had died since arrival; in that month 46 per cent had contracted malaria, 38 per cent dysentery and 9 per cent cholera.

As the Japanese engineers increased their demands for more workers, relations between the Australians and the Japanese commandant became worse, and many stormy interviews took place.

> Men were being driven to work like cattle and not returning to camp until as late as 2330 hours . . . soaked through with rain, tired, footsore and dispirited. After their meal they were often too weary to stand around fires to dry their clothing . . . now rapidly falling to pieces . . . boots . . . were becoming unserviceable and a great number of men were forced to go to work bootless.

At this stage working parties were marching six kilometres and a half to working sites where they were required to manhandle logs 14 feet long by 8 inches in diameter over muddy and waterlogged ground to corduroy the surface of the road. When men collapsed under heavy loads they were compelled by the engineers to carry on, at times being struck with tools and sticks.

Conditions were filthy at Upper Songkurai camp. At first the medical care of the camp was in charge of a sergeant, except when Major Hunt was able to pay a visit from Lower Songkurai, and for a few days rations were issued to coolies who cooked both for themselves and for the Australians. By 8th June 216 men were sick; 7 had died of cholera. Captain Swartz, who took over the camp on 8th June, reorganised it and obtained a big improvement in hygiene and food and "by the end of June this camp was the best in the group, relations with the [Japanese] were reasonable, working conditions and rations fair, and the men generally con-

[6] The Japanese administration provided little for cooking purposes except rice boilers (kwalis) which are heavy fixtures and useless for food or water distribution to hospital or outside working parties.

tented".[7] At the Songkurai and Changaraya camps (all British) cholera losses were more severe than elsewhere. In Songkurai 227 of 1,600 died; at Changaraya 159 of 700, almost 25 per cent.

Between Songkurai and Konkoita were the Nieke and Lower Nieke staging camps. Colonel Harris and Colonel Banno (the senior Japanese officer) established their headquarters first at Lower Nieke and then at Nieke proper. The site was a quagmire, but there was less sickness than at other camps and the rations were better, probably partly because Banno was there and partly because of the "untiring leadership" of Lieut-Colonel Dillon, the camp commandant, but also because the camp was a concentration point on the railway and therefore better served with supplies. The number of men frequently changed, the maximum being 1,075, including 450 Australians.

At the end of June only about 700 of the 5,000 men north of Nieke were at work daily, and of those at least half were unfit for heavy work. The remainder, except for Red Cross and administrative troops (including officers), were lying ill in camp hospitals. This state of affairs had been caused at the outset by the general exhaustion of the prisoners and by the demands of the Japanese engineers for maximum numbers, including all fit and convalescent men, to be employed on work parties. These were for such heavy work, seven days a week, as clearing jungle, building bridges, digging cuttings and building embankments, and for roadmaking. Too few men were left for camp maintenance and care of the sick.[8]

At this stage the road from the south was impassable, and to the north difficult. The scale of rations fell below the level required to keep fit men in health, and far below the level required to help sick men back to health. The rations of men in hospital—250 to 300 grammes of rice and a small quantity of beans a day—were fixed at far too low a scale, evidently in the mistaken belief that lack of pay and rations would drive men out of hospital. But this would happen only where men were practising deception, and there could be no deception where the sick were dying in large numbers daily.

In late June the Japanese decided to establish a base hospital at Tanbaya in Burma for the increasing numbers of sick. The hospital was to accommodate 1,700 patients considered incapable of work for at least two months, and Major Bruce Hunt was to command it. The sick far exceeded 1,700 even at that stage, and the selection of patients was extremely difficult. On the one hand it was useless sending men who were unlikely to survive the journey; on the other many were certain to die if retained at the working camps. An advanced party, including Hunt, left for Tanbaya on 1st August, followed by the first batch of sick on the 25th. The journey was unduly prolonged and arduous, and 43 out of 1,700 died on

[7] Report of Activities of AIF, "F" Force.

[8] Paradoxically, although the engineers appeared to have complete control of working conditions and seemed insensible of requests for their amelioration, when the condition of the sick was demonstrated to them "they would rush out of the sick huts rather than endure the sight of the results of their inhuman treatment". (Report of "F" Force, Lt-Col S. W. Harris.)

the way. The conditions at staging camps were chaotic, and the sick lay by the side of the road for hours awaiting transport. There was no bedding or straw on the metal floors of lorries or railway trucks, and "guards jabbed ulcerated buttocks to make the sick 'speedo' in their climb into trucks, and stoned them to 'speedo' the unfortunates out again".

The Tanbaya camp fell below even the most dismal expectations. It consisted of a hutted camp without light or water. The amount of medical stores supplied was negligible and rations were at all times poor. They were particularly deficient in vitamin B, vital to patients, practically all of whom were suffering from beri beri.[9] Although men at Tanbaya were required to work only on camp maintenance, in the period 1st August to 24th November 750 patients died, or about 45 per cent of the total patients.

Compared with others, Pond's battalion was unfortunate in two special respects: it was frequently moved from one camp to another and its camps were commanded by Lieutenant Murayama, a particularly cruel and dishonest Japanese. Cholera broke out when it was at Upper Konkoita, roadwork ceased and the rations, always low, dropped to 7½ ounces of rice a day. Dysentery and malaria increased. By 6th June 368 out of the 694 men in the unit were too ill for even light work. On 10th June fit and light duty men (316 all ranks) were moved north to a filthy site near Nieke where groups of 30 or more men had to use 12-men tents. At this stage every man was "suffering severely from hunger pains, weakness and giddiness" although the rice ration had been increased to 12½ ounces a day. By the 17th most of Pond's battalion had been concentrated at the new site. Next morning the battalion began a 40 miles march south to Takanun, the weary sick men "hopelessly weighed down with equipment".

A shuttle system had to be employed whereby fit and nearly fit (who by now were very few) marched to the next camp, erected tents, dug latrines, prepared cookhouses etc. and then returned to the last camp to carry stretcher cases and sick men and their gear forward. To add the last straw to these trials the men repeatedly were ordered back to dig from the mud and then push up the hills the many ox-carts laden with Japanese stores which had become bogged. Over and over again these efforts kept the men on the road until 3 and 4 in the morning, only to start again at 0800 hours.

When it was over more than half the men had no boots, most had no clothing but a loin cloth, and many had developed ulcers.[10] The battalion remained at Takanun for two months, working or marching from

[9] A shortage of medical supplies existed throughout "F" Force. At this stage it was estimated that 70 per cent of the men were infected with amoebic dysentery, yet the only issue of a specific drug was 100 1/3rd grain emetine ampoules (sufficient for three patients by normal British standards) to the Tanbaya hospital where there were hundreds in need of it. Anti-cholera vaccine and quinine were, however, supplied more liberally, although there was seldom enough of the latter for suppression purposes. Many hundreds of cases of beri beri would have been avoided by the supply of rice polishings, used by the Japanese at Kanburi in 1944 to feed their cavalry horses.

[10] The average kit of a prisoner on the Burma-Thailand railway in this period might be made up of an old hat, a pair of boots with leaking soles, no socks, a "Jap-happy" (loin cloth) in which he worked, perhaps a patched pair of reserve shorts; a water bottle, with or without cork, a mess tin and spoon, a leaky foul-smelling groundsheet, two sacks or perhaps a thin blanket, a pack to carry the equipment in, and possibly a share in a mosquito net. These were the total possessions of the average soldier, but many had far less.

8 a.m. until 10.15 p.m. The men rose at 7 a.m. in pitch dark, and usually in pouring rain. Those detailed as mess orderlies staggered up slimy slopes carrying heavy mess dixies of rice. Others, having queued up to sterilise their mess tins in boiling water, received their rice and squatted or stood miserably in the rain while eating it. Immediately afterwards, still in the half light, they lined up again to wash their mess tins and receive their luncheon issue of rice. At dawn the medical officer began sick parade; at 8 a.m. the working parties fell in, and efforts were begun to obtain extra men to replace those whom the medical officer found unfit for work.

At 0815 hours the party moved off across a high level bridge, 80 yards long, the track being constructed of slippery logs 6" wide. Men whose nerves were not equal to the task of negotiating this bridge were compelled to cross a low level bridge two or three feet under water. At 0830 hours a second parade of the work party was held by the Japanese, a check of numbers made and tools issued, and at the conclusion of this the men were herded off to the job about two miles away through deep mud or across sharp flint-like stones or gravel. As half the camp at this stage was without boots the journey always was a trial, stragglers being smacked on the face on arrival for lateness.

Having arrived at the job the men were divided into teams of three or four, one man to pick the cutting face of the rock, one to shovel and two men to carry away the spoil in bamboo stretcher-like baskets. This last duty usually meant a carry of shale, rock or soaking clay for a distance of 50 to 75 yards through yellow oozing clay on a bed of gravel. Again men's feet suffered badly. Almost without exception the periods of work were 50 minutes with a ten minutes break for smoking. When the men were on contract labour, which frequently was the case, the rest period was often used by dysentery and diarrhoea cases to obey nature's call. The break for lunch was taken from 1330 hours to 1500 hours, being reduced to one hour for the last month's work on the railway. . . . Last light at this time of the year was in the vicinity of 2115 hours and usually this was the time for cessation of work. Then followed the collection and counting of tools and baskets, checking of men and the order to return to camp. To many men this return journey was one of the greatest trials of the day. Exhausted from work, feet cut and sore, clothes wet and cold, they set out to pick or feel their way in the dark through the two miles of mud, including a balancing task across three bridges.

Arriving at camp at about 2215 hours, again they would line up to sterilize their mess gear and then draw their evening meal of rice and jungle-leaf flavoured water. The more fortunate would cluster round a fire, and then grope their way down to the river to wash off the day's mud and sweat. Another sick parade, and dressings completed, the men were able, usually by 2300 hours, to don a camp shirt . . . roll themselves in a blanket, probably damp, and lie down under a rotted, dripping tent.[1]

At the outset in "F" Force officers were required to accompany work parties, but at Takanun officers were ordered out to work in special parties on a more favourable contract basis. As time went on sickness reduced their numbers and they became used solely for supervising the men or acting as tally clerks for the number of baskets carried by the men. Suspicions, not perhaps unjustified, that officers were falsifying the figures (at one stage the Korean guards themselves were frequently doing so in order to return to camp the earlier) at length led to their suspension from this

[1] Report of Activities of AIF, "F" Force.

task; and as the number of men collapsing at work increased some officers began voluntarily to fill their places with the permission of the guards.

During July conditions at the Songkurai camps became worse. The road became a ribbon of mud, almost impassable except by six-wheeled vehicles. Bridges to the north were repeatedly washed away, and supplies from Burma were irregular. No clothing or boots had been issued and blankets available had been too few even to cover the feverishly ill. Working conditions worsened, and at Lower Songkurai men finishing road work at 9 p.m. faced a return march of two hours through mud and rain in pitch darkness. At the end of the month, of 1,854 men at Lower Songkurai, 1,265 were in hospital, 214 on camp and hospital duties and 375 working. At Upper Songkurai, where conditions were consistently better than at other camps either to the north or south, 229 out of the 430 were hospital patients.

In August 866 Australians of Major Tracey's battalion were concentrated at Songkurai No. 2, where 1,000 British troops were already collected. Conditions there were probably worse than in any other camp, and 600 British troops had died before the Australians arrived. Men had been beaten with wire whips and bamboo sticks to make them work harder, and men too sick to stand had been forced to haul logs and beams from a sitting position. When the Australians arrived hygiene had fallen into neglect. The newcomers built new cookhouses, dug new latrines and cut and stacked wood. At this stage the principal task was the building of a wooden bridge, about 100 feet long over a near-by river, and the prisoners were required to carry logs up to 20 feet long and over 1 foot diameter for distances of 800 feet through mud up to their knees, while being constantly beaten. Lieutenant Abe, the Japanese engineer commander at Songkurai, demanded numbers far in excess of the fit men in camp, and when Tracey protested brought armed guards through the hospital, who turned out by force the first 200 men encountered. Some of the men working on the bridge were knocked into the river 30 feet below it.

By August two-thirds of the men in all camps were hospital patients. A movement began, evidently with the object of concentrating all British prisoners at Songkurai and all Australians (except Pond's battalion at Takanun) at Upper Songkurai. This led to a series of exhausting marches with the men carrying not only their own gear but their blankets and camp equipment, including iron rice boilers, over roads deep in mud. Requests for some motor transport were refused despite the fact that lorries returning empty were moving along the road. On 8th August there were 1,020 Australians, including 403 sick, and 670 British, including 492 sick, in Upper Songkurai. The latrines were flooded by incessant rain; one had broken its confines and a filthy stream oozed through the camp area and passed under the floors of the huts occupied by the hospital, bay after bay of which collapsed under the weight of the sick men who had crowded into them. Cholera broke out, and before it was subdued nearly 50 men had died.

In mid-August Lieutenant Wakabyashi—"the only Japanese officer with whom 'F' Force had to deal who showed the slightest glimmerings of humanity or understanding of his responsibility towards Ps.O.W. under his charge"—told Colonel Harris that the engineers had ordered that, unless the working figure was doubled, all prisoners, sick as well as fit, would be turned out into the jungle to fend for themselves, thus making room for coolies to be brought in who could work. An opportunity for Harris to interview the engineer colonel was created and he was persuaded to allow the prisoners to retain two-thirds of their accommodation, leaving one-third available for fresh labour. The prospect of the prisoners being ejected was a real one, and would otherwise have been carried out despite the monsoon then at its height. "It is a grim recollection," wrote Harris, "that we were able to make available a third of our accommodation only by taking into consideration the number of deaths which would inevitably occur in the next few weeks."[2]

The Japanese seemed determined to break the British troops and to discriminate between them and the Australians. No Englishman was permitted to be employed in the cookhouse or on any other camp duty, so that all were available for working parties despite their age or physical condition. This meant that it became necessary to protect the weaker men by keeping them in hospital until they had recovered sufficiently to take on heavy work. For some days the Japanese reduced the rations of the British troops by one-third, but, by adjustment, the British heavy workers continued to receive the same rations as the Australian. At the end of August 63½ per cent of the men were sick and 100 per cent were suffering from beri beri in some degree. Working hours were increased and the workers were not arriving back in camp until 2 a.m.

> The strain now, both physical and mental, was terrific. Men were too exhausted even to speak and acted more as automatons than human beings. It was only the thought that the end was in sight that sustained them in these days of sheer torture.

"The end" meant the end of the work on the railway. On 18th September it was announced that the main work had been finished and a holiday was granted—the first since the work began in May.

October was relatively peaceful at Songkurai, but at Taimonta, where Pond's unfortunate battalion had now concentrated, "a new form of torture was instituted"—the carriage of railway gear from Nieke to Taimonta or from Taimonta to Konkoita, each return trip a distance of about 15 miles.

> The route was along the line and meant walking on the irregularly placed sleepers or the hard gravel at the sides; the lightest load would be a bundle of five picks, the heaviest an anvil . . . and empty train after empty train would pass without any effort . . . to relieve them. . . . Staggering under their heavy loads, riddled with malaria, with ulcers and cut feet, men collapsed over and over again. . . . On one occasion a warrant-officer, a particularly strong (man) . . . had to drag himself the last three kilometres back to camp on hands and knees.

[2] History of "F" Force, p. 22.

The beginning of November brought the final test—a move north to Nieke carrying the sick, including twenty-six stretcher cases. When this was completed most of the Australians of "F" Force were distributed between Nieke and the Songkurai camps. In mid-November the transfer of "F" Force to Kanburi in Thailand and eventually to Singapore began; soon only small rear parties and men too sick to be moved remained.

Of the 3,662 Australians in "F" Force 1,060 had died up to May 1944, including some who died after the return to Changi. Of a similar number of British troops 2,036 died. The average monthly death rate between May and December was over 360. Dysentery and diarrhoea had combined to kill 832 men, while 637 had died of cholera alone. One reason for the large number of British deaths was that a larger proportion of unfit men had to be included in the British force to complete its strength. Colonel Kappe attributed the lower Australian death rate also to "a more determined will to live, a higher sense of discipline, a particularly high appreciation of the importance of good sanitation, and a more natural adaptability to harsh conditions", and to "the splendid and unselfish services rendered by the medical personnel in the Force".

Under the terrible conditions suffered by the force as a whole the bonds of discipline and morale were "stretched to breaking point", wrote Colonel Harris, "but they never quite broke. If they had, probably not one man would have returned alive." Harris decided that the lower death rate among the Australians was due to the fact that they "were all members of one volunteer force with a common emblem and outlook", whereas the other troops were "a heterogenous collection of men of all races and units, many of whom found themselves together for the first time". He considered that the average physical standard of the Australians was "incomparably higher than that of the mixed force of regular soldiers, territorials, militiamen, conscripts and local volunteers" who formed the British half of the force, and they possessed a higher proportion of men accustomed to looking after themselves under "jungle" or "bush" conditions. Also the Australian contingent was undoubtedly fortunate in being able to complete its march and occupy its working camps before the monsoon broke.

While "F" Force had been undergoing privations and hardships in the upper Thailand regions of the line, a new force, "H", had been brought in by the Japanese to reinforce the middle reaches where progress had fallen behind schedule. Like "F" Force it too was to be under the disadvantage of administration by the distant Malayan headquarters. The force had been raised at Singapore in April 1943, in response to a request by the Japanese for a further 3,270 men for employment on the railway. Of these, 600 were to be provided by the A.I.F.[3] The force commander was Lieut-Colonel H. R. Humphries, of the Royal Artillery, and his second-in-command Lieut-Colonel Oakes, who also commanded the

[3] "H" Force contained a number of Australians captured in Timor.

Australian part of the force. Twenty-four of the Australian quota were officers, including two medical officers, a dental officer, and a padre.

The movement from Singapore by rail began on 5th May, the Australians leaving three days later. Like preceding forces the men travelled in enclosed steel trucks to Bampong, where the 600 Australians were confined to two atap huts 120 feet long by 20 feet wide. Water was drawn from one well; the latrines, close to the cookhouses, consisted of two slit trenches, with bamboo footrests, "the sight of which was enough to turn the strongest stomach".

> Fly larvae to the number of millions were in the trenches and here, as well as over the whole area of the establishment, flies and numerous other insect pests abounded.[4]

On the 13th, just before midnight, the men set out along a bitumen road on the first stage of the march to Tarsau, about 90 miles north-west of Bampong.

> We had not cleared the town limits (wrote one officer) before men were being sick and requiring assistance. . . . Men fainted and had fits—many threw most of their possessions away—all gasped for breath in the hot night air. . . . Many were grievously sick and very weak, but there were also weak-livered bludgers who couldn't or hadn't the guts to make an extra effort. . . . I would scold, growl, entreat, sympathise, encourage and beg of them to rise, but I might have spoken to the Sphinx—they just lay like dead men, but immediately a Jap guard grunted at them they were up like a shot. These men were just the scum of the A.I.F. . . . The large majority were true blue and helped and encouraged their weaker and sick mates tremendously. . . . We did not arrive at our destination until 10.30 a.m.[5]

The march to Kanchanaburi—an advanced railhead of a kind—was completed in two stages each of about 16 to 18 miles on the morning of the 15th. There a halt was granted, men were inoculated, vaccinated and "glass rodded"[6] before setting out on the final stage to Tarsau. After Kanchanaburi the road degenerated into a dirt track, and when the last leg of the march to Tarsau was reached "every man was limping badly . . . the men were in the last stages of exhaustion, limping, staggering and swaying like drunken men". Some of the groups that followed the Australians were more fortunate in that transport was made available, but at Tarsau, virtually the entrance to the jungle proper, which was reached by Oakes' force on the 19th, there was an almost total absence of tentage or drinking water, and totally inadequate sanitary arrangements.

Thereafter the groups proceeded by stages along jungle paths until they reached their respective camps. At length "H" Force headquarters was set up at Tampie and battalions were along a 20-kilo stretch of railway between Tonchan and Hintok. The Australians were second farthest north at Konyu 2 (afterwards known as Malayan Hamlet) which they reached

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[4] Report of Lieut-Colonel Oakes.

[5] Major A. E. Saggers' diary. (Saggers was second-in-command to Oakes.) An other-rank member of "H" Force later commented that the prisoners who lay like dead men but were up like a shot when a Jap hove in view were, to his mind, acting quite normally. "A man almost beyond exhaustion point," he wrote, "can often find new energy with a bayonet prodding his rear."

[6] A humiliating test for dysentery performed by the Japanese.

"absolutely worn out" on 21st May. Most of the men had stood up to the march "like heroes", but some were found wanting and imposed unfair burdens on their comrades. The medical officer, Major Fagan,[7] with his medical orderlies, "tended the sick faithfully and lovingly", and "must have walked twice the distance in missions up and down the line", as also did Father Marsden,[8] the padre to the force.[9]

No preparations had been made at Konyu for the incoming troops, but soon a small area was cleared, tents were erected and a cookhouse was prepared. By 25th May the camp strength had grown to over 600. At that time the first working party of 200 men was ordered for work by day with another 200 for work by night. The men, still worn out, were difficult even to the point of insubordination to get working. Here as elsewhere railway work fell into three categories: railway construction, the carriage of rations over long distances during the wet season because of the breakdown in transport; and camp duties. A satisfactory feature of the camp at Malayan Hamlet was that the Japanese permitted Oakes to retain an adequate maintenance staff, and within a short time the camp was enlarged, tents were floored with bamboo, and hospital accommodation improved until, according to Colonel Humphries, it became "easily the best of any in the force".

The principal task allotted to Oakes' force on the railway was the cutting where "D" Force was already employed. Each night masses of rock were blasted away; each morning the broken rock had to be removed —sometimes in small skips but more often in baskets. This work was exceedingly arduous because of the long hours—as many as 15 hours in one stretch—the hurry-up methods of the Japanese, the consequent nervous strain, and the ill-health of men never fully recovered from the effects of the march up to the working sites.

The rations, consisting of rice, and a small amount of dried fish and spinach, were poor at first, but after a few weeks began slightly to improve. Small quantities of yak meat arrived and canteen supplies such as eggs, gula melaka (coconut sugar), tinned fish, biscuits and peanuts became available. Money was limited, however, and the amount of canteen supplies received by individuals extremely small. For example, the cost of providing each man with 1½ eggs or one ounce of sugar or two ounces of peanuts amounted to 100 dollars.

In June the strength of the working parties dropped from 200 to 150 by day and night. The camp strength steadied round 550, but many were ill and unfit for work, and Oakes and his fellow officers fought unceasingly the demands of the Japanese to increase the working party strengths.

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[7] Maj K. J. Fagan, NX70643; 2/10 AGH. Medical practitioner; of Bookham, NSW; b. Launceston, Tas, 5 Feb 1909.

[8] Rev Fr L. T. Marsden, NX76355. Catholic priest; of Sydney; b. Bundarra, NSW, 12 Jul 1911.

[9] "Above all there was the extraordinary courage and gentleness and the incredible endurance of the medical officer, Major Kevin Fagan. Not only did he treat any man needing treatment to the best of his ability; he also carried men who fell; he carried the kit of men in danger of falling, and he marched up and down the whole length of the column throughout its entire progress. . . . And when at the end of our night's trip we collapsed and slept he was there to clean blisters, set broken bones and render first aid." Russell Braddon, in *Naked Island*, p. 178.

For the officers, the task of providing working parties of the required strength became a nightmare.

Our guards were concerned only with supplying the workmen demanded by the railway gangers (wrote Oakes). The latter were concerned only with getting the railway built by a certain date. There was nothing personal about the matter at all. It was simply a demand for certain numbers. These men worked 12-hour shifts and were supposed to rest for the other twelve, but there were always ration carrying fatigues, camp fatigues for the Japanese, pulling lorries out of the mud and a hundred and one other distractions.

Towards the end the parades of the sick called to increase the working parties became "ghastly" affairs.

Men wrapped in blankets, shaking with malaria; men naked except for a loin cloth for fear that they would foul their clothes through the weakness of dysentery; men crying through weakness and nervous strain; men pleading to be allowed to stay back, but the guards adamant.

On the 16th June, Major Fagan reported the first case of cholera, and soon afterwards the man died. That day all men were inoculated. At this crisis in the affairs of Oakes' force, the strength in the area was augmented by the arrival of 266 British troops, who also came under Oakes' command.

Throughout June and July rain continued to fall and deaths from cholera to increase. Over a period of nine days between 26th June and 4th July, 72 men died of cholera alone. The cholera isolation area was "a frightening sight", with dead and dying lying about and the medical orderlies working like heroes. Nevertheless so exhausting at this stage had the work on the railway cutting become that many of the prisoners declared that they would be "glad to be placed in the cholera suspect tents" to rest and be freed from the mental and nervous strain of work "in this hell of a railway cutting". The prisoners were fast becoming demoralised. "Many have dropped their bundle," wrote an officer, "and it is no wonder."[1]

Time ceased to have any significance (wrote one soldier). No man knew what day of the week nor what week of the month nor even what month of the year it was. . . . If one were to survive it was essential not to acknowledge the horror that lay all around, still more not to perceive the effect it had upon oneself. It was not wise ever to look in a mirror. Life accordingly evolved into a blur of continuous work, people dying, guards bellowing, heavy loads to be carried, fever which came in tides of heat and cold on alternate days, dysentery and hunger. All those became the normal. Upon them, occasionally an event superimposed itself with sufficient violence to be remembered.[2]

Bodies were cremated, sometimes as many as ten at one burning, but the labour involved in gathering fuel was heavy. At length the Japanese prohibited cremations and the dead were buried in mass graves. On 29th

[1] It was noticeable that in the early stages of the outbreak many more Australian than British prisoners died of the disease, but within a week the pendulum had swung, and thereafter deaths among the British outnumbered the Australian by almost two to one.

[2] R. Braddon, *Naked Island*, p. 189.

June 454 were in hospital; by 4th July 91 had died, 110 had cholera and there were 118 suspects in a camp about 750 strong.

> The hospital is under fairly good control and organisation (wrote Major Saggers) but the cholera tent lines! God, what a sight—it is just a charnel house . . . the victims just dehydrate—some last up to 11 days, others are dead within 8 hours. They die absolute skeletons. The medical orderlies are heroes—not a whisper of complaint have I heard and they are working like slaves.

Only 120 of Oakes' force were able to work, and these worked in 8 hour shifts, 80 by day and 40 by night. "The 8 hour shifts are helping the men," noted one observer; "they are getting more rest and picking up very slightly but they badly want food." By the 18th, 134 men had died, 118 from cholera, 4 from dysentery, 4 from beri beri and one from diphtheria. One man in every six had died within five weeks.

In August rations began to arrive by rail and deaths to decrease. The men were lice-ridden and the camp was plagued by rats. On the 22nd a large wooden cross, erected by Colonel Oakes, was unveiled by Colonel Humphries at the cemetery, to commemorate the death of 217 prisoners (including 106 Australians). On the 25th 100 "fit" men (83 Australian and 17 British) moved north to Konkoita for other railway work. Early in September the Japanese began returning the remnants of "H" Force to base camps and hospitals at Kanburi. Here although the fit men were reasonably well off, and were issued with footwear, clothing and good food, and canteen supplies and rest did much to restore them, the hospital accommodation was hopelessly inadequate. An Australian has calculated that into an area 150 paces wide by 370 long 2,300 men were crowded. On 20th November the first troops left Kanburi by rail for Singapore and the Sime Road camp, under conditions similar to those encountered earlier, but in cooler weather. They were followed by other batches at intervals until 10th December, when only a few dangerously ill men remained.

One group of "H" Force deserving mention because of the special circumstances of its employment was that known as the "H.6 Officers Party", 320 strong, including 68 Australian officers, and other ranks numbering 60, including one Australian. This group, formed at Changi in May 1943, had been told before its departure that it would be employed in Thailand for camp administration and supervision of labour parties. Like other groups it had been misinformed about conditions in Thailand, and as a result the group included 30 per cent of physically unfit. Also, being one of the last up-country parties to leave Changi, it necessarily included a fairly large proportion of men who on account of their age had been excluded from earlier forces.

When the group arrived at Tonchan South and learned that it was required for labouring tasks on the railway, the officers protested, pointing out to the Japanese that the group was composed largely of unfit, and that it had been sent up solely for administrative duties. These protests were unavailing.

The work performed was of a very heavy nature, such as clearing jungle, felling trees, excavating for cuttings on the railway, cartage of earth, rocks and logs for building up embankments etc. In addition it was often necessary to call on officers who had been out all day to do further work on their return, such as making paths, fetching water for the cookhouse, collecting firewood, unloading lorries and other "chores" necessary to make the camp hospitable.[3]

The work was hard, the hours were long, and the difficulty of liaison with the Japanese resulted in more than the usual number of incidents because of misunderstandings. Officers were struck with pick handles or iron bars almost daily. The food of weak vegetable stew and tea thrice daily was not sustaining, clothing and footwear deteriorated, accommodation for the increasing numbers of sick was insufficient, and all sick other than those actually in bed were forced to make up the working parties. Conditions continued to worsen until June. Camps housing coolie labour sprang up round the H.6 camp and soon it was completely surrounded by areas in which even the most elementary hygiene was neglected. By the end of June almost 50 per cent of the A.I.F. group were sick, mainly with ulcers. On the 28th, when orders were received to send a party north to Hintok River camp, almost every fit officer was required to go. Of the 110 officers who left that day on foot for the 30-kilometres march to Hintok River camp, 28 were A.I.F.[4] Thenceforward the officers' group at Tonchan South began to disperse among other work forces. On 28th August the site was abandoned, and the remaining officers were amalgamated with a group at Tonchan Spring camp.

One small section of "H" Force which remained after the general evacuation to Kanburi included 20 Australian officers commanded by Major Ball who were sent north on foot to Konkoita in late August. A camp site was cleared, tents were erected, and for several weeks the officers were employed on railway construction, working long hours in mixed gangs with Tamils and Chinese coolies, hauling, among other things, heavy baulks of timber by rope up steep river banks. Increasing numbers became too ill to work, and the worst cases were evacuated from time to time to Kanburi. In mid-November the remainder were returned to Kanburi "fit camp", and at length to Singapore.

The deaths in "H" Force totalled 885 (27.37 per cent of the whole force), including 179 Australians. The majority of the Australians died at Malayan Hamlet, but some 50 died after evacuation to Kanburi.

From the Australian point of view redeeming features of the ordeal were the efficient control of medical supplies, a messing fund on a force basis, the maintenance of strict discipline, appearance and morale, "the extreme bravery of Colonel Humphries and his constant endeavour to obviate ill-treatment and remedy injustices, and the perfect harmony that existed between the A.I.F. and the other force commanders at all times".[5]

[3] Report by Major A. F. Ball.

[4] These were used to reinforce the Hintok cutting.

[5] Report of Lieut-Colonel Oakes.

The discipline of the officers of No. 3 party (wrote Colonel Oakes of his own force) was at all times of an extremely high order and most certainly an inspiration to me in my command. As regards the other ranks some few exhibited discipline of such a high order that they cannot be too highly commended. The majority . . . behaved themselves and carried out their duties in a most satisfactory manner and compared favourably with other troops. The A.I.F., perhaps owing to their natural training, seemed to stand up to rigorous conditions better than English troops. There were a few whose discipline was bad as they made little attempt to help either themselves, their comrades or the administration. . . . Generally speaking, however, I should say that more decorations for valour were earned during this episode than during any period of battle.

Early in 1943 the Japanese had begun recruiting Tamils, Chinese, Malays and other native labourers from Burma, Malaya, and Thailand to work on the railway. The recruitment was normally by contract for a specified period (usually six months), but the contract period was rarely honoured and coolies were kept working on the railroad until they died or were permanently disabled.

Taken into areas where cholera and dysentery were rampant, where even elementary principles of hygiene were neglected, and where no plan for medical treatment existed, it is not remarkable that the Asian workers died in thousands under the harsh treatment of the Japanese. Soon the medical situation had become chaotic.

Accordingly two forces comprising medical officers and orderlies were formed at Changi in June 1943 for employment on the railroad. Of these forces, "K" consisted of 30 medical officers and 200 orderlies, and "L" of 15 and 100. They were informed before their departure from Changi that they would be going to well-equipped hospitals and that it would be unnecessary to take medical equipment. On arrival at Kanchanaburi in Thailand they learned that they would be treating coolies, and that since "Japanese and other native labour had been grossly maltreated by the Americans at Panama and by the British elsewhere", it was the white man's turn to become "a coolie, to be degraded and to die in thousands". Both forces were split up into parties of one medical officer and four other ranks and distributed among the various coolie camps on the railroad. Coolie hospitals were established at Kanchanaburi in the south, at Wun Yi, Kinsayok, Konkoita and as far north as Nieke. These varied in holding capacity between 2,500 at the Kanchanaburi base to about 800 in those along the line.

The treatment, feeding and supply of medical equipment were particularly bad. Hygiene was exceedingly difficult to control. Cholera and dysentery were rife, and the Tamil particularly . . . will soil his neighbour's area with great cheerfulness. Grave digging was always done by medical personnel and owing to the increased death rate and the lack of staff there were at one time 500 coolies buried in the one grave at Nieke. Major Crankshaw,[6] AAMC, was employed in the IJA cookhouse and on other camp duties, whilst Captain Brown and Captain Eastwood, RAMC, were employed as bath coolies for the IJA.

[6] Maj T. P. Crankshaw, VX62081; 2/13 AGH. Medical practitioner; of East Malvern, Vic; b. Ararat, Vic, 17 Mar 1907.

The IJA showed complete indifference to the fate of the sick and labourers. This policy was economically so stupid that one can only suppose that it was due to sheer sadism. On one occasion, one of them killed a patient by putting a pick through his skull, apparently . . . to see how effective a weapon it was. The Nipponese orderlies used to enjoy going about the hospital with a bottle of chloroform and a 10 cc syringe, administering the chloroform intravenously to patients chosen at random and watching the subsequent convulsions and death.[7]

In March 1944 a new phase began with the arrival in Thailand of Japanese-trained Malayan dressers. These had undergone a three-months' course in Malaya and had been sent up to replace British medical personnel who were transferred to coolie work. In the circumstances described above it would be difficult to estimate either the numbers of sick treated along the line or the number of dead. For example, at Nieke in a period of twelve months, about 6,000 cases were admitted to the hospital of whom 1,750 died. The civilian death roll was calculated in August 1944 to amount to 150,000. Although, as will be seen, this was an overestimate, some such number was probably rendered permanently unfit for further work.

A gradual transfer to Kanchanaburi of "K" and "L" Forces began in August 1944 and was completed in February 1945. Deaths among these two forces amounted to about 16.

The magnitude of the task and the degree of suffering incurred by the prisoners may best be comprehended by the examination of some railway statistics, derived partly from Japanese partly from Allied documents collected after the war. Japanese engineers stated that the completion of the railway involved the building of 4,000,000 cubic metres of earthwork, shifting 3,000,000 cubic metres of rock, and the construction of 14 kilometres of bridgework in a period of about ten months "after hastening 6 or 7 months"—all by absurdly primitive means. Altogether 330,000 workers including 61,000 prisoners of war were employed on the railway. The Allied War Graves Registration units decided in 1946 that the number of dead among the prisoners of war amounted to 12,399, including 6,318 British, 2,646 Australians,[8] 2,490 Dutch, and 589 unknown prisoners. The bodies of the American dead were repatriated early in 1946. The total of deaths among the 270,000 labourers drawn principally from Burma, Malaya and Thailand was far higher. Some authorities place it at 72,000, but this figure may under-estimate the dead by as much as 20,000.

By March 1944 the bulk of the prisoners, except for those such as "F" and "H" Forces under Malayan prisoner-of-war administration and consequently returned to Singapore, had been concentrated into main camps at Chungkai, Tamarkan, Kanchanaburi, Tamuan, Non Pladuk and Nakom

[7] Report of Lt-Col E. E. Dunlop, Medical Liaison officer, Bangkok, 5 Oct 1945.

[8] The final estimate of the Australian dead is 2,815.

Paton in Thailand.[9] Conditions now began to improve, and there is some evidence that the Japanese had begun to feel apprehensive about the heavy casualties of 1943.[1] This was shown in a series of essays Allied officers were required by the Japanese to write in May 1944, dealing with aspects of railway construction and citing "actual examples of most miserable, most detestable and most painful things or matter (experienced) during the work". Senior Japanese officers from Tokyo visited some camps in Thailand in April and photographs for propaganda purposes were taken purporting to show well-dressed prisoners singing as they worked in the gardens and ideal hospital arrangements in Chungkai, Tamuan, Tarsau and Kanburi.

In February 1944 the Japanese had begun preliminary arrangements for sending parties of technical workers to Japan for employment in heavy industry. However, this plan was altered and at length the Japanese expressed their intention of sending 10,000 men, together with sufficient officers to control them.

The men were drawn from the various groups in Thailand between April and June 1944, after being examined by Japanese doctors, who rejected men suffering from skin complaints and malaria relapses.

The "Japan parties" were concentrated at Saigon whence it was hoped to transport them to Japan. As will be seen, transport difficulties and heavy losses incurred through submarine activities hampered the movement: many were lost on the way; others were taken to Singapore for shipment which did not always eventuate; some remained in Saigon awaiting shipment until the end of the war.

From May 1944 onwards parties ranging in strength from 150 to 600 were sent from base camps in Thailand to work on railway maintenance along the new line, to cut fuel for locomotives, and to handle stores at dumps along the line. The fittest of the prisoners had of course already been earmarked for Japan, but between June and August conditions in these working and maintenance camps were not unduly severe. As the numbers of men decreased, because of the toll taken by disease, conditions worsened. The numbers employed on the railway were too small to encourage merchants to visit the line with canteen supplies, and the railway was overworked carrying military supplies.[2] In some camps there were recurrences of the brutalities that had occurred in 1943; hospital patients, totally unfit for any form of exertion, were beaten and driven out to work. In fact, the only redeeming feature for the men working in the railway gangs along the railway during the winter of 1944-45 was the

[9] Some remained at Tarsau until the end of April and at Aparon, Burma, until February 1945, and there were other detachments in Thailand.

[1] Large hospitals such as those at Nakom Paton and Tamuan were established. These, though crude in the extreme, did at least give protection from weather; some of the finest surgical and medical work in the period of captivity took place at these centres. The Nakom Paton base hospital was designed to take 10,000 sick, and eventually held as many as 8,000. It was commanded by Lt-Col A. E. Coates.

[2] According to the records of the *9th Railway Regiment* more than 180,000 tons of supplies and equipment were moved from Thailand to Burma in the period January to December 1944. Thereafter the volume of traffic dropped sharply. In December 115 trains carried supplies from Thailand to Burma. In January 1945, possibly as a result of damage to the railway from air attacks, the number dropped to 60.

facility with which sick could be evacuated to the base in the trains returning empty southwards.

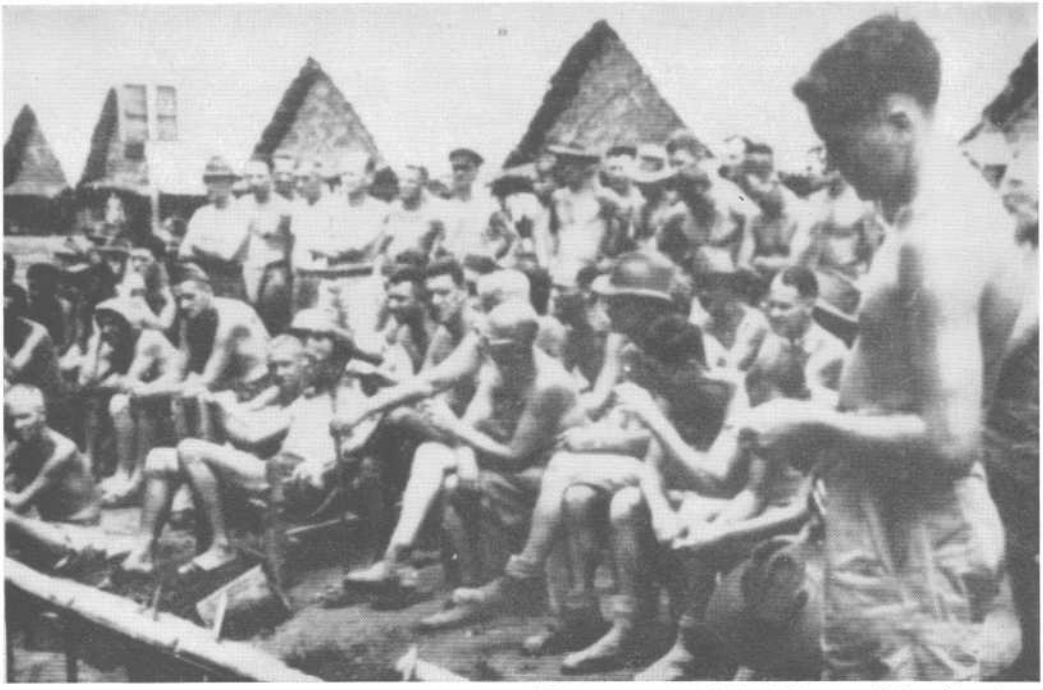
In April 1945 a labour force of about 1,000 (including 120 Australians) was employed making a road between Prachuab Kirikun and Mergui. The road was cut through virgin jungle and working hours were long. No atap roofing for huts was available and a bamboo substitute was not weatherproof. Although rice was plentiful, vegetables were very scarce and small issues of meat were made only at rare intervals. By June the death rate in the party had reached 18 per cent and half the men were sick; by August 25 per cent had died.

Another party of 500 sent to Songkurai, 12 miles south of the Three Pagodas Pass in June 1945 to build defence positions, underwent a gruelling time at the hands of the Japanese, who increased their working hours until the men laboured eighteen hours a day. There were no medical officers and few medical supplies; the rations were restricted to rice and dried vegetables. In the first month eighteen died and beatings were common as the Japanese drove the increasing numbers of sick to work.

A British-Dutch battalion of 400 was sent from Tamuan to Wampo in April to build a road leading westwards to Tavoy. Much of the journey took place at night along jungle tracks. Many of the men were without boots. All had been recently discharged from hospital. They were made to carry heavy burdens, and feeding was inadequate and at long intervals. From Wampo the work consisted of clearing a three-metre track and transporting stores in loads ranging from 25 to 40 kilograms (about 55 to 90 lbs), an average of 26 kilometres (15½ miles) a day. Accommodation was restricted to leaking, overcrowded tents; medical attention was inadequate, and the diet remained consistently at starvation level. Thirteen died in the first month and the number of sick rose rapidly.

Towards the end of July 1945 a group of 800 prisoners (including 100 Australians) commanded by a warrant-officer with two medical officers attached was marched from Nakom Nayok to Pitsanulok, a 600-miles journey which lasted six weeks. A third of the party were suffering from relapsing malaria and over 100 were suffering from chronic amoebic dysentery. Medical supplies were negligible, the rations were very poor, and stores, cooking gear and the sick had to be carried much of the way. Fortunately the capitulation occurred before this epic march was completed, and before more than three had died.

Meanwhile, in the Thailand base camps the discipline had noticeably tightened. In October 1944 ditches were dug round the perimeter of the camps, sentry posts were built and so placed as to cover the entire camp boundaries. As an additional precaution a series of fences were constructed of both barbed wire and bamboo, and embankments were built round most camps to block the prisoners' view of the surrounding country. In addition regulations prohibiting contact with the Thais were rigidly en-

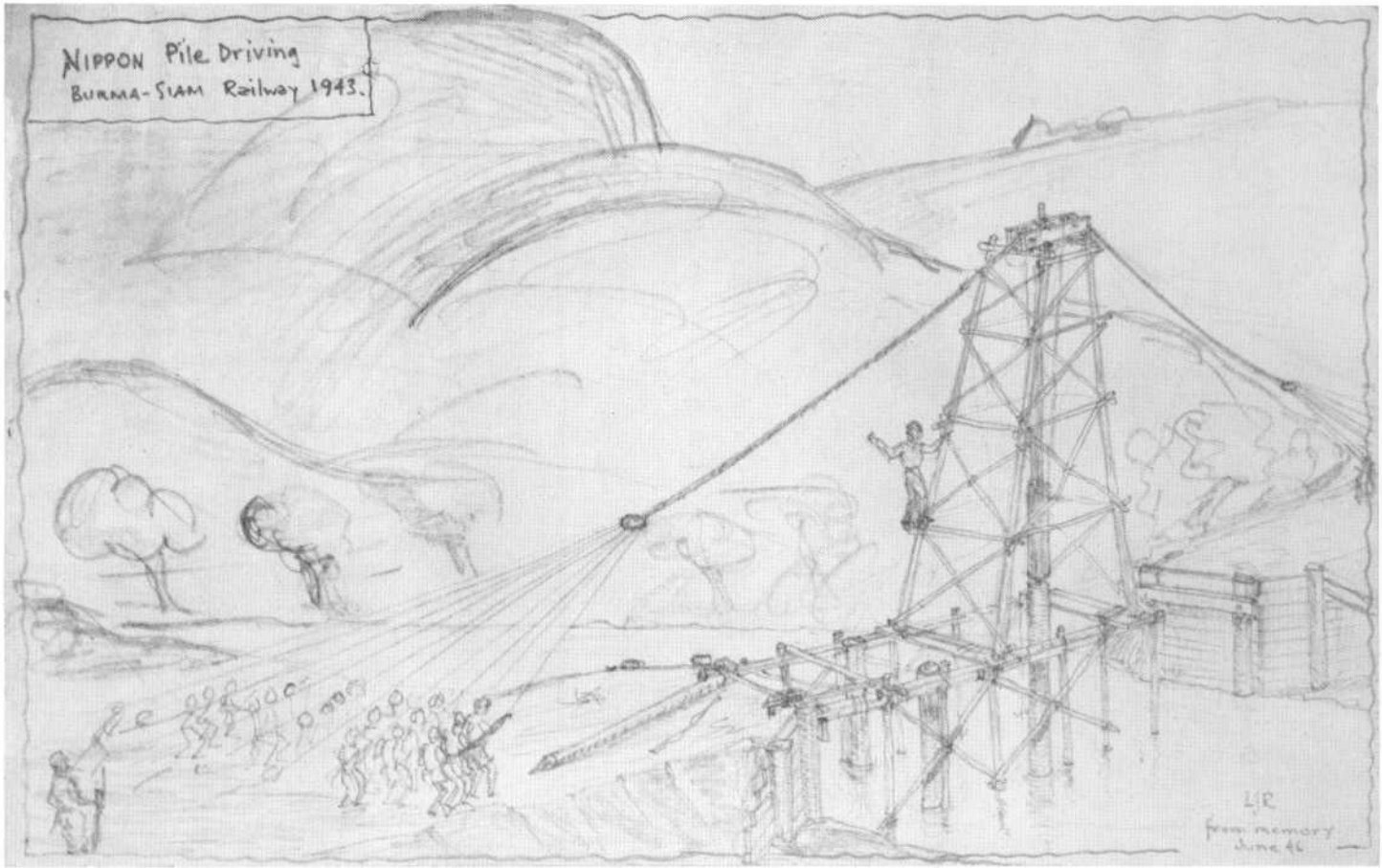


(Ex-Servicemen's P.O.W. Subsistence Claims Committee)

The audience at a camp theatre on the Burma-Thailand railway.

(Ex-Servicemen's P.O.W. Subsistence Claims Committee)

Mess parade at a camp on the Burma-Thailand railway.



Pile-driving on the Burma-Thailand railway, 1943. Reproduction of a sketch by Maj L. J. Robertson.

forced, the Japanese evidently fearing that the civilians might attempt to enlist prisoners in their resistance movement.

Frequent searches were carried out by the Japanese military police, and officers and other ranks were subjected to third degree by the *Kempei* headquarters at Kanburi. Petty restrictions were imposed. Smoking in the open was forbidden, and permitted in huts only on the condition that a prisoners' both feet were on the ground. Lying down or reading was restricted to certain periods. The half-holiday conceded each week by the Japanese was interrupted by inspections; and men found resting were beaten with bamboo sticks by Japanese guards delegated specially for this duty. Instances of communal punishment were common. A cigarette butt found on the ground might provide an excuse for striking all prisoners in the community and the cancellation of the weekly half-holiday.

The officers, although generally speaking better off in Thailand than the men, never completely won the privileges to which their ranks entitled them. In March 1944 the Japanese had stated that officers would not be required to work other than on light duties in camp for their own benefit —a remarkable concession considering the treatment meted out to the officers' party during the building of the railway. In June, however, when most of the officers had been gathered together at Chungkai to form an officers' battalion, they were ordered to provide 100 officers to work in a vegetable garden outside the camp, the best produce of which was to go to the Japanese. The officers protested, stating that though they could volunteer, they should not be forced to work, and asked that the work be regarded as "voluntary".

The Japanese agreed—evidently the face-saving formula in reverse appealed to them—and 100 "volunteers" were ordered to begin work under their own leaders. The outcome was a notable improvement in health and morale for those employed on outside work.

In November the Japanese demanded that the officers be employed under Japanese control, and issued orders for 70 officers to move a fence round the camp. On 19th November the number of officers so employed was increased to 190, and many officers doing useful voluntary work for the hospital were withdrawn by the Japanese. That month large numbers of officers were sent from Chungkai to Tamarkan, and the delicate matter of officer working parties, overshadowed by deaths from bombing raids and other events, was never quite resolved.

In January 1945 all officer prisoners—about 3,000 all told of British, Dutch, American and Australian nationalities, plus 300 other ranks—were concentrated at Kanburi. There they were expected to build a camp and improve it. Apart from these duties and the construction of defences round the camp as ordered by the Japanese the work was not heavy and, in the words of one officer "when the camp was completed we had very little to do".

Contrary to expectations the removal of officers, except some medical officers and padres, from their men in Thailand and Burma brought no

great hardships. As a rule warrant-officers and N.C.O's who had been working with administrative officers took over their tasks, and did magnificent work. In their daily dealings with the Japanese they brought to bear "a mixture of tact, low cunning and firmness"—always necessary if concessions were to be won from their captors—and incidents between Korean guards and the prisoners diminished to a notable degree. This may have been partly because the presence of unemployed officers was a constant source of irritation to the Japanese, as one report suggests, or because of a tendency among certain of the guards to aggravate wherever possible the difficulties of the officers. It may also have been a result of the changed war situation. Whatever the cause the outcome was a triumph for those warrant and non-commissioned officers who bore the burden of liaison with the Japanese in the final stages of captivity.