

# Death Railway

## T O U R S

### Death Takes a Holiday

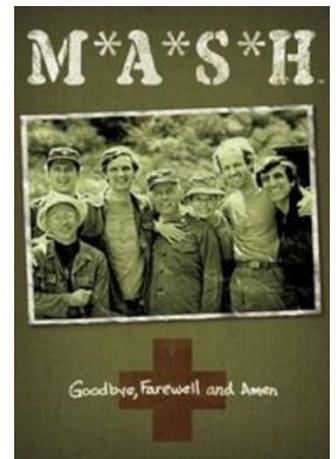
During a tour of the railway with my brother in 1999 we found a Digger whose date of death stood out from others. This Digger near the front entrance of the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery died on Christmas Day 1943. This period of the railway was just after the 'Speedo' where the Japanese pushed the men at great effort and length where the death toll increased as evidenced in the war cemeteries of both Thailand and Burma.

Since then I've always thought of him on Christmas Day, even though I don't know what he looks like, in my mind I think he looks like Clark Gable – I've toasted him at family dinners and also privately. He was Private George Lee of NSW and was 24 years old.

In 1980 there was a poignant episode of the American sitcom M\*A\*S\*H\* – sometimes I found the balance of war and humour cringe-worthy and something for me didn't always gel. (Maybe it was Klinger's choice of frocks).

The one episode that stood out – is related to my topic above titled 'Death Takes a Holiday'. Hawkeye, BJ and Margaret manage a critically injured soldier who they learn is a husband and father; they get the patient late in the day, and from memory of the episode he dies around 2330 hours on Christmas night. One Doctor fudges the time of death and marks time of death after midnight – saving the family the association of death of their loved one with Christmas – hence the title: 'Death Takes a Holiday'.<sup>1</sup>

On Christmas Eve 2016, I remembered Private George Lee from Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and wondered how many more Diggers had served our great country and died on Christmas Day. I was surprised at the results where unfortunately during the two World Wars – death certainly did *not* take a holiday.



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<sup>1</sup> Death Takes a Holiday – M\*A\*S\*H\* – Season 9 Ep 5 – aired 15 December 1980.

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### World War 1

Year	Casualties
1914	0
1915	7
1916	23
1917	12
1918	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>47</b>

### World War 2

Year	Casualties
1939	1
1940	3
1941	3
1942	21
1943	23
1944	10
1945	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b>

There was 11 deaths alone on Christmas Day for the Thai-Burma Railway; nine buried in Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and two buried in Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery. The same year shows six buried in Bomana War Cemetery from the Kokoda campaign.

**114** Australian lads died on Christmas Day where Death did not take a holiday. A couple of railway lads mentioned below:

Private Herbert Billsborough QX10086 died in F&H Hospital in Kanchanaburi of Cardiac Beri Beri – he was moved from Kami Songkurai up on the Thai/Burma border – Private Billsborough was from Goondiwindi, died on Christmas Day 1943 and is buried in Kanchanaburi War Cemetery. F&H Hospital was over the road from the current day war cemetery.

Private Jack Reed NX50113 enlisted at Paddington NSW in 1941 and sailed on the Aquitania to Singapore. After the Impregnable Fortress fell on 15 Feb 1942 Private Reed worked at Keppel Harbour and at Thompson Road. He was sent to the railway with F Force on Train 5, Truck 16. He was one of Blackjack Galleghan's boys of the 2/30<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Private Reed died on Christmas Day of preventable Dysentery and is buried in Kanchanaburi War Cemetery Thailand in row D in the Australian section. (He is one of three in the same row who died on Christmas Day).<sup>2</sup>



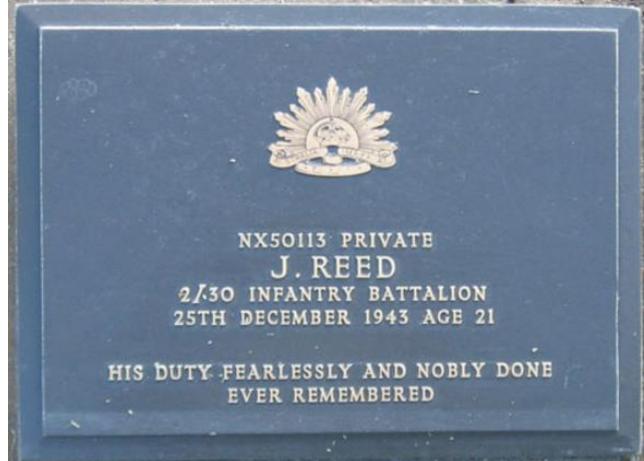
<sup>2</sup> Photos by [www.230battalion.org.au/](http://www.230battalion.org.au/)

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Above: Private Jack Reed.



I like the MASH storyline but certainly understand the accuracy of military records and how linear they can be.

Many a RAAF report I wrote was 'red-penned' over the years until I became an expert in factual writing leaving all opinion and fluff from reports. I got a 1995 record through my Flight Sergeant without one red pen – it was a 5 page Police report on a homicide (a massive report for the time).

A recent paper I wrote for Uni was critiqued that it was very 'report' style – LOL – can't win.

RIP fellas.

### References

1. [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)
2. [www.2-26bn.org/](http://www.2-26bn.org/)
3. [www.230battalion.org.au/](http://www.230battalion.org.au/)
4. [www.imdb.com/title/tt0638292/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0638292/)