

Death Railway

TOURS

The Railway Man (2013)

(Colin Firth, Nicole Kidman, Stellan Skarsgard & Hiroyuki Sanada)

Released late in 2013 the Railway Man was a book by exPOW Eric Lomax (a British soldier); I had picked up the book years before at the Thai Burma Railway Centre opposite the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery who stocked it.

Watch the official trailer here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEGTm1jgf_U

Colin Firth is the title character who plays Lomax; where the film is set in the 1970's. Lomax as a person on the surface seems to be dull and dare I say boring; however he has this strange 'I could snap at anytime' type demeanour. Put into today's terms he seems to suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and experiences flashbacks and nightmares, as portrayed in the film. Firth plays the role brilliantly as we discover the nuances of Lomax as the film progresses. I understand Rachel Weisz was meant to play the female lead (she was great in 'Enemy at the Gates' 2001 - a great war movie).

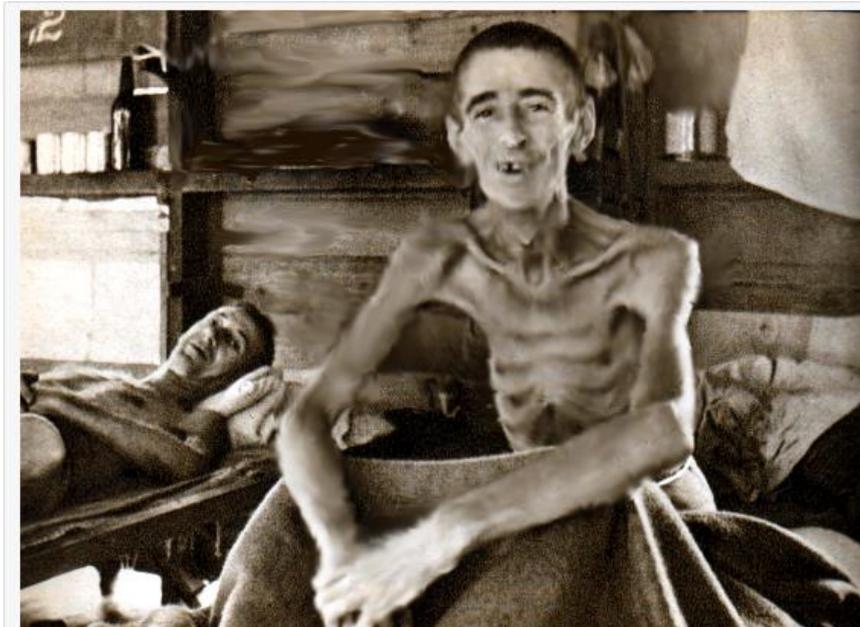


The movie flyer.

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The real Lomax was caught with a railway map (and radio parts) because he was a railway enthusiast pre-war and subsequently imprisoned in the infamous Kempeitai Prison at Outram Road Gaol Singapore (and also Kanchanaburi on the railway). Conditions in Outram Road were notoriously bad; there were daily executions, bashings and torture. Lomax feigned injuries and fevers in a bid to be transferred back to Changi prison which worked on a number of occasions; however when he returned to better health he was returned back to Outram (Japanese Military Police Prison). He flung himself down stairs which nearly killed him on one occasion.



Post war photo of British exPOW 'Becky' Sharpe who was imprisoned in the infamous Outram Road Gaol in Singapore. He is smiling because he was in Changi Hospital and the war was over. (Photo from Tim Bowden's website).

Lomax meets his love interest (Kidman) on a train and the two fall in love. Kidman is dressed down in the movie to more suit the genre and not to overshadow the quiet unassuming Lomax – this is a good thing; although I am a fan of Rachel Weisz and would have liked to have seen her cast in the role. Throughout the movie Lomax continues with his demons whilst his relationship with his wife also struggles particularly through the PTSD and nightmares. He finds some solace with friends who were also returned men and particularly with one close friend who tips Lomax's decision to visit Thailand. This close friend (played by Stellan Skarsgard) was an interesting choice – the young character has a very broad British accent and the older character a more Scandinavian accent – the latter explained as Skarsgard is Swedish. (The character was I understand not based on a real person, more over composites of real mates of Lomax).

One of Lomax's nemeses' is Nagase Takashi a Railway Interpreter for the dreaded Kempeitai Military Police. Later in life Nagase converts to Buddhism and reflects on a life

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that involved the deaths tens of thousands of men on the railway; he dedicates many years in assisting the locals in Kanchanaburi and trying to make up for his past.

This is where Lomax and Nagase meet again; back in Kanchanaburi and with some fiery scenes we are on the edge of our seats to see if Lomax will go through with his threats; a sort of bipolar edged scene of 'will I won't I' type drama that keeps audiences guessing whilst the drama lifts and intensifies.

This is a great contemporary film that has no CGI or big car crashes and chases. If you want that type of thing – this film is not for you (hire Pearl Harbour with Ben Affleck). This is a thinking person's film filled with raw emotion over a topic that was not widely known for many decades. Not the POW story, not the railway story; but PTSD among returned soldiers who relived their torture, pain and nightmares for the rest of their lives.



The young Nagase as a Kempeitai Interpreter.

Nagase published a book in Japan that was later transcribed into English titled 'Crosses and Tigers'.

Nagase has a statue in Kanchanaburi outside the JEATH War Museum – we will visit that museum and visit the statue on our tours of the railway. Hiroyuki Sanada plays the antagonist brilliantly and as an audience are captivated by both Firth and Sanada in their dual back in Kanchanaburi years later; the converted Kempeitai Interpreter against the quiet British ex prisoner who suffered greatly then and continues to suffer now. The build up to this scene is well done as the drama intensifies we wonder who will live and who will die.

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The statue of Nagase outside the JEATH War Museum.

I remember Rod Beattie (Curator of the War Cemetery and Director of the TBRC) telling me that Nagase was excellent to talk with and that re-telling stories should not be biased and should include both sides of the conflict – one premise of the TBRC.

Tim Bowden on his website has a great couple of pages on the succinct story of Lomax if you are keen to read a bit more on him and fill in some of the gaps the film leaves open.

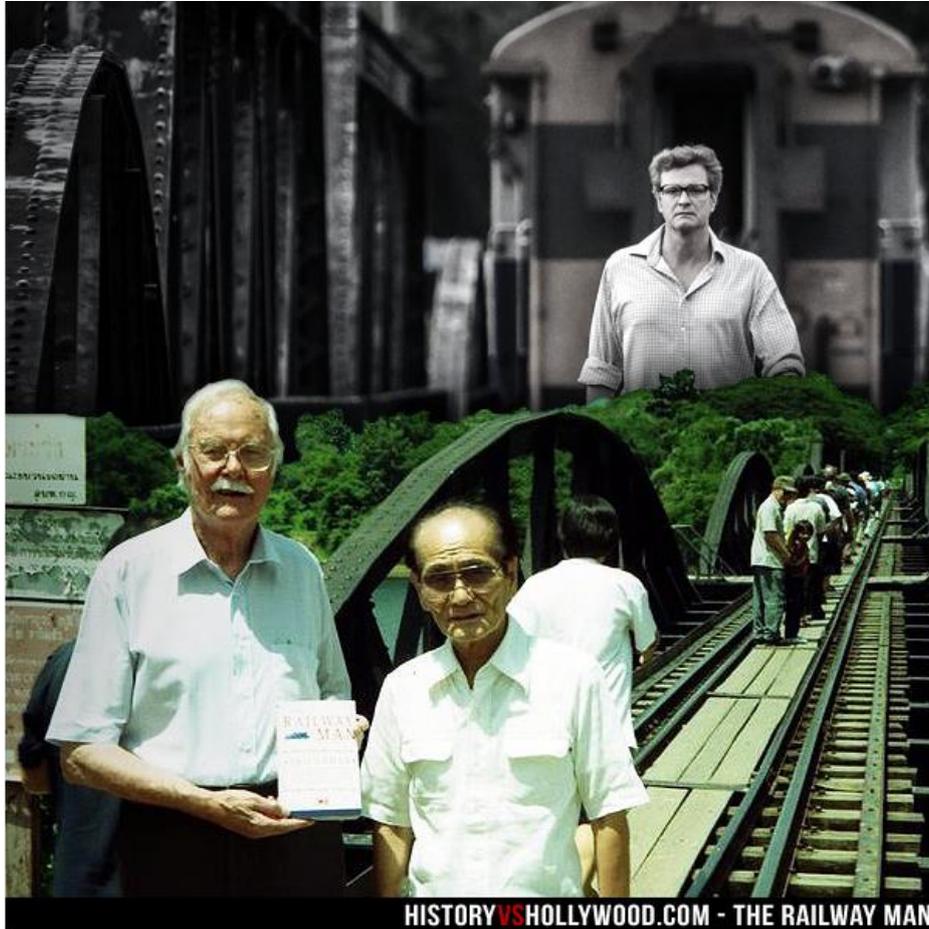
<http://www.timbowden.com.au/2014/02/16/part-two-eric-lomax-nagase-takashi/>

A couple of things the film omits is Lomax's first wife of 37 years; who he was engaged to before the war. His finance did not know if he was alive or dead during his time in captivity.

Lomax and others were caught with a radio in August 1943; Lomax and six of his comrades were forced to stand in the heat for hours without food and water. They were then stomped on and beaten unconscious with pickaxe handles; two of them died. Lomax stayed on the ground for two more days with cracked ribs, broken arm and hips. He suffered more torture in Kanchanaburi and Outram by being kept in a coffin sized cage and force fed water among other things.

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The real Eric Lomax and Nagase on the Bridge Over the River Kwai.

Definitely have a look at this film and remember it is not the big car crash Hollywood, over the top type film we come to expect out of Tinsel Town – this film’s strength is that it captures the mindset of the protagonist as we get inside his head and start to understand there is more to the outwardly boring railway enthusiast.

Andrew Mason.

Sources:

<http://www.timbowden.com.au/2014/02/16/part-two-eric-lomax-nagase-takashi/>

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2058107/>

<http://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/railway-man/>