

Death Railway

T O U R S

The Blue Haze

By Les Hall (1996)

This is one of the best books on the railway with its detail; re-produced from notes contemporaneously taken during the dark days of the author. It is probably the best account of the Burma side of the railway ever documented.

Observational comments and descriptions of railway life from the House of Death where two Orderlies attending the sick died of Cholera at the 105 kilo Camp to the bombing of Thanbyuzayat and the death of a Corporal at the 40 Kilo.

In-depth discussion on Green, Williams and Black Forces to reports of medical issues; broken promises by the enemy to Colonel Ramsay Speech and messages to Nagatomo, this book must be the definitive book on railway life. The reason for the railway, Les Hall discusses:

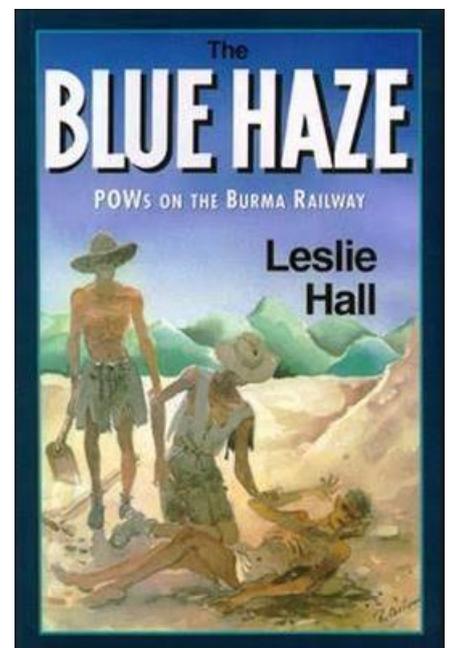
“British engineers and surveyors had studied the terrain and reported against the proposal. Mountains, jungle and rivers presented too great a challenge. The Japanese thought differently; they wanted and needed it for a supply line to their armies fighting desperately in northern Burma. To them, the word impossible meant a task took just a little longer than normal. To overcome the gigantic problem they poured manpower, and women too, in many thousands to build what some of the world’s leading engineers said could not be done.” (Hall, 1996: 98).

The description and actions of the guards was well documented in his book concluding with a chance run in by Mr Hall back in Singapore after the war. A particular nasty guard was arrested by Hall (as the ExPOW was now holding a .45 pistol) and marched to the former Kempeitai Police Cells and imprisoned.

After the war Les took a short flight out of Singapore with Weary Dunlop – the aircraft got into trouble mid-air where the pilot thought they may have to crash land - Les had entered the cockpit and overheard a Morse signal about lack of fuel – suffice to say they made it via a very bumpy ride.

I had the privilege to read this book whilst on tour and got to visit some of the luminaries in the novel including the following chaps discussed at length (among others) in Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery Burma (Myanmar):

- SGT Ron O’Donnell – murdered by a Guard and buried in Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery;
- Major Mull – escapee – died in a shoot-out with the Japanese;
- GNR Dickinson – escapee - contracted Malaria and couldn’t continue; captured and killed by firing squad;
- Private Bell – escapee - captured and executed by firing squad.



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"Being slow close to freedom, they cast doubts aside and decided they would complete their trek in daylight. They were both very excited and the smell of home was, as Bell later stated, in their nostrils....If ever the Nipponese needed proof they required but few guards for prisoners of war, the failure of Mull, Bell and Dickinson presented it. The inhospitable, hostile jungle was a major guard, the bounty-hunting Burmese its back up". Hall, 1996: 118).

This book is a warts and all true life documentary from discussions of 'dirty white prisoners' to mass bashings, disease, Hut of Death, ulcers at the 55 Kilo and amputations etc. The sinking of the Rakuyo Maru is discussed at length due to some of the luminaries of A Force who died in that terrible sinking and those rescued by the USS Pampanito.

"On 11 November 1944 Betty Hall walked down the aisle in her sister's frock of purple and gold, the colours of Les's battalion. On that same day, 3,000 miles away at Bencassi in Thailand, Les was badly bashed up by a Jap guard and British planes bombed nearby marshalling yards. Ten Australians were killed and many more wounded." (Hall; 1996: 308).

Great read – highly recommended.



Bibliography

Hall, Leslie (1996) *The Blue Haze* – Kangaroo Press