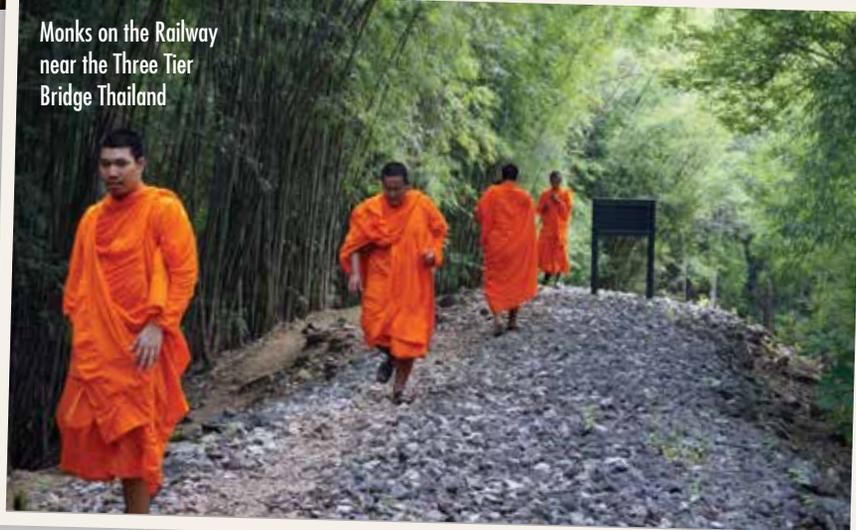


REVISITING THE THAI-BURMA DEATH RAILWAY AFTER 75 YEARS

The decision to complete the railway connecting Moulmein with Bangkok was made in June 1942. It was inspired by the need for improved communications to maintain the large Japanese army fighting in Burma (now Myanmar) – so it was a necessity born out of supply issues for the Japanese. The sea routes were becoming far too dangerous to bring supplies to the fighting men. This sea route was completely exposed to Rangoon, Singapore and the Strait of Malacca – the overland route was unfit for continuous heavy traffic from Raheng to Moulmein.

Attempts had previously been made to build this connection of the railway but were abandoned due to the massive task, cost and labour required. Much of the proposed route was through mountainous and dense jungle with one of the worst climates in the world through what would be one of the worst monsoons on record. The railway was to be built by

Monks on the Railway
near the Three Tier
Bridge Thailand



British, Australian, Dutch and American POWs, with local labourers in their thousands, including Burmese, Tamils and Malays. Most of the Australians had been captured in the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942.

More than 400 kilometres of railway from Thanbyuzayat in Burma (the northern end) to Ban Pong in the south (Thailand) had to be constructed. The

Japanese aimed to complete the railway in 14 months, or by the end of 1943. From June 1942 large numbers of POWs were taken to posts in Thailand and Burma to begin work on opposite ends of the line with the intention of meeting in the middle.

Throughout the building of the railway, food supplies were irregular and inadequate for the intense workload.

Kanchanaburi War Cemetery Cross of Sacrifice – ANZAC Day 2017



Vegetables brought up the Kwai Noi River by barge were often rotten; the food intake for the POWs was well below the normal calorific content of adults – even below that of official Japanese measures. Tracks by the railway trace were difficult and time consuming to utilise because of the monsoonal conditions and lack of space.

Although possible to supplement the diet by scrounging, the men had to often survive for months on a small supply of watery rice of poor quality with frequent infestations of maggots and other vermin. Fish, meat, oil, salt and sugar were all luxuries and on an absolute minimal scale. Guards would steal food before it arrived and sell it on the black market, further reducing life-saving nutrition given to the men.

Malaria, dysentery, pellagra, avitaminosis, cholera, beriberi and tropical ulcers attacked the POWs and the numbers of sick were massive. The



Hellfire Pass Thailand – ANZAC Day 2017

Japanese demanded a set percentage from the camps for working parties and irrespective of the sick numbers, the latter had to make up the quota. Sometimes the sick were carried by their mates to the railway trace.

The base camp ‘hospitals’ were really large crude attap huts at places like Chungkai, Tamarkan, Nong Pladuk and Thanbyuzayat. The sick were supported by those who were less sick. Drugs were

not widely available and generally the doctors possessed what they carried with them from Singapore. Some trading occurred with locals; in particular with the Thai trader Boon Pong. The mortality rate was somewhat controlled later on the line only through sheer determination by the medical staff with improvisation and skill.

The railway was completed at Konkoiata

in October 1943 and was fully opened in December of the same year – a ceremony was held to drive the final spike into the railway. Following the opening of the railway, work consisted of repairs and maintenance including fixing damage caused by bombing.

Hellfire Pass at Konyu cutting was one of the worst sections of the Death Railway particularly during the infamous ‘speedo’ period. It got its name from POWs standing at the top of the cutting, looking down during the night with bamboo bonfires and oil lamps burning, with hundreds of men toiling in the hot night, with their captors ready to pounce with a bamboo stick at the ready. Men likened this to the ‘jaws of hell’ and ‘Dante’s Inferno’; hence Hellfire Pass became its name.

Rod Beattie, an engineer who is director of the Thai Burma Railway Centre and former curator of the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, says anyone would be lucky to get through all the rock at Hellfire Pass in under three months today, even with modern equipment, correct catering and a huge labour force.

Men worked around the clock on Hellfire Pass, generally seven days a week and for 12-18 hour shifts each day. Often men worked double shifts to replace a mate who was too sick to work. By June 1943 the job was behind schedule. In July the ‘speedo’ commenced where the men were pushed (many beyond their limit) and the labour force was supplemented with another group of Australian and British POWs to bring the total to around 1,000 men.

There were three types of workers at Hellfire Pass:

- Earth moving gangs who removed earth and rubble to expose rock with chunkels (mattocks) and rice sacks;
 - Hammer and tap men;
 - Rock rollers, who cleared rubble, rocks and boulders often using crowbars.
- One Digger who died at Hellfire Pass

was Private Roy MacDonald of the 2/20th Bn. He was 39 years old and died on 4 November 1943. He’d come to Australia from Scotland with his two brothers; one brother served with the 1st AIF and the second was killed in action in Syria in 1941. You can visit Roy at the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery at Grave 1.A.65.

Work continued along the railway with repairs and maintenance. The POWs were not allowed to paint symbols on their roofs to indicate their presence. Camps were generally situated close to the rail trace and suffered during bombing raids. In Nong Pladuk, one camp existed near the petrol dump which was subsequently bombed; 95 POWs were killed and 300 wounded.

The numerous war cemeteries across the line were reduced post-war to two for the Australians – Kanchanaburi in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma – Nikki Camp was the delineator for what cemetery you went to in either the north or south.

Another lad to visit at Kanchanaburi War Cemetery is Sergeant Charlie Mucklow who died of dysentery and beriberi at Tamarkan POW camp near the bridge over the River Kwai. He died on 29 January 1944 aged 36. From Nathalia, Victoria, he had been a sharp shooter who entered local shooting competitions and a champion flower grower.

More than 2700 Australians died on the railway with over 1300 of them buried

in Kanchanaburi. There is a memorial to 300 whose ashes were interned in two plots in the Australian section. There are five 18-year-olds in this cemetery with predominately British, Dutch and Australian lads here.

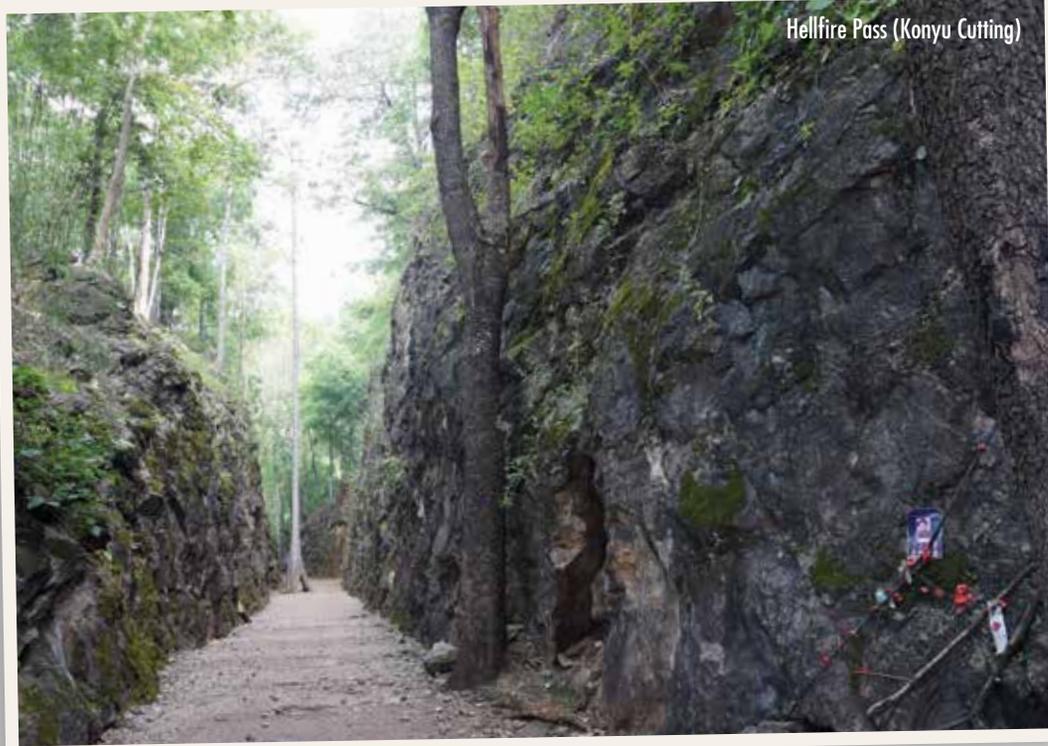
Ex-RAAF Corporal Andrew Mason is a former Military Police investigator and the son of a POW who served in Malaya, Singapore and Japan. Andrew has led numerous tours to the Death Railway and Hellfire Pass. For more information: www.deathrailwaytours.com.au

THE TAVOY EIGHT — EXECUTED FOR TRYING TO ESCAPE

On 6 March 2011 the Secretary for Defence announced that 20 servicemen would be awarded, posthumously, the Commendation for Gallantry. What these 20 men had in common is that they escaped from the Japanese during WWII and all were executed as a result.

One group of eight were all members of the 4th Anti-Tank Regiment, led by

RANK	NAME	SERVICE NO	AGE
Warrant Officer	Mathew Quittenton	VX45344	37
Sergeant	Clifford Danaher	VX31946	24
Lance Bombardier	Aubrey Emmett	VX38444	23
Lance Bombardier	Arthur Jones	VX46835	30
Gunner	James Wilson	VX47903	27
Gunner	Alan Glover	VX57043	31
Gunner	Thomas Cumming	VX31670	30
Gunner	Arthur Reeve	VX27292	21



Hellfire Pass (Konyu Cutting)

Warrant Officer Mathew Quittenton, who escaped and shortly after were recaptured. They were on the Burma side of the railway and went on the run on 4 June 1942 – about a month after arriving for the Death Railway detail of ‘A’ Force under Brigadier Varley, repairing airfields in preparation to the building of the Thai-Burma Railway.

All eight were Victorians; two came from the same small country town of Ouyen. They were a mixed bunch, made up of a fireman, a grocer’s assistant, a truck driver, a railway worker and a farmer.

Although camp conditions were adequate at first in Burma for A Force, the Tavoy Eight decided to escape even though they knew that prisoners found outside the camp would be shot. They just walked out of the camp on 4 June 1942.

One of their mates, Ken Dumbrell, tried unsuccessfully to persuade them not to go. He later said, “The boys had made up their minds. They had all the courage in the world. For them, it was now or never”.

The following day the men were captured, returned to the camp (some

injured) and sentenced. On 6 June 1942, the eight men of the 8th Division were murdered in cold blood by the Japanese military. Held responsible for the orders were two officers in particular: Major Itsui and Captain Shina.

Forty men of the AIF were given stakes about 1.2 metres long, taken to a spot near the Tavoy cemetery and ordered to dig eight graves; the officer in charge of the digging team was Captain Hennessy. As the party followed instructions to dig, 16 Japanese soldiers practised aiming and loading. It was a Sunday and the rain pelted down, filling the graves with water.

When the graves were dug a staff car carrying Japanese officers including Major Itsui and Captain Shina arrived, followed by another vehicle carrying Brigadier Varley; Lt Col Anderson VC, Bill Drower (interpreter) and two padres, Bashford and Smith. Behind this vehicle was a truck carrying the eight condemned men.

The men left the truck one by one, hands bound behind their backs, some obviously wounded. They were taken to

the graves and made to sit in front of the stakes, to which they were then bound.

The digging party heard two volleys of shots and were then marched on the double to the gravesites. They were ordered to put their mates in the water-filled graves. The padres continued with a burial service while the Japanese stood about laughing and jeering.

Brigadier Varley later told the POWs that “the men had died like Australians”. He said two of the men refused to be blindfolded so they could look their executioners in the eye, and that immediately prior to the volleys they called out to

each other saying goodbye.

In 1950, facing a war crimes trial held on Manus Island, Itsui said that during his Army training he was taught to be obedient and to carry out orders implicitly. He said he instructed Captain Shina to carry out the executions. However the court was told that even under Japanese military law, the executions were unlawful, that there was no court martial for the men and no form of trial whatsoever.

Itsui had claimed the order to shoot the prisoners came from General Yamashita of the 25th Army HQ himself ‘execute all prisoners who escaped’ and that if he did not carry out the general order then he himself may have faced execution.

On 20 June 1950, the two Japanese officers were found guilty of murdering the eight Australians at Tavoy. Major Itsui was sentenced to life in prison; Captain Shina received 10 years imprisonment. The San Francisco peace treaty would have them released and repatriated by 1958.