

Building the Trans

Burma Railway



The Bridge on the River Kwai was released in 1957 by Columbia Pictures. The movie was based on the novel *Le Pont de la Rivière Kwai* (1952), written by French author Pierre Boulle and based on the construction of the Burma Railway in 1942–1943. It was a wildly successful movie, winning seven academy awards including Best Picture. It was the top money maker of 1958, beating out *Peyton Place*. The film has demonstrated considered staying power over the years. In 1997, it was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the United States Library of Congress. It is included on the American Film Institute's list of best American films ever made. The British Film Institute voted *The Bridge on the River Kwai* the 11th greatest British film of the 20th Century.

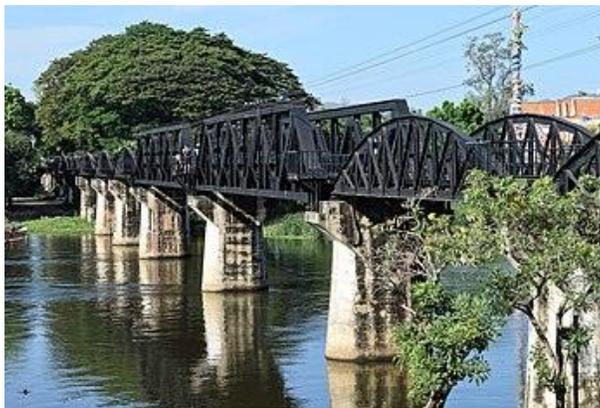
The movie is almost entirely a work of fiction. Reality was far more grim. The railway bridge that inspired the movie didn't cross the river known at the time as the Kwai. Boulle — who would later write another novel that turned into a highly successful movie, *Planet of the Apes* — had worked in Malaya and was interned for a time by the Vichy French in Hanoi where he himself suffered severe hardships and forced labour. However, he had never been to the actual location of the Burma railway. He knew its route ran parallel to the Kwae River and just assumed that it was the Kwae that it crossed.

The dramatic destruction of the bridge depicted in the film was purely a creation of the screenwriters. In the movie's most dramatic scene the newly-finished bridge is blown up by the British POW Colonel who had built it. That, too, had no parallel in reality. At the time of its filming, the explosion scene ranked as the most expensive special effects shot in movie history. Rather than use a miniature, the production crew opted to build a full-sized bridge in a valley in Sri Lanka. They wired \$50,000 worth of explosives onto the span and to the train that would run along it. Six cameras would cover the shot, one of them aboard the train. The cameramen were to start their cameras and then jump clear of the explosions.

On the first filming attempt, one of the cameramen failed to get away and the explosives weren't triggered: the locomotive was run off the end of the bridge into a pile of sandbags. Two days later, after necessary repairs, the shot was ready again. This time, everything went according to plan: the bridge went up in a spectacular fireball, and the train plunged dramatically into the deep gorge below.

The movie's first two screenwriters had to conceal their identity because they were on the infamous Hollywood Blacklist for past political views, real or imagined, and were prohibited from working in the US film industry. One of the seven academy awards the film won was for Best Adapted Screenplay, which put the Academy in an awkward position. It gave the statue to the French author Boule, who did not speak English. (Foreman and Wilson eventually received Academy Awards as well, posthumously.)

What is true is that in 1943 a railway bridge was built by Allied POWs and Asian forced laborers over the Mae Klong river (which would be renamed "Khwae Yai" in the 1960s following the film's success) at a place called Tha Ma Kham, five kilometres from Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Actually, two bridges were built: a temporary wooden one and a permanent steel/concrete bridge a few months later. Both bridges were used for two years, until they were destroyed not by saboteurs but by Allied bombers. Neither looked anything like the bridge in the movie. The steel bridge was repaired and is still in use today.



The River Kwai bridge as seen from the tourist plaza (NNE side) in Kanchanaburi, Thailand in 2017.

These bridges and many others were critical parts of a 415 km rail line referred to today as the Trans Burma Railway (TBR.) It was constructed starting at its two ends simultaneously: Thanbyuzyat in Burma and Nong Pladuk in Thailand, north to south along the western edge of Indochina, which we now call Southeast Asia. Once completed, it would link the Thai and Burmese railway systems. Owing to the inhumanely harsh conditions attendant to its construction it also gained the name "Death Railway." The

purpose of the railway was to give the Japanese military a much-needed land route for expanding their supply lines. It was needed to compensate for reversals suffered at sea against resuscitated Allied naval power.

Supposedly many Japanese viewers resented the film's story-line, that incompetent Japanese military engineers had to turn to British expertise to plan and complete the bridge on time. The Japanese were in fact expert engineers. The POWs were nothing to them but manual laborers. The railway was finished ahead of schedule, an extraordinary accomplishment given the extreme conditions, circumstances and terrain.

At the turn of the 19th century the British had surveyed for such a rail route but concluded the project was too difficult, costly and dangerous to build through such dense jungle and wild and uneven topography. But pressing strategic needs and an unexpectedly surging POW population (aggregated from victories in Malaya, Singapore and the Philippines) gave the Japanese strong motivation to tackle the challenge. Using POWs for war-related work was illegal under the Geneva Conventions, but Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita had extracted a promise from British General Arthur Percival, as part of the Singapore surrender terms, that he would not object to what in effect became forced labor.)



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One thing the movie got dead right was that the project was built with slave labor including impressed locals and massive numbers of British and U.S. POWs. An estimated 180,000 and 250,000 Southeast Asian civilian laborers and about 61,000 Allied prisoners of war were subjected to forced labor during construction. Truly accurate figures will never be known. About 90,000 civilian laborers and more than 12,000 Allied prisoners died. This according to Wikipedia reports.

The Thailand-Burma Railway Centre in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, is dedicated to exploring the wider history of the railway. Its estimates are that over 13,000 prisoners of war perished between late 1942 and late 1945, and it calculates the death toll among Asian laborers probably exceeded 100,000. Everyone agrees the working conditions on the "Death Railway" were beyond appalling. Dysentery, malaria, beriberi, fungal infections known simply as “jungle rot” and savage cholera epidemics were routine. Starvation rations, overwork, poor or no sanitation and systematic brutality on the part of Japanese and Korean engineers and guards were the normal conditions of the day.

Prisoners were described by some observers as nothing more than walking skeletons. Medical facilities and drugs were practically non-existent. Over one-fourth of the entire workforce is believed to have died during the actual construction. At a spot called Konyu, a 500-yard stretch of railroad was laid in a gap that had to be carved through a mountain ridge by hand with picks and shovels. Of the 1,000 men who began the initial digging, only 100 survived. From July to October 1943, desperate to finish construction against a deadline, Japanese engineers forced the pace to the point where many men were working virtually around the clock – as much as 62 hours work in a 72-hour period. Rest days were a rarity.

The first POWs to go to Burma were Australians. They worked on airfields and other infrastructure initially before beginning construction of the railway in October 1942. The first POWs to work in Thailand at the southern terminus were British soldiers. More POWs were imported from Singapore and the Dutch East Indies as construction advanced. Construction camps housing at least 1,000 workers each were established every 5–10 miles (8–17 km) of the route. Workers were moved up and down the railway line as needed.



The real bridge on the "River Kwai" (actually built over the Mae Klong river). Aerial photograph shows severe damage to the middle spans caused by Allied bombing in May 1945.

U.S. POWs represented a very small part of the overall POW contingent of the sixty-some-odd-thousand POWs assigned to the TBR. They came mainly from just two sources, the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery and the survivors of the sunken Navy ship USS Houston. Both groups were captured on the island of Java in March 1942. In all, 534 soldiers from the battalion and 368 survivors of the Houston were taken as prisoners of war. They remained so for 42 months until the end of the war. Most of them were sent to Thailand to work on the Railway. Of the 902 soldiers and sailors taken captive, 163 died in captivity.

The parent organization of the 2nd Battalion was the 36th Division, Texas National Guard. The majority of the men in the battalion ranged from 18 to 22 years old. The 2nd Battalion was the only U.S. ground force sent to the Dutch East Indies. The mission was to help the Dutch defend the islands against an invasion, which in fact began February 27, 1942. On March 8, the allies in the Dutch East Indies surrendered and 32,500 soldiers were taken prisoner, mostly Dutch, British, and Australian, and 534 members of the 2nd battalion.

The USS Houston was at sea when the Pacific War began and spent the first two months of the war escorting convoys from Australia to the Dutch East Indies. On February 3, 1942 the Houston was damaged in an air attack at the Battle of Makassar Strait which killed 48 men. The Houston also participated in the Battle of the Java Sea on 27 February before being sunk in the Battle of Sunda Strait, February 28 – March

1, along with the Australian light cruiser HMAS Perth and the Dutch destroyer HNLMS Evertsen. 696 crew members died; the remaining 368 were captured by the Japanese

JJ Karwacki, a retired US Army Colonel living in Kanchanaburi, worked with The Thai-Burma Railway Centre and Museum to as precisely as possible document the numbers of US POWs who worked on the TBR, the numbers of U.S. deaths and those liberated, name by name. His detailed findings go so far as to identify the cause of death and final resting place of each person in his database. He puts the number of US POW deaths at 131: 65 from the Army, 62 from the Navy and 4 from the Marines. The total number of US POWs who labored on the TBR, he concludes, was 779, mostly as noted from the 131st FA and the USS Houston. . There were also 28 from the 39 survivors of the sinking of the Merchant Marine ship SS Sawokla who were sent to the TBR (all were liberated) plus one civilian volunteer pilot with the Flying Tigers. He likewise survived.

Country of origin	POWs	Number of deaths
UK, British India or crown colony	30,131	6,904
Netherlands or Dutch East Indies	17,990	2,782
Australia	13,004	2,802
United States	686	133
Total	61,811	12,621

MacPherson, Neil. "Death Railway Movements"

If the ambitious engineering feat pulled off by the Japanese in the Southeast Asian jungle was ruthless and brutal, it was also short lived. When the war ended, the railway was confiscated by the British. On January 16, 1946, the British ordered Japanese POWs to remove a four-kilometer stretch of rail between Nikki and Sonkrai. The railway link between Thailand and Burma was separated to protect British interests in Singapore. The line was closed completely in 1947, but the section between Nong Pla Duk and Nam Tok was reopened ten years later and still operates to this day.



Hellfire Pass: a railway cutting on the railway noted for harsh conditions and the heavy loss of life suffered during construction. The name was supposedly inspired by the sight of emaciated prisoners laboring at night by torchlight, said to evoke a scene from Hell.

The British government sold the functioning railway and related materials to the Thai government for 50 million baht (\$1,575,746 in current U.S. dollars). The Burma section was sequentially removed, the rails were gathered in Mawlamyaing, and the roadbed was slowly reclaimed by the jungle.

[Source: [Source: <http://www.axpow.org> | Article | March 17, 2019 ++]