

# RETURN TO THE BRIDGE

On February 15 1942, Singapore fell to the Japanese Imperial Army. That is a fact which cannot be disputed. From that date onwards the numbers estimated by historians, the facts offered by what historical records still exist are so mind-numbing that they can too easily be rejected.

The Japanese captured 85,000 British and Australian prisoners. Most of them were forced to build a railway to link Burma and Thailand.

Fifty-five prison camps were established along the line of the railway. Some 30,000 Japanese guarded the workers on the railway.

Over 2000 men worked on the bridge over the Kwai.

Because there was little modern machinery human energy was what mattered and the Japanese view was that the individual could no longer be taken into consideration. The work force was no longer human - simply a machine. Over a quarter of a million workers from Asia were forced to work on the railway- Malaysians, Indonesians, Indians. More than 100,000 of them died. Of the 64,000 Europeans and Australians who worked on the railway, half of them died. There are no statistics available to indicate the numbers who died later as a direct result of their experiences.

In October 1943 the link between Thailand and Burma was completed. The Japanese objective was to construct a route which would allow them to continue their thrust beyond Burma and into the Indian sub-continent. Constructed far too hastily

the line never achieved its objective. The Japanese had estimated that 30,000 tons of war material a day could be transported to the Burma front. The best results were 600 tons a day.

Of the 450 kilometers built in the 1940's only 80 kilometers still exist. The rest has been lost to the jungle.

These are the raw facts. Against the odds some people did survive and one of them who did is Ian McKenzie. Ian was a prisoner of war between the fall of Singapore

and his release more than three years later. For part of that time he was forced to build the

"Railway of Death" for the Japanese Imperial Army, the railway made known throughout the world by the film "The Bridge over the River Kwai."

Almost fifty years later Ian returned to Thailand with his wife, Margaret.

G.Q. Ian, when did you join the army?

I.M. I joined just before my 16th birthday as a boy soldier. That was in March, 1939, prior to the war with Germany.

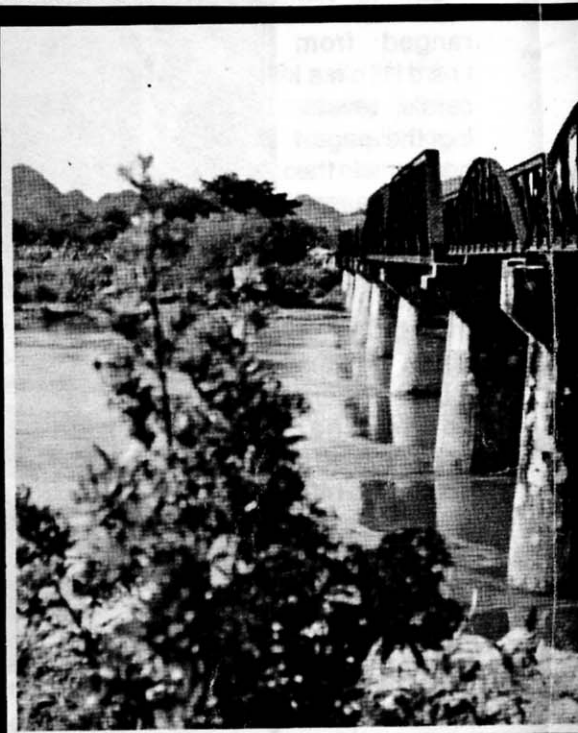
G.Q. What were your duties as a boy soldier?

I.M. I joined the First Battalion of the Gordons in Aldershot. I played the clarinet in the military band and was not very good at it. In June, 1939 I transferred to the Second Battalion which was stationed in Singapore.

G.Q. What do you remember of the

fall of Singapore?

I.M. The fact we were so young made no difference - we were in action with the men. The Gordons were sent sixty miles north of the Japanese causeway but we were forced to retreat. The Argylls piped us across the causeway which was



then blown by the Royal Engineers. The Gordons were the last to leave the front line, passing through the Argyll defences. The allies had no tanks, no ~~phones~~ - surrender was inevitable and Singapore fell.

G.Q. Last year, you revisited Thailand. Tell me about that.

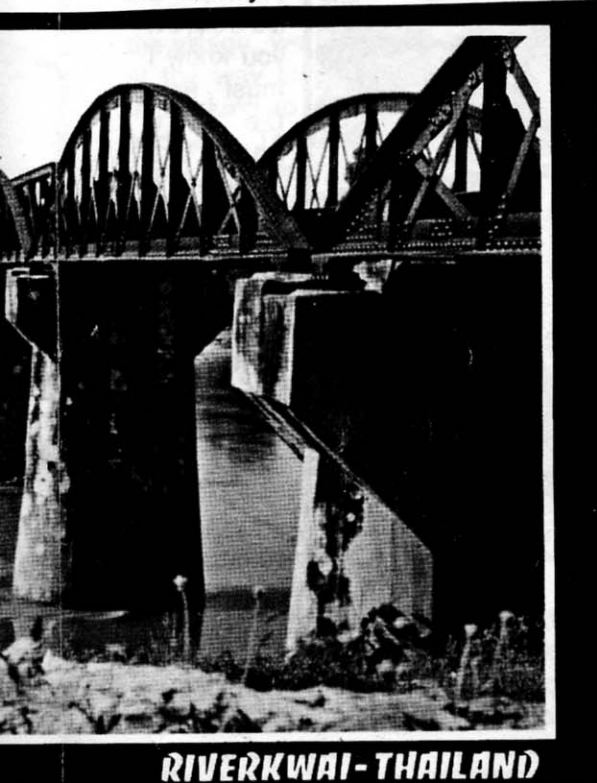
I.M. The Far East Prisoner of War Association run a trip every year. I always wanted to go back - why I do not know. Eventually, Margaret and I decided to go. A party of around seventy went including widows and families looking for their husbands' or fathers' graves. There were only fifteen former prisoners of World War 2. There are few of us left.

G.Q. You travelled from Bangkok in

# ON THE RIVER KWAI

a luxury air-conditioned coach. That must have been very different from the last time you followed that route.

I.M. There was much worse to come but I can never forget that journey. We travelled by cattle truck from Singapore to Bangdong where the railway of death started. There



**RIVERKWAI-THAILAND**

were thirty men in each truck so that we were forced to stand up, sit down, stand up to relieve the pressure of space. The journey took four days. All that time pinned in a steel truck: it was like an oven and we were rarely allowed out. From time to time the train stopped at stations and we were fed on watery soup and plain boiled rice: there was never enough to eat. Our greatest anguish in that confined space was that we were never allowed access to a toilet. We took turns holding each other "over the side"- I often wonder what the native people thought.

G.Q. What happened when you

arrived at Bangdong?

I.M. We were put in a prisoner of war camp for two days and then we marched some twenty miles to the Bridge on the River Kwai. I did not work on the bridge. Instead I was moved ten miles north to a base camp at Chungkai where we were put to work building the embankment for the railway. The camp was made up of huts made from bamboo and atap (leaves for the roof). A hut was perhaps a hundred yards long. There was no furniture. A platform made of bamboo ran the whole length of the hut on each side and that is where we slept.

The food was bad. Plain boiled rice and a few vegetables was standard tack and from time to time there was a very little meat. Some hot water and a few tea leaves was what we had to drink.

G.Q. I know that you visited the Bridge on the River Kwai last year. What were your thoughts, how did you feel?

I.M. When the bus drew up beside the bridge my mind immediately went back to the time when I was there

***I was speechless - you, not anyone, could have a feeling like that in all your life!***

after the railway was finished. By this time the Japs knew that they could not win the war and were concerned about loss of life on the railway.

One evening, I heard aircraft approaching and thought they were Liberator bombers. They attacked

the bridge. The Japanese opened with ack-ack guns positioned above the bridge. Fortunately, outside my hut was a drainage ditch which was dry. I was first into it. Recently I listened to a POW (not a Scot) who was present during that raid. He told the interviewer how proud he felt that the allies were striking back - so much so that he stood up and sang "Land of Hope and Glory". I unashamedly admit that I remained at the bottom of the ditch with several allies and a Scots voice suggesting that those afflicted planes might please go away, or words to that effect. A stick of bombs missed the bridge and landed in the POW camp. Twenty-four prisoners were killed. Not one bomb landed on the Japanese camp just across the road.

Nevertheless, after the raid we were made to build landing strips and troops had to be ferried across the river. To that extent the raid was a success.

G.Q. When the railway was completed where were you sent?

I.M. To Bangkok where I worked on docks loading and unloading barges.

In my last camp, near the border with Cambodia, we were building machine-gun positions from logs and earth. The Japs did not bother about

The Geneva Convention. We were there when the A-bombs were dropped and we were released. That day we were working away from camp and when we arrived back there was the union jack. We were the last to know.

I was speechless - you, not anyone, could have a feeling like that in all your life! Everything seemed better - nothing could feel better than feeling free. A boat to Liverpool and an ambulance from Stirling Station to my home.

G.Q. Ian, this is a difficult question

and there is no need to answer it if you don't want to. At the very lowest estimate 125,000 men died building that railway, a railway only 450 km in length. How did you survive?

I.M. I was very young, seventeen or eighteen and exceptionally fit because of the army training. There was also determination - I was determined to survive. Many gave up through illness and starvation.

What also helped was the comradeship of the Scots. We tried to help each other as much as we could. Other people did not have that - or at least not to the same extent. I remember two men tried to escape. One was beheaded where he stood and the other had a terrible sword wound across his shoulder. We sheltered him. When I came down from Camp 211, the most dreadful place I have ever experienced, I met a Major Docherty of the Argylls who is now over ninety years old and lives in Stirling. He knew I came from Stirling. He gave me a little food and some money to buy fruit and eggs. I had malaria, tropical sores on my arms and legs: I was really bad. Major Docherty had very little - but the comradeship was so strong that he gave what he also needed to survive.

G.Q. This is the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Singapore. Should that be recognised by The British Legion and other organisations?

I.M. Some 200 people are going back to Thailand and Singapore. Myself, one other Gordon and several Argylls are the few survivors who live in this area. We have been invited to a dinner in Falkirk on the

month before the quinine ran out.

Ronald Searle, the cartoonist, was a prisoner in Chungkai, my original base camp on the railway. He said: "We are fortunate as prisoners - we

have come through the very worst the world can offer."

G.Q. The last question, a question you know I must ask. Do you hate the Japanese?

I.M. No - You cannot hate an entire nation. I cannot forgive or forget although it was fifty years ago. I have had

a young Japanese in my house, a guest of a friend. He was born after the war ended. Mind you, many prisoners were beaten by the Japanese and I experienced a particularly brutal beating. I can still remember to this day what he looked like and even now would like to get my hands on him. The worst part of any beating was having to stand and take it. To retaliate would have resulted in being beaten to death.

Whether this article will do any good is a matter of conjecture. Will anyone, nowadays, pay any attention?

15th February.

G.Q. I have asked you a lot of questions. Have I asked the right questions? Is there anything you wish to add?

I.M. Even during the worst times

***" We are fortunate as prisoners - we have come through the very worst the world can offer."***

there was always humour, often a sense of the ridiculous. One of the many things we were short of was toilet paper. Consider a defoliated jungle - on prisoners' rations.

I suffered terribly from malaria. There was a monthly supply of quinine but there was never enough. We all agreed that it was better to have an attack of malaria early in the



Mr McKenzie on a recent visit to the bridge