NOTES ON THE THAI-BURMA RAILWAY
PART Ⅰ: "THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI" -THE MOVIE

One of the most extraordinary engineering achievements of World War Ⅱ was the construction of the Burma-Thailand railway. With unbelievably primitive tools for such a project and a total disregard for human life and suffering, the Japanese built a railway 415 kilometers long through one of the most rugged and pestilence-ridden areas in the world in the incredibly short span of 12 months. The cost was a life for every sleeper laid over its most difficult terrain. Dead were 13,000 British, Australian, American and Dutch prisoners of war and an estimated 70,000 Asian civilian labourers ....The total workforce to be employed on the railway included 51,000 British, Dutch and American prisoners of war, 9,500 Australians and over 270,000 conscripted Asian labourers from China, Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Singapore.


POW Railway
State Railways

Heights shown in feet

miles

kilometres

1 3 5 7 9 0 1 3 5 0

0 0 10 20 30 40 50

0 10 20 30 40 50
In a recent letter there was mention of "The Bridge on the River Kwai". I passed over this bridge in an open freight car as I was being sent to the Burma front. The following year, I passed over this bridge again in a covered freight car as one of the wounded and ill. What I saw from the railroad was the reality of the abuse of prisoners of war by the Japanese forces...It was called the "Railroad of Death"...I started my trip on this railroad on 11 March 1944. The train moved at a maximum of 20 kilometers an hour and stopped many times. It took 3 nights and 4 days to travel the entire 450 kilometers...On my return the conditions had worsened. It took 6 nights and 7 days. We passed large numbers of prisoners of war in the jungle along the tracks. They were badly exploited. They were all naked except for a fifty-centimeter-wide loincloth. These were made from coarse jute bags for rice and wheat. The peachy skin of the Caucasians was soiled by streams of blood. They moved and writhed, chased by Japanese officers wielding whips. I couldn’t help but doubt that this was permitted under international law. Lack of education is a fearful thing. This showed the inferiority of military education, which produced officers who were lacking in compassion and ignorant of international law.

Watanabe Hideo, 64, painter, essayist, Kamakura.

-from a letter to the Asahi Shimbun (newspaper),

On September 1, 1943, in the midst of the rainy season, I set off from Bangkok station on a freight train, and arrived in Ban Pong, which is located approximately 70 kilometers west of Bangkok. Nong Pladuk, which is one stop before Ban Pong on the Bangkok side, is the starting point of the Thai-Burma railway....Birds, larger than crows, flew in flocks over me. They were unfamiliar black birds. I took a careful look at them. They were vultures which fed on carrion. I jumped to the conclusion that this was the habitat of black vultures, but the truth was that they flocked to the smell of carrion. There was a concentration camp in Ban Pong for POWs from Malaya and Singapore....A funeral procession of prisoners was coming up. Comrades were carrying a body on a stretcher which was covered with a faded Union Jack, followed by a Japanese soldier with a gun. At the rear of the procession, four or five vultures followed with their heads moving to and fro. The location, which was surrounded by an uneven bamboo fence, turned out to be the concentration camp.

(1) နေရာများနှင့် မောင်များ နေရာတစ်ခုဖြစ်သည်။

(2) နေရာများကို ကြည့်ရှုရန် အခမ်းအနား မြင့်သော အခြေအနေဖြင့် စိတ်ဝင်စားသည်။

(3) ကြည့်ရှုရန် နေရာများကို သတိပေးပေးသည်။

(4) နေရာများကို မြင့်သော အခမ်းအနားဖြင့် စိတ်ဝင်စားသည်။
（5）写真では、山の斜面に沿って築かれた土壁が見える。壁の上には、石碑が設置されている。壁の形状により、地形を整え、自然災害からの防禦を図っている。

（6）ここは、古代の遺跡として知られる場所である。遺跡は、古代の生活を反映している。遺物は、当時の生活様式を知るうえで貴重な資料となっている。

（7）この石碑は、この場所の歴史を記録している。碑文には、この場所の歴史についての詳細が記載されている。この石碑は、歴史的価値が高いものである。
There is nothing "interesting" about the Thai-Burma railway. As the previously quoted extracts indicate, it is a story of indescribable misery, suffering and horror. Reading the diaries of Allied prisoners of war (POWs) or the reports of other (more qualified) scholars on the pressganging of local Asian labourers for railway construction work, creates a sense of deep and unmitigated depression. This depression is so suffocating that I find it increasingly difficult to introduce the railway in any meaningful way to young Japanese students, mostly ignorant of the events of World War II and often receptive, through cartoons and other media, to the increasingly vociferous propaganda of contemporary "revisionist" Japanese intellectuals.

I first started introducing the Thai-Burma Railway to Seika students more than ten years ago, by including David Lean's widely acclaimed and influential movie, "The Bridge on the River Kwai", in a class on Western images of the war in Asia, together with other documentary materials. It soon became clear to me, however, that the movie was highly inaccurate and - in a real and unfortunate sense - was rather "whitewashing" the realities of the Thai-Burma Railway. Would that it had merely been the "interesting" and "dramatic" story portrayed in the movie! It was not; the realities of the railroad were far more dreadful than any commercial Hollywood production could ever portray. Nevertheless, I must admit that in order to present some intelligible images of the railway to contemporary Japanese students, I still find it necessary to include the movie in my present course on the Thai-Burma Railway, if only because confrontation with the stark horrors and ugliness of the railway would be incomprehensible to a generation of Japanese educated in blissful ignorance of their country's World War II history.

Occasionally, in these "Notes", I may seem at times to be giving too much space in attempts to understand certain Japanese participants and their views both during and after the railway's construction. This is in no way intended to denigrate or in any way detract from the weight of the experiences of the Allied POWs or Asian labourers concerned. Rather, I consider it axiomatic that in any grandiose imperial and military undertaking, however sordid and grotesque the realities, there are (or were) those few unusual individuals who, sincerely motivated by ideals of an alternative future, came to grasp the impossibility of reconciling those ideals with the miserable and ghastly events unfolding in the Thai-Burmese jungle, and, in their small and modest way - and within the limitations of their own cultural values - tried to mitigate and even personally atone for the horrors.

Regrettably, very few Allied POW diaries have been translated into Japanese. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to try to recap the miseries recounted in these diaries; the originals must be read and
allowed to speak for themselves. Rather, I confine myself to quoting extracts illustrating the wider issues that seem relevant. I have also refrained from reproducing the many valuable sketches by former POWs or photographs illustrating the railway’s construction, regardless of the fact that such materials have been endlessly reproduced, usually without proper accreditation. The copyright on all such materials legitimately belongs to their creators and their descendants (in the case of personal sketches) or to compilers of photographic collections and the various national archives to which the originals belong (in the case of photos). Only in the case of Asian labourers have I occasionally presumed to try to recreate their situation and experiences on their behalf for - as will be clear as this series of "Notes" continues - except in rare cases, Asian labourers did not and could not speak for themselves.

More than 50 years have passed since the opening of the Thai-Burma Railway in 1943 and most of the track has been totally reclaimed by the jungle. Even today, the terrain from Kanchanaburi to the Three Pagoda Pass is but sparsely inhabited and the climate oppressive even when travelling by modern transport on modern highways.

The influence of "The Bridge on the River Kwai" on the postwar western generation’s attitudes to World War II (of which the author is one) cannot be exaggerated. For this reason alone, the movie deserves more careful analysis than it has hitherto received. An example of its impact is found in Micool Brooke’s instructive book, "Captive of the River Kwae";

"The seeds of my infatuation had been sewn many years earlier. I was a chubby-faced seven-year-old sick on a block of melting chocolate when I first saw 'The Bridge on the River Kwai’ in a dark little cinema in Sydney in the late 1960s. I remember emerging from the movie house and coming face to face with a poster which held me hypnotized as the whole film again flashed before my eyes.....The film had been made as a big budget release to combat television by luring audiences back to the cinema. It won seven Oscars.... The film had done more than tell a war story. It awakened the world to the sufferings of several hundred thousand Asian slave workers and Allied prisoners of war who had worked on the Death Railway and, years after the Second World War had ended, spawned a major tourism business for Kanchanaburi province. "(1).

The movie is still regularly televised in Britain, Australia and New Zealand and, more occasionally in the USA. Listed in "Halliwell's Film Guide; 7th. Edition" as being released in 1957 by Columbia, the movie received a string of Academy Awards; best picture, best adaptation( with a curious proviso "now credited to Carl Foreman, Michael Wilson and Pierre Boulle") as well as several individual "best"
awards going to David Lean (Director), Jack Hildyard (Photography), Malcolm Arnold (Music), Alec Guinness (acting the part of the eccentric British Colonel Nicholson), plus an Academy Award Nomination for Hayakawa Sessue (acting the role of Japanese camp commander, Colonel Saito) . (2).

Seven Oscars was an unbelievable achievement for a movie of that vintage when the Academy Awards categories were far more restricted than today.

Briefly, the movie records the story of the building of the Thai-Burma Railway's pivotal bridge on a river misnamed "the Kwai" near Kanchanaburi. After an altercation (over whether POW officers could legitimately be used as labourers on the railway) with Japanese camp commander Saito, the eccentric British officer in charge of the POWs camp administration near the bridge, Col. Nicholson, wins the day after enduring considerable deprivations, including solitary confinement. Thereafter, Col. Nicholson more or less takes over supervision of building the bridge from Col. Saito (and his presumably even less competent junior officers!) only to find his precious bridge blown up by Allied saboteurs, guided by an escapee from the same camp, a U.S. naval officer, Commander Shears (played by William Holden in the movie), resulting not only in the bridge’s destruction, but the deaths of all the principal actors - US Navy Commander Shears/William Holden, British Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness and Japanese Col. Saito/Hayakawa Sessue - in a rather confusing but dramatic climax.

The movie's Director, the late David Lean, pursued a dazzling career from very modest beginnings. "He entered British films as a tea boy at Gaumont in 1927". Struggling up to become editor of newsreel footage and then feature films, he began his career as Director in 1942. Some notable films included "two extraordinary adaptations of Dickens novels, 'Great Expectations' and 'Oliver Twist' " (with Top Rank),

"The opening sequence of the former contains a masterful example of cutting for suspense effect which is frequently shown in film schools...With 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' (1957), Lean turned abruptly from intimate drama to the sumptuous superproduction with which he has since become identified and he won an Academy Award for the direction of this critical and popular blockbuster as well as another New York Film Critics Award. He received another Oscar in 1962 for 'Lawrence of Arabia' " . (3).

His later successes included "Dr. Zhivago" (1965) and 'Ryan's Daughter' (1970). The script for "The Bridge on the River Kwai" was based on an original book of the same title, written by Pierre Boulle, "translated from the French by Xan Fielding." (4). But by the time the movie was released, unbeknown to its viewers world-wide, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" had already become a victim of the cold war, as represented by U.S. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's "Red Purge" . As recently as 1997,
"The Japan Times" reprinted an article from the "Los Angeles Times" by Nora Sayre entitled "The Staying Power of Hollywood’s Blacklist". In several hearings from 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities focussed on "communists" in the film industry which resulted in firings and blacklistings that persisted well into the 1960s (although Senator Joseph R. McCarthy had lost power in 1954). Among the victims;

"Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson who wrote 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' didn't receive an Oscar for the script - the award went to the French novelist, Pierre Boulle, who could not then read or write English. In 1984, Foreman was told he would finally receive a screen credit and an Oscar; he died two weeks afterwards. Wilson was already dead". (5).

Hence the strange wording noted above in "Halliwell’s Film Guide"; Academy Award, best adaptation "now credited to Carl Foreman, Michael Wilson and Pierre Boulle" (emphasis added).

Who, then, was Pierre Boulle, the original creator (in French) of "The Bridge on the River Kwai"?

A brief biography of Boulle appears in his novel;

"Pierre Boulle was born in 1912 at Avignon. In 1939 he was called up to the French forces in Indo-China, but after the collapse of France he fled to Singapore, where he joined the Free French Mission. After the Japanese invasion he was sent to Yunnan to establish contact with Kuomintang forces and there he infiltrated as a guerrilla into Indo-China, where he was captured by the Japanese in 1943. He escaped in 1944 and was picked up by a British plane. He served for the rest of the war with Special Force, Calcutta. After the war Pierre Boulle lived in Malaya, the Cameroons, and finally Paris, where he settled until his death in 1994. 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' was awarded the Prix Ste. Beuve in 1952." (6).

It is unclear whether Pierre Boulle is a pen-name for the original (1952) copyright is held by a certain Rene Jouilliard. Micool Brooke (who had met the author) gives a slightly different version;

"It was in 1943 that Pierre Boulle was captured by the Vichy French and sentenced to life at hard labour. He had been sent to Malaya in 1938 to oversee a rubber plantation near Kuala Lumpur and joined the French army in Indochina a year later when war broke out in Europe. After the fall of France he fled to Singapore where he joined the Free French and became a secret agent. Posing as an Englishman under the name of Peter John Rule, he helped organize resistance to the Japanese in China, Burma and Indochina. He was caught while trying to float on a raft down the Mekong River. It was in prison in Saigon that he began keeping a diary on scraps of paper. In 1944, with an
allied victory looming, prison authorities arranged for his escape. He returned briefly to his plantation but was later to go back to France to start a career as a writer." ( 7 )

The slightly differing information in the above two accounts may be of some importance and requires some explanation and collation. Whereas the novel’s preface claims "he( Boulle )was captured by the Japanese in 1943", Brooke states, "Pierre Boulle was captured by the Vichy French and sentenced to life at hard labour." It was presumably the Japanese military who arrested Boulle as a suspected espionage agent, but, under the agreements between Japan and the pro-Vichy French administration of Indo-China, Boulle’s internment ( being a French national ) would have been the responsibility of the French colonial administration. "In 1944, prison authorities arranged for his escape" should be understood in the context of the deteriorating relations between Japan and the French colonial administration ( which eventually culminated in the Japanese "coup de force" of March 1945, after which Japan directly administered Vietnam as an occupied territory ). ( 8 ) . Brooke further tells us that Boulle had started keeping a diary while imprisoned in Saigon and that he had been "caught while trying to float on a raft down the Mekong River" . The novel’s preface adds, "He escaped... and was picked up by a British plane ."

I had long been puzzled by the movie’s connections to the "Red Purge"; but it was not until I had actually begun preparations for this article that I suddenly realised that there is one apparent divergence between Boulle’s original book and the movie script, and that - moreover - this difference may have been of significance in drawing the House Committee on Un-American Activities’ attention to the script writers. It surrounds the character of U.S. Commader Shears ( William Holden in the movie ). In Boulle’s book, Shears is not an American Navy Commander; he is a Major, "an ex-cavalry officer who had been transferred to Force 316( Special Force ) at the time that special unit had been formed and was, in fact, one of its founder members....Shears had only just arrived from Europe, where he had successfully completed several tricky missions." In the novel, Force 316 is located in Calcutta. ( 9 ) .

In the movie, however, Shears/William Holden is a U.S. Navy Commander, already a POW in the camp to which Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness and the British prisoners are seen arriving at the movie’s memorable opening. Later, Shears/William Holden escapes from the camp and drifts on a raft down the Maeklong River ( not the Maekong! ). After reaching the sea, he is spotted and picked up by a British plane which takes him to Kandy, Ceylon ( now Sri Lanka and then the base of Lord Mountbatten’s Allied South East Asia Command ).The method of Shear’s/Holden’s fictional escape in the movie thus
exactly parallels the real escape of Boule himself as recorded in his biographical notes (above) and which he presumably recorded in his Saigon prison diary. None of this appears in the original book.

But there is a further twist in the film’s depiction of Shears/William Holden. While convalescing in an officer’s hospital in Sri Lanka, he is summoned to Kandy by the Special Force Unit 316, where he is pressured to guide a planned guerrilla raid on the bridge being built by the prisoners at his former camp site. Special Force officers had discovered that Shears/Holden was merely an ordinary enlisted sailor masquerading as the Commander of the U.S.S. Houston who had - according to the movie script - been killed by the Japanese. The script is explicit;

Major Warden/Jack Hawkins: Yes, your navy’s turned you over to us. The signal arrived yesterday morning from your c-in-c Pacific, authorising your temporary transfer of duty to Force 316.

Shears/William Holden: They can’t do this to me!

Warden/Jack Hawkins: I’m afraid they have.

Shears/William Holden: My Navy’s made a big mistake!

Warden/Jack Hawkins: Oh?

Shears/William Holden: I’m just an ordinary swob-jockey, second class. When the Houston sunk, I made it ashore with an officer, a real commander. Later on, we ran into a Japanese patrol and he was killed. I figured it was just a matter of time before I was captured, so...

Warden/Jack Hawkins: So, you changed uniforms with a dead man?

Shears/William Holden: I thought officers could get better treatment in the prison camps.

Warden/Jack Hawkins: That’s very sensible.

These substantial changes in the film’s scripting were presumably the work of Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson. Perhaps unfortunately? For just as Shears/Holden’s escape was based on the actual experiences of Pierre Boule, likewise the U.S.S. Houston was no mere figment of the imagination! The U.S.S. Houston had in fact existed. Its crew, together with the troops of 2nd. Battalion, 131st. Field Artillery became collectively known as the “Lost Battalion” following their total disappearance after capture by Japanese forces in Java in 1942. This one ship, the Houston, and the accompanying troops had been sent to reinforce the Dutch in Java (then the Netherlands East Indies). (Quite how such a small force was supposed to save Java from an overwhelming Japanese onslaught is still something of a mystery!). Some 700 sailors and marines out of a total complement of over 1,000 died when the U.S.S. Houston was sunk off Java on 28th February, 1942. 369 survivors became prisoners of war.
Together with the servicemen of the 2nd. Battalion, 131st. Field Artillery unit who had been captured on Java, some 900 Americans became POWs and were sent to various parts of Asia. Of these, 668 American prisoners were dispatched to work on the Thai-Burma Railway. 133 of these American POWs died, casualties of the Death Railway in the Thai-Burma jungle. When the survivors of this "Lost Battalion" surfaced after the war, they were unable to gain permission to erect a memorial to their dead comrades in Kanchanaburi or in the POW cemeteries administered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In 1994, they did succeed in gaining recognition in Hawaii’s National Memorial Cemetery. Their monument reads:

"2nd BN. 131 FA. 36th Div
USS HOUSTON CA-30
In Memory; United States of America military personnel captured by the Japanese in March 1942,
worked on the Siam-Burma 'Death' Railway as prisoners of war, and 133 died due to malnutrition,
tropical disease, starvation, medical neglect, and other causes."

A list of casualties under the headings, Army, Navy and Marines follows. But the saga of the survivors' efforts to find a fitting memorial to their 133 dead comrades did not end in Hawaii; a "Bangkok Post" article entitled "The Death Railway" of 12th September, 1997 announced;

"In a victory against bureaucratic red tape, US Ambassador to Thailand William Itoh will unveil on Sunday the first memorial in Thailand to the American servicemen who died building the infamous 'Death Railway' during World War II. . . . The US plaque. . . .honours the 133 US POWs who died under the whip of the Japanese engineers and Korean guards. . . .Maj-Gen. Sorcha( Kanchanaburi Parliament member, Sorcha Montriwat ) said the 'US memorial would help boost tourism in Kanchanaburi as now more Americans would visit the River Kwae. The American POW escapee played by William Holden ( Shears ) in 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' told many movie fans for the first time that American prisoners had been used as labour on the Death Railway' " . (10).

Maj-Gen. Sorcha’s point that the movie drew attention to the fact and deaths of US POWs on the railway, is doubtless true, but the way in which Foreman and Wilson had departed from Boulle’s novel to depict Shears/William Holden - a survivor of the USS Houston - as a somewhat humorous rascal who had dressed himself in the clothes of the dead ship’s commander in order to masquerade as an officer, doubtless did not amuse the remaining survivors of the USS Houston, whose chief concern was to find a dignified and honourable memorial for their tragically dead comrades. It is doubtful whether it would have amused the House Committee on Un-American Activities either! However, there is no evidence that they examined the movie in any detail and the Committee( as far as I am aware )could not actually censor movies; rather it confined itself to blacklisting people in the Hollywood film industry whom it
suspected of "red" affiliations. The official records merely state that both Foreman and Wilson were blacklisted for refusing either to confirm or deny any past affiliations with the Communist Party or communist sympathisers.

What of Boulle’s novel itself - which, with the exception of the important alterations noted above, was fairly well-preserved in the final film? Pierre Boulle himself never actually worked on the Death Railway. Due to the book's and the film's great success, however, many of Boulle’s mistakes in names and locations have been preserved today in Kanchanaburi, causing some confusion to the visitor. Firstly, there was no River Kwai! The bridge in fact spans the Mae Klong River. It was located just above the confluence of two tributary rivers, now named the Maenam Kwai Noi (Small River Kwai ) and the Maenam Kwai Ya ( Big River Kwae ). It is unclear whether or not these two rivers were always referred to by these names, for the Thai word "khwae" (ก้าว) simply means "tributary, branch of a river." ( 11 ). As a former British POW pointed out;

"There never was a River Kwai. It was across the Mae Klong River that we built the bridge so that the railway line could follow the Kwai Noi . Boulle used the wrong name for his novel. As this name became more popular, the river in question became called the Kwai Ya( the large tributary ). Only the part beyond the confluence at Kanchanaburi has kept its original name of Mae Klong.” ( 12 ).

Moreover, there were two bridges built over the river; an original wooden bridge completed in February 1943 ( which the bridge in Lean’s film somewhat resembles ) and the more famous steel and concrete bridge still existing today. The steel spans, after dismantling, had been brought by the Japanese army from Java. Both bridges were built at Tha Makham( Tamarkan ) , only some few kilometers from Kanchanaburi town, and not in the middle of a remote jungle as depicted in the film. ( The movie was, in fact, shot on location in Sri Lanka ) Nor was the bridge destroyed by an Allied commando raid, as shown in the movie;

"Allied bombing raids to destroy the two Kanchanaburi bridges began in late 1944 but it was not until February 1945 that both were temporarily knocked out. Repaired by Allied prisoners, the wooden bridge was hit again in April and the steel bridge in June. Destruction of the bridges was by then interrupting Japan's supply route to Burma. The service ( wooden ) bridge was finally destroyed on April 2nd 1945 by B24 bombardier Lt-Col. Bill Henderson .” ( 13 ).

Is then Boulle’s book a total fiction? Clearly the activities of Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness,
attempting to foil - out of misguided notions of military honour - an Allied commando team’s dynamiting the bridge, is pure fiction, for no such commando attack ever took place.

"Many visitors to Kanchanaburi today are surprised, some even disappointed, to learn that the story created by Pierre Boulle is indeed only fiction." ( 14 )

Or is it? In a 1968 article entitled "The Myth of the Bridge on the River Kwai" an investigative reporter of the "Observer" magazine, Ian Watt, published the results of his researches into Boulle’s novel and the film. He came to the conclusion that Boulle’s imaginary Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness was based on various stories ( picked up from former POWs ) of a legendary British POW camp administration leader, Lieutenant Colonel Philip Toosey. ( 15 ). The article’s publication prompted an immediate letter to Col. Toosey from Earl Mountbatten of Burma, former commander-in-chief of British and Allied forces in Southeast Asia;

"I realized that the film ...was wildly inaccurate, but I also heard that it was based on a legendary British hero. The film was so interesting that I had it down here at Broadlands to show the Queen, who was thrilled. I must confess that it was not until I had read this article that I realised the true hero was yourself, and in a way that made much more sense than Alec Guinness’ hero. I feel, as the Supreme Commander of those days, I really ought to write and thank you on behalf of the Command for all you did to keep morale going, and to save so many prisoners....Please accept my sincere congratulations." ( 16 ).

What parts, then, of the book ( and film ) are based on fact, and what is merely a fantasy construction of Boulle's creative mind? In view of the book ( and film )’s improbable portrayal of the bridge’s siting being disputed ( in the film, Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness wins approval from Japanese camp commander Saito/Hayakawa Sessue to relocate the bridge in a more favourable position, revising the original plans of the Japanese engineers! ), it may come as something of a surprise to read that there was, indeed, a dispute about the direction of the railway’s track and the precise siting of the bridge itself; but this - needless to say - was a dispute within and wholly resolved by the Japanese railway engineers themselves. It had no relation to the views or advice of the Allied POWs. ( 17 ).

Col. Philip Toosey arrived at Tamarak ( Tha Makham ), the bridge-building POW camp on 26th October, 1942. As senior POW officer, Toosey headed the camp prisoners' administrative structure. Unlike Allied officers heading other camps’ prisoners, Col. Toosey had considerable success in restricting the Japanese military's excessive demands on prisoners.

"It was his ability to present a jaunty air of complete unconcern irrespective of the circumstances which endeared him to his men - many of whom appeared to have thought of him as a kind of
eccentric English gentleman of the old school. The fact that he was always prepared to take their part against the Japanese was subsequently to confirm the widely held opinion that he was indeed a man worthy of command." (18).

Other POW diaries confirm Toosey’s effectiveness. In “The Secret Diary of Dr. Robert Hardie 1942-5” occurs the following entry for 25th Sept. 1944;

"Colonel T. at Tamarkan is said to have told the Japs firmly that he had no further fit men, and that they would have to assume full responsibility; with the result that they (the Japanese) are trying to take the men from this camp."


"(It was only Toosey who) had the imagination to understand all the sides of the problem confronting him...the engineering side, the labour-supply side, and above all the complex morale side as it affected the prisoners and their captors. Toosey knew that in a showdown the Japanese would always win, because they had the power, and no scruples whatever about how to use it. So, though a very brave man, he never forced the issue so as to make his captors lose face; instead he first awed them with an impressive display of military swagger, and then proceeded to charm them with his ingratiating assumption that no serious difficulty could arise between honourable soldiers whose only thought was to do the right thing." (20).

That the Tamarkan Camp may not have experienced the full extent of horror and brutality that affected other camps further up the railway, was not solely due to Col. Toosey’s presence. Being situated just outside Kanchanaburi town and thus well-connected to the rest of Thailand, Tamarkan was not exposed to the same difficulties of supply faced by other camps further up river in the jungle. Moreover, Col. Toosey seems to have been able to form some sort of rapport with the senior Japanese NCO at the site, Sergeant-Major Saito Teruo. (Oddly, Saito’s name was never disguised in either Boulle’s book or the film, in which his role is played by Hayakawa Sessue).

"Toosey found him to be very strict but he was always regarded as being honest and just in his dealings with the prisoners. . . .The working arrangements which Toosey developed with Saito showed that the Japanese sergeant-major was a practical soldier who knew how to handle troops." (21).

Although the film’s dramatic confrontation between Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness and Col.
Saito/Hayakawa Sessue over whether or not officers should be forced to do manual labour never occurred in exactly the circumstances shown, the issue of officers' working obligations is mentioned in most POW diaries. Dr. Robert Hardie's "Secret Diary" notes under 21st Dec. 1942;

"Another crisis which caused excitement was over the question of officers working on the railway line. The Japanese finally said they must work and that they would use extreme measures to obtain compliance with this order. . . They paraded the officers in the morning and called out an armed Jap. party, who lined up, loaded their rifles and stood ready. Our senior officers decided to comply, and I think the great majority of the officers concerned were in agreement with this decision. It did not really seem worthwhile to commit suicide over this question". (22).

Col. Toosey's response to the same Japanese order was to call a conference of all the camp's prisoner officers where he suggested there were only two alternatives;

"Either you are going to work and we will try to get the best terms we can or you are not going to work and you are going to stand there if necessary until they shoot you", but added, "If you refuse I will stand and get shot with you." (23).

A slightly different scenario to that of the film, ( in which Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness is placed in solitary confinement to try to elicit his agreement to the officers' working order ), did in fact take place; another Tamarkan officer (not Col. Toosey himself, but one Lieutenant Bridge who was fiercely opposed to the order) had been confined to the guardhouse, to be released later, after the officers' conference had agreed to do manual work. Solitary confinement of the sort depicted in the book (and film) was commonplace. One such example from Tamarkan camp was,

"Lieutenant May was subsequently sentenced to 28 days' solitary confinement, which he had to serve in a tiny room only 6 feet square on a diet of rice and water." (24).

That Pierre Boulle's plot was pure fiction is beyond doubt - if only because both Col. Toosey and Sgt-Major Saito survived the war ( in the film version Col. Nicholson/Alec Guinness and Col. Saito/Hayakawa Sessue are both killed in the dramatic finale of the bridge's destruction ). Col. Toosey later became active in the Far Eastern Prisoners of War Association (FEPOW) and died in 1975. Sgt-Major Saito Teruo subsequently visited Col. Toosey's grave near Liverpool and met with his eldest son, Patrick, in 1985. Photos of former Sgt-Major Saito's visit to Britain are recorded in Col. Toosey's biography. (25).

"At Tamarkan his (Toosey's) relationship with Sergeant-Major Saito began rather coldly but the consequences of many hours of discussion in respect of working arrangements was that a genuine rapport developed on both sides. Toosey quickly realised that Saito's only desire was to complete
the task he had been given with as little friction as possible and that he would respond favourably to any suggestion that helped him to achieve this object. Consequently it was relatively easy to persuade him to allow the British administration to have a bigger share in the organisation of the work.... The relationship between Toosey and Saito was crucial.... and, while they never became friends, their continued association led to a strictly formal but real understanding of each other’s point of view." (26).

After the surrender, when Saito Teruo was being screened (like all other Death Railway personnel) for war crimes, Col. Toosey gave testimony in Saito’s favour, backed up by camp interpreter, David Boyle, who later stated,

"Saito was hard but he was fair and could be trusted - and you could not say that about many of them. I remember Colonel Toosey once called a strike by the prisoners because a guard beat me up. Saito got hold of the guard and beat the daylights out of him." (27).

"After the hearing Toosey met Saito for the last time and discussed the reasons for the deaths of so many prisoners. Before leaving, Toosey remarked: 'God would decide who was right'. This was a phrase which Saito, who knew a little English, could still remember forty years later." (28).

It is doubtful whether either Col. Toosey or Sgt-Major Saito were particularly flattered by their reincarnations in "The Bridge on the River Kwai" (the former an eccentric, if not lunatic, British officer; the latter an inept and bungling Japanese prison camp commander). But the Japanese prison camp atrocities on the Thai Burma Railway, depicted in Boulle’s book and the film, are reflected in contemporary POW diaries. The plot itself, however, is a complete - if ingenious - fiction. Pierre Boulle must clearly have interviewed several former Allied POWs before constructing his novel. It is perhaps significant that Boulle never wrote the usual disclaimer of reality/truth in his book, although the publisher labels it "fiction". Nevertheless, both the book and the film’s curious mixture of fact and fiction enable its accurate parts (such as various instances of prisoner ill-treatment) to be dismissed as "exaggeration;"

"The Japanese always point out the make-up (sic) in the film....Some point out that the film was a mere fiction and therefore dispraised (sic) the artistic value of the film. I wonder what they thought of the scene in which prisoners were threatened with machine guns and forced to do labour?" (29)

The premises on which the original novel were written are also somewhat dubious;
"The insuperable gap between East and West that exists in some eyes is perhaps nothing more than an optical illusion... Perhaps the conduct of each of the two enemies, superficially so dissimilar, was in fact simply a different though equally meaningless manifestation of the same spiritual reality. Perhaps the mentality of the Japanese Colonel, Saito, was essentially the same as that of his prisoner, Colonel Nicholson." (30).

Such a statement can only be maintained if the novel's plot happened to be factual, which it was not! - and that the interaction between Saito Teruo and Philip Toosey was accurately described in the novel, which it was not! Boulle's views of British (and even Japanese) behaviour seem rather to be informed by France and Britain's mutual visions of each other's irrationality and eccentricity. Perhaps it will come as no surprise to find that neither the book nor the movie have found much favour among those who experienced the Death Railway. Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop, who also became a living legend as an Australian POW Doctor at Hellfire Pass, where some of the more horrendous atrocities occurred, commented,

"If anyone stood up to the Japanese the way Alec Guinness did, they were killed. It's as simple as that. Besides, the Japanese were far too arrogant to ask us how to build their railway."

The same "Japan Times" article adds further explanation by writer Cameron Hay,

"Reality was far worse than Hollywood chose to depict. Nearly one in four prisoners on the railway died of starvation, and more than 800 were executed or beaten to death." (31).

Nagase Takashi, the former Japanese Kempeitai (Military Police) official involved in the railway's construction makes similar observations,

"When I left here (Kanchanaburi) at the war's end the town was a mass grave... The untruths created by the book and film make it very unpopular with World War II veterans. Boulle writes how Japanese officers and engineers were reliant on the advice offered by Allied officers and how it was they who largely built and designed the bridge on the River Kwae. The Japanese army never asked for any technical assistance. It is unbelievable that Japanese officers, who loathed the prisoners for surrendering, would seek their advice on anything." (32)

A slightly different perspective has been voiced by Australian former POW, Chick Warden,

"The world would never have heard about the River Kwae, much less the Death Railway, had it not been for Boulle who wrote the book and the script for the movie (sic)." (33)

Perhaps my own ambivalent feelings towards the film are best summed up in comments by Micool Brooke,

"Was Boulle's book a bridge, I wondered, not between reality and fiction, but between reality and
fantasy - for the generation lucky enough to have never fought in a war but liberated enough to
want to understand and sympathise with those who did?" ( 34 ).

While being somewhat dubious as to whether the word "liberated" is quite appropriate in the above
context, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" can still be a useful visual tool for introducing young people to
some of the moral problems posed by the Death Railway. In the final analysis, however, my main
reservations about the film are not related to the question of the respective quantities of reality or
fiction, but to the obvious fact that neither the book nor the film acknowledges in any way whatsoever
the even more serious plight and situation of the far greater numbers of Asian labourers forcibly used in
the construction of the Death Railway.

 bibliography
( 3 ) Details on David Lean's career are taken chiefly from Ephraim Katz: "The Film Encyclopedia".
Japan Times, 19th April, 1997. After his troubles in Hollywood, Carl Foreman left the USA for
Great Britain where he became president of the Writers' Guild ( 1968 ) , governor of the British
Film Institute( from 1965 to 1971 ) and was awarded the title Commander of the British Empire
in 1970. He eventually returned to the USA in 1975 after 23 years' self-imposed exile.
( 6 ) Pierre Boule: op. cit.; Preface
( 7 ) Micool Brooke: op. cit.; p.36.
( 8 ) Nazi Germany occupied France in 1940 after which "the Vichy-sympathizing authorities in
Indochina subordinated themselves to the Japanese." By the so-called "coup de force" of March
1945, the Japanese military finally took outright possession of France's Indochinese colonies
and began to round up French civilians. See David Marr: "Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-
( 9 ) Pierre Boule: op.cit.; p.42
(10) Micool Brooke : "Death Railway: Itoh to Unveil Memorial to US War Dead". Bangkok Post,
12th Sept. 1997. The survivors' struggle to erect a memorial is a great deal more complicated
than presented in this brief synopsis. Full details of the survivors’ activities are recorded in Micol Brooke: "Captive of the River Kwae", op.cit.; Chapter 12, "The Lost Battalion". Although I personally visited the Hawaii memorial some years ago, I neglected to take my camera on the visit to the cemetery. The US plaque referred to in the Bangkok Post article is located just to the right of the bridge itself and is reproduced in the photo section.

The politics surrounding the refusal of the survivors’ previous requests to locate a memorial in the Commonwealth War Cemeteries was not just "bureaucratic red tape", but possibly derives from some of the rather unpleasant contradictions surrounding the demise of the Thai Burma Railway and the end of World War II. The prewar Phibun government had sent several official requests for British aid anticipating the imminent Japanese attack. Only when it was clear that Britain would not respond, after Japanese troops had landed in Peninsular Thailand (Songkhla, Pattani etc.) and after not inconsiderable Thai military casualties, did Phibun agree to enter into treaty relationships with Japan on 12th December, 1941. The Regent (the youthful King Ananda was absent in Switzerland) Pridi Panomyong, had reservations about the agreements with Japan and the Thai ambassador to Washington, M.R. Seni Pramoj, refused to hand over to the US State Department Thailand’s subsequent formal declaration of war on the USA and Great Britain. After the war, differing policies towards Thailand seem to have emerged between the USA (which regarded Thailand as a friendly nation) and Britain (which treated Thailand as an "enemy" country). British forces even briefly occupied Thailand at the war’s end. During negotiations for a peace treaty with Thailand, Britain demanded the "return" of the Shan (Thai Yai) states to Burma and the four northern Malay provinces ("the Unfederated Malay States") to Malaya. Other British demands included payment of reparations by Thailand to India (including a great quantity of rice) and the land for building the two Commonwealth War Grave Cemeteries in Kanchanaburi. Although Pridi seems to have been understanding of Britain’s position, the demands were staunchly opposed by the new Democrat Party of which M.R. Seni Pramoj was the most influential leader (The early Democrat Party was regarded as a rather conservative, pro-Royalist group, receiving the support of many prominent princes). In this delicate situation - and with a quite different policy of their own - the US authorities would probably not wish to be seen to be in any way encouraging British intentions. Indeed, Rayne Kruger in "The Devil’s Discus" (Cassell, London, 1964) records, 'What the 'Times' man noticed most at the time of Mountbatten's visit (to Thailand in 1946), however, was the atmosphere of pro-American and anti-British sentiment caused by the popular belief that the US had forced Britain to moderate
her peace treaty demands.” These factors may have applied to the seemingly straightforward issue of the Commonwealth War Grave Cemeteries. The “Lost Battalion” and USS Houston survivors’ requests perhaps presented - in view of this background - a somewhat more delicate and complex problem, not merely "bureaucratic red tape”.


(12) Former British POW, Arthur Peddie, whose wartime experiences were recounted in "Return to the River Kwae". Quoted in Micool Brooke: op. cit.; p.116.


(14) Micool Brooke: op. cit.; p.38.


(17) The details of this dispute are rather complex and involve changes to the planned railway routing which had generally followed a route proposed by an earlier British survey. The original track plan envisaged the railway’s proceeding up the Kwai Yai and crossing it at Tadan, joining the Kwai Noi at Wang Yai. The alteration was made by Futamatsu Yoshihiko who had been a Japan National Railway’s engineer before being seconded to the Malaya invasion force. For quite legitimate reasons (at that time), Futamatsu altered the track to its present course, crossing the Kwai Yai much lower down at Tha Makham to follow the Kwai Noi right up to the Three Pagoda Pass, requiring the track to be built through much more inhospitable territory. For reasons that are not clear, some former POW’s later claimed that this was an "incredible error". (one such former Australian prisoner was a distant relative of Col. Toosey, a Captain Verne Toose). Full details can be found in Peter N. Davies: op.cit.; pp.90-98. The accompanying sketch map is adapted from an Imperial War Museum publication map, the origin of which was not accredited.

(18) Peter N. Davies: op.cit.; p.10

(19) Christopher Dowling (ed.): "The Burma-Siam Railway; The Secret Diary of Dr. Robert Hardie
1942-45". Quadrant Books, 1983. p.148. Dr. Hardie was extremely critical of his own camp administration,

"We rather wondered if the India Army colonel who is our senior officer makes sufficiently strong representations to the Japanese. He appears to think that as we surrendered unconditionally we have no right to expect anything, and that anything we do get is a favour of the Japanese."( op.cit.; p.32 ). In a footnote added before his death Dr. Hardie later elaborated,

"This may be unfair: one was inclined, under the conditions that prevailed, to put the worst construction on anything."


( 21 ) Peter N. Davies: op.cit.; p.100.

( 22 ) Christopher Dowling ( ed.): op.cit.; p.57.

( 23 ) Interview with Tamarkan camp interpreter, Capt. David Boyle, quoted in Peter N. Davies: op. cit.; p.109.

( 24 ) Peter N. Davies: op. cit.; p.III.


( 26 ) Peter N. Davies: op. cit.; p.204

( 27 ) Glasgow Herald, 15th March, 1974; quoted in Peter N. Davies: op. cit.; p.205. It seems that the guard in question was a Korean military auxiliary (gunzoku).

( 28 ) Peter N. Davies interview with Saito Teruo. From Peter N. Davies: op. cit.; p. 205.


( 30 ) Pierre Boulle: op.cit.; p.I.

( 31 ) This comment and the quotation by the late Sir Edward Dunlop are both taken from a Japan Times article of 16th May, 1991, by Cameron Hay, entitled "Hell Fire Pass Not Forgotten: Former POWs Recall Japan's Atrocities in Thailand."


( 33 ) Quoted in Micool Brooke: op. cit.; p .118.