

Report on the Defence Reserves Association Tour of Thailand, November 2006.

Saturday 4 November.

Our group from NSW arrived in Bangkok late on Saturday evening where we were met by Lam. When we arrived at the Ambassador we were greeted by Peter who spent many late nights waiting up to greet the various groups. Arrivals this year were very staggered.



Sunday 5 November.

We spent the day shopping, resting and chatting, catching up with friends as they arrived.

Monday 6 November.

Our tour began in earnest with our trip to the Summer Palace and the old capital of Ayutthaya. As we drove through the streets of Bangkok we noticed the huge numbers of residents wearing yellow in honour of the King's birthday. On the way Lam spoke to us about the Thai culture and the influence of the Chinese on the architecture as well as the conflict between the Thais and the Burmese.



Our first stop was at Wat Yai Chaminkon where we wandered around the grounds of the temple & viewed the reclining Buddha, draped in saffron coloured fabric because of the religious festival of Lon Krathong. We climbed up the steps of the temple, worn down by the countless worshippers who had done the same over hundreds of years.



Next stop was at Wai Yai where the temple revealed the influence of Chinese culture in its friezes and red lacquer ceilings. We then visited another temple surrounded by markets and took the opportunity for some quick shopping.



We reached the Summer Palace and wandered through its manicured grounds and marvelled in the opulence of the buildings. We also witnessed the changing of the guard.

Lunch on the boat cruising on the Chao Praya River was a relaxing affair and, as we made our way back to Bangkok, we watched the endless variety of buildings on the river banks ranging from temples to sky scrapers to humble wooden hovels perched on the tiniest piece of land.



Dinner that night was at 'Cabbages and Condoms' where a feast of Thai food was enjoyed amid messages

exhorting safe sex.

Tuesday 7 November.

We now headed north following the route of the line. Our first stop was at the Nakhon Prathom Chedi (Temple) with its





myriad of markets. Close by was the site of a hospital built for POWs during the war. The chedi could be seen from the windows of the hospital and so was a relevant landmark for the soldiers.

As we were unable to get the bus to Non Pladuoc we went on to Ban Pong Station. Bill Haskell (Dunlop Force) and John Parkes (F Force) told us of their experiences being transported up the line to Ban Pong. The railway trucks in which they were transported were half to two-thirds the size of those we saw on the siding at the station and approximately thirty-five men were crowded into them. They were detained at Ban Pong having travelled up from Singapore. Throughout the trip our experiences were greatly enriched by the recounts of Bill and John who willingly shared their memories with us. The story of the line was brought to life by them and it was indeed a privilege to share in their experiences. We all took photos of each other under the station sign or of the teak trees shading the station the leaves of which we were reliably informed made excellent toilet paper some sixty-three years ago!



Next we travelled to Kanchanaburi where we stopped at the JEATH museum. JEATH is an acronym for Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand and Holland. This is a museum run by the monks of the adjacent temple. Incense wafted on the breeze and the monk's voice delivering a sermon droned in the background as we made our way through the network of bamboo huts constructed in the manner of those occupied by the POWs during the war. We spent some time spotting the much younger John and Bill in the photographs on display at the entrance of the museum.



We then moved to the restaurant overlooking the Kwaie River where apart from food we enjoyed a cool Singha. After a leisurely break we joined the stream of tourists walking over the bridge, cameras at the ready, endeavouring to capture the beauty of the Thai landscape. Before we hopped back on the bus many of us took the opportunity for a quick look at the many stalls in the area and tried our hand at bartering.



The emotions we were feeling as we moved up the line were heightened as we stopped at Chungkai War Cemetery where we gazed upon row after row of headstones mainly belonging to British and Dutch soldiers. Here Barbara Atkin laid a wreath for her brother John Maurice Rutherford, V Battalion, D Force. Rod Beattie caught up with our group and spoke to us about the history of the cemetery.



We then moved on to Chungkai cutting, a cutting which was constructed by mainly British soldiers, one of whom was Bill Lawson, Derek's father. Peter and Bill explained to the group how the POWs employed the technique of 'hammer and tap' to clear a way through the rock.

Next we visited the war cemetery at Kanchanaburi where one is confronted by the sight of seven thousand headstones marking the graves of many (approx 2,700) Australian soldiers who died on the line. Once



again emotions were intensified as we watched Pamela Miller lay a wreath in memory of her father Edgar Joseph Howard from H Force.



Rod Beattie spoke to us about the history of this cemetery and offered to open the museum for an extra hour just for us. We then spent time wandering through the museum and through the cemetery. It was a tired and to some extent emotionally drained group who then travelled to Pung Waan Resort and had dinner there on a raft on the lake.



Wednesday 8 November.

Our day began bright and early with a short trip into Kanchanaburi where we could divide our time between the Death Railway Museum and the War Cemetery. At the museum Derek spoke to us about the background of the establishment of the line and the Japanese psychology which influenced their whole attitude to the line. Later in the morning Peter presented a plaque listing the Australian medical officers and other doctors on the line to Rod for inclusion in the hospital section of the museum.



People moved through the museum examining the exhibits and listening to the anecdotes of John and Bill which so greatly enhanced our understanding. Many also spent time wandering through the cemetery and there was an ironic poignancy when, as we moved along the rows of graves, we could hear the station master at Kanchanburi calling over the loud speaker the stations at which the train would stop.

At 11am we boarded the train and headed for Wampo Viaduct. We made ourselves comfortable on the wooden seats, opened the windows and settled back to enjoy the journey. We travelled over the bridge we had walked across the previous day and through the cutting we had earlier examined at close quarters. Out the windows we watched the landscape and marvelled at the range of Thai dwellings, from the older spacious traditional teak constructions to brick and timber cottages that would have fitted in 1950's suburban Australia and finally to humble huts made of a variety of available materials. There were so often spirit houses in the yards of the houses including even the most humble dwellings. The crops ranged from sugar cane to tapioca and tobacco. Peter took the opportunity to have a massage on board!



We arrived at Wampo Viaduct and had lunch overlooking the river and the viaduct itself. Derek spoke to us about the hardware used on the line and about Japan's long term plan for the construction of the railway. He also explained the myth of the bridge on the River Kwai which has been perpetuated by the film.



Our next stop was at the elephant farm where a number of us took the opportunity of having a ride on these wonderful creatures which are so much a part of Thailand. We then stopped at Tarso Tarso (now known as Namtok) to get money from the bank. This town was the site of a camp and hospital which my dad mentions in his memoirs. On our way back to Home Phu Toey we were entertained by Bill who led us in a sing-song.

When we arrived at Home Phu Toey sadly we learned of the death of Khun Oonji, wife of Khun Kanit. Some of us attended the Buddhist funeral in her honour that evening. This was followed by dinner and bed.

Thursday 9 November.

Today was to be a big day, travelling up to the Three Pagodas Pass on the Burma border and so we all rose early at 6am and breakfasted, looking out over a very misty countryside.

We set off and out the bus windows saw immaculately dressed school children waiting for their transport. The roadside stalls with their thatched roofs were bedecked with both national flags and yellow ones to celebrate the king's birthday. Off in the distance we could see Buddhist statues and by the roadside herds of buffaloes meandering along.

Our first stop was at the site of the Tukanun POW camps of which there were five, and the adjoining monastery and chedi. A railway embankment is all that remains in the area. Many people climbed the 286 steps up to the top of the chedi and marvelled at the spectacular view and after descending walked out on the suspension bridge over the river.



Back on the bus again and through the windows we watched as tapioca crops were soon replaced by banana plantations. Up in the hills there were thatched huts nestled in the green, with more buffaloes grazing contentedly. On billboards and in the villages there were the ubiquitous photographs of the king and queen.

We were entertained by Peter who talked to us about some of the doctors on the line and Bill who related anecdotes from the line. As we headed north we passed the site of the Shima Songkurai POW camp followed by the Kami



Songkurai camp site. When we reached Three Pagodas Pass we saw

the remnants of the line and took the obligatory photos of the border. Many people took the opportunity to shop at the many stalls that made up the village. A tiny Thai girl of about three years of age handed me a 10 bhat coin I had accidentally dropped, which, needless to say, I gave back to her for being so honest.



We headed south and had lunch at Auntie Fat's, enjoying our lunch boxes and a cold Singha overlooking the river. Once we were fed and watered we continued south until our next stop which was the site of Shimoa Songkurai POW camp. Derek led the walk into the area and told us the history of the camp as we stood on what was originally Cholera Hill as per the George Aspienall photograph. It was very moving to hear the information as we were standing on the very spot.



We travelled further south to Khao Laem Dam which today covers a large section of the line. As we walked up to the dam wall we were enthralled by the antics of the monkeys who delighted in the attention they received.

After a very long day we arrived home to a very welcome dinner and Peter showed a movie for night time entertainment.

Friday 10 November.



With another early start we headed off to the site of Hintok Jungle POW camp where Bill Haskill spoke to us about the day of an Australian prisoner of war. He told us of rising before dawn as all clocks were set to Tokyo time by the Japanese. The prisoners would eat the meagre breakfast of rice and then walk miles to the work site. They worked at their back breaking tasks until after dark and would return to the same meagre rations and a shower. With this routine they were unaware of the existence of other camps close to them. Bill described the diseases that affected them most: dysentery, berri berri, tropical ulcers and cholera, and told us of the lack of medicine to keep these

diseases under control. He described the ingenious still that was developed by medical officers and engineers in his camp to re-hydrate cholera victims and praised the work of these people in keeping the soldiers alive despite the lack of medicines and the inadequate diet they were all forced to endure. His recollections of this period of his life certainly had a sobering effect on his audience.

From here we travelled to Hindatd Hot Springs, the complex having been built during the war by Dutch POWs for the enjoyment of the Japanese. Some people enjoyed the hot/cold experience of the springs and the river while others took the opportunity to enjoy neck and foot massages. The only reminder of the line was an embankment where Bill and Derek found evidence of ballast.



Our next stop was Sai Yok National Park which in wartime was the site of Kinsaiyok POW camp. Here people enjoyed the beauty of the waterfalls while another group walked up the hillside to what remains of an embankment where we could find ballast underfoot and spikes still firmly embedded in the ground. As Peter talked to us we could visualise the bridge that originally crossed the river. All that remains is some evidence of concrete and spikes protruding through the fallen leaves.

Next we moved onto the barge where we ate lunch while cruising down the river. As I contemplated the beautiful scenery I wondered if my dad ever had a moment to enjoy the beauty around him despite the brutality he was facing.



We stopped at the site of Hintok River camp and walked through what was the site of the British camp, now a resort. Bill pointed out to us the site of the Australian camp, now private property, where he had spent 3-4 months. As we gazed across the road at the site he described aspects of his life there: up in the dark and home in the dark, completely unaware of the British camp so close to him.

Back at Home Phu Toey we had free time to swim and explore the grounds before the light and sound show about the railway and the bridge on the River Kwai and dinner, followed by a video.

Saturday 11 November.

Remembrance Day was a beautiful day, sunny but not too hot, and was the climax of the trip. Dressed in our shirts and caps we made our way to Hellfire Pass Museum where we spent an hour



looking through the museum, and then moved onto the pass for the Remembrance Day service. It was a moving and emotional experience in such a spiritual place. The service began at the scheduled time, led by Peter with various members of the tour group reading passages and poems. During the opening prayer showers of leaves drifted down as the breeze lifted. Max read a speech written by Rowley Richards. The vibrant colours of the wreaths laid during the service contrasted sharply with the chiselled wall of the



pass. It was difficult to reconcile the scenic beauty of the Thai landscape juxtaposed with a history of such suffering and brutality.

We returned to Home Phu Toey for lunch after which John and Bill were interviewed by Greek television about their experiences on the line. The afternoon was free for sleeping, swimming and exploring the grounds. Late in the afternoon Max led a tour of the grounds, including the Weary Dunlop Memorial Park and the Jack Chalker Gallery. After a moving day we were ready for dinner and bed.

We returned to Home Phu Toey for lunch after which John and Bill were interviewed by Greek television about their experiences on the line. The afternoon was free for sleeping,

Sunday 12 November.



The highlight of Sunday was a walk along Hellfire Pass Walking Track. Bill pointed out on the diorama at the museum where we would walk and the significance of each site. We were divided into three groups and set off.

As we walked through the cutting we examined the rock face that revealed the hammer/tap method used to make a way through the rock. At the 7metre embankment we marvelled at the work accomplished by the men. At the Three Tier Bridge we saw in the rock the holes that originally held the timber structure. We walked through Hintok cutting where we picked up a welcome bottle of cold water and then went onto Hintok Station, evident by the double railway track. Here we saw remains of concrete drums transported there by the Japanese. We walked along the embankment that was built to replace the Pack of Cards bridge and then to Compressor Cutting where the rock face bore evidence of the different method of



breaking away the rock. Around the corner was the end of the track. On our return trip we took in the beauty of the landscape.

When we reached Hellfire Pass many people took the challenge to walk bare footed on the ballast to try to begin to imagine the hardship faced by the men. Back in the bus Bill congratulated us on our efforts and pointed out all we had to do now was 7 hours of hammer and tap work, move 148 baskets of rock and then walk the same distance back to camp, all on just a bowl of rice.



We returned to Home Phu Toey to lunch and free time. Dinner that night was our last occasion when the group was together and there were many expressions of thanks to Peter and others involved in the organisation of the tour and many farewells.

Monday 13 November.

We left Home Phu Toey at around 8 am, and some experienced a memorable trip up to the road in the back of a cattle truck driven by a man who obviously had aspirations to become a rally driver. We called into a number of significant sites on our trip back to Bangkok. Firstly we visited Tonchan Ledge, where D force had worked and where there are still sleepers and ballast. Next stop was Tonchan Station where there is still evidence of the line. We were then taken close to Tonchan Springs Camp, now on private property. I was able to get off the bus and photograph the road leading to the camp for which I was very grateful as my dad had been there.



Next we went to Tonchan Spring Camp which had been occupied mainly by the British. Here we saw a locomotive that had been commandeered by the Japanese from Malaya or Indonesia and actually used on the line. While we were looking at the engine we were joined by a very excited Rod Beattie who told us that with Bill's help he had pinpointed the actual site of Weary Dunlop's hospital at Hintok Mountain Camp as he had found a Middle Eastern coin and a Dutch coin together with other artefacts that could only have come from Australian forces. His excitement was palpable. We climbed up above the



waterfalls to the area that would have been the camp site and the cholera hospital. Once again the beauty of the Thai landscape seemed at odds with the brutal history of the area.



We stopped next at the Tiger Temple but unfortunately the tigers were not on display. We headed into Kanchanaburi and went to the Death Railway museum. Here Rod had set up a power point presentation for us, detailing his find, including photographs of the artefacts. After eating our lunch at the museum we headed into Bangkok where we arrived late in the afternoon. Dinner at the Ambassador that night was the last group event as on Tuesday we went our various ways.

We left Thailand humbled, having had our lives enriched by meeting the ex-POWs and hearing of their amazing experiences on the line. Our knowledge of the line was deepened and our desire to keep the story alive intensified by visiting such significant and memorable places.

Thank you sincerely to all those involved in the organisation of the tour. It was an uplifting and emotional experience.

Vicki Mail,
Daughter of ex-POW William Clements Parker NX26087.

