

Uren View vs Kappe Reality

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ABSTRACT

This article contrasts two representations of the prisoner of war (POW) experience on the Burma-Thailand railway and examines the ways they contributed to myth-making in Australia. The first representation was provided by Tom Uren in his 1959 maiden speech to Federal Parliament; the second came in recounts by Australian members of 'F' Force under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Kappe. Whereas Uren's account focused on the equity and effectiveness of systems adopted by Dunlop Force, Kappe's command was so dysfunctional that he achieved the dubious distinction of being one of the most despised POW officers of the Pacific War. The juxtaposition of these two representations of captivity on the Burma-Thailand railway highlights the ways Australians like to remember this chapter of our national history. I argue that, on the Burma-Thailand railway, there was a distinct divide between officers and enlisted men and yet, in the postwar period, there was widespread reluctance amongst former POWs to call out publicly those of their officers who performed poorly and who let them down in ways so fundamental it resulted in the deaths of a great many of their comrades. I consider the question of who set the agendas for official histories and consider reasons why a 'conspiracy of silence' on officer privilege seemed to hold so fast for so long. I conclude that there was and continues to be class bias in the public record as well as in academic writing. Products of that bias include this article, this writer and his research.

INTRODUCTION

In his maiden speech to the Australian Federal Parliament on 26 February 1959, ex-prisoner of war (POW), Tom Uren, recalled his experience at the Burma-Thailand railway camp known as Hintok Road which was adjacent to the Konyu cutting known later as 'Hellfire Pass'. As a POW, Uren was a member

of Dunlop Force. According to his account: 'We were living by the principle of the fit looking after the sick, the young looking after the old, the rich looking after the poor.'⁸⁵ As he tells it, some months after Dunlop Force's arrival in the area, 400 British members of 'H' Force marched in.⁸⁶ In that party, the best of the tents were allocated to the officers with the enlisted men getting the dregs. The British did not tithe officers' pay and did not implement measures to care for the sick when dysentery then cholera set in so that, after only six weeks, just fifty of the original 400 men marched out again and, of those, another twenty-five died subsequently. Uren concluded:

Only a creek separated our two camps, but on one side the law of the jungle prevailed and on the other the principles of socialism.⁸⁷



Figure 1: NX38458 Bdr Thomas Uren, 2/1st Fortress Hvy Batty.

SOURCE: UNSW Australians at War Film Archive

⁸⁵ Tom Uren. *Maiden Speech*. AustralianPolitics.com. 1959. Accessed 24 August 2024. <<https://australianpolitics.com/1959/02/26/tom-uren-alp-reid-maiden-speech.html/>>.

⁸⁶ While Uren's speech does not identify the nationality of the party of 400, his comments in an interview with Pattie Wright do. See Pattie Wright. *The Men of the Line: Stories of the Thai-Burma Railway Survivors*. (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2008). pp.89-92.

⁸⁷ Uren. *Speech*.

Uren's well-polished recollection is emblematic of the popular Australian representation of the Burma-Thailand railway experience where mateship and unity ruled the day and helped ensure Australians did better than any other national group experiencing the dreadful conditions which prevailed. At the time and in subsequent years, this representation has been bound up with feelings of national pride and the railway chapter of the POW story has been framed in ways which reflect creditably on the character and performance of Australians. However, Uren's account should be contrasted with the recollections of Australian members of 'F' Force who were at Shimo Songkurai near the Thai-Burmese border where life was lived "red in tooth and claw".⁸⁸ According to those recounts, the Australian Force commander, Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. 'Gus' Kappe, who was paid considerably more by the Japanese though exempted from manual labour,⁸⁹ hid in his hut, fed himself more than the enlisted men and told them that was necessary because someone, i.e., Kappe himself, had to survive in order to tell the story of how they died.⁹⁰ He also told them not to come close when speaking to him lest they infect him with any of their many ailments.⁹¹ When cholera broke out, he relocated to another camp where he admitted himself to hospital in what the men of the other ranks were convinced was an effort to hide from the Japanese and further ensure his own survival.⁹² He was accused of lending money at extortionate interest for personal profit.⁹³ At the end of the railroad's construction, rather than being the last to leave, as a good leader should, he not once but twice put himself at the head of the queue to return to Singapore.⁹⁴ Even

⁸⁸ That memorable phrase is quoted from Ernest Gordon in Julie Summers. *The Colonel of Tamarkan: Philip Toosey and the Bridge on the River Kwai*. (London: Simon and Shuster 2005). pp.145-146.

⁸⁹ Lex Arthurson. *The Story of the 13th Australian General Hospital. 8th Division A.I.F., Malaya*. (2009). <http://www.pows-of-japan.net/articles/AUSTRALIAN_GENERAL_HOSPITAL.pdf>. p.53; & Lionel Wigmore. *The Japanese Thrust*. (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957). p.548; & AWM. 9/2. *[Records of war crimes enquiries and trials, 1939-45 War] Report of Major R E Steele, Warrant Officer W Wallace, Sergeant R J Kennedy [on POWs] - Copy No. 4*. p.52.

⁹⁰ Alexander Hatton Drummond. *The Naked Truth*. n.d. AWM MSS1530. p.169; & Tim Bowden. "I Don't Think I Deserve A Pension – We Didn't Do Much Fighting". Interviewing Australian Prisoners of War of the Japanese, 1942-1945." (Paper Presented at 'Prisoners of war: A conference on the Australian experience of captivity in the 20th century.' Australian National University, Canberra, Thursday, 6 June, 2013). p.45; & Peter Brune. *Descent into Hell: the Fall of Singapore - Pudu and Changi - the Thai-Burma Railway*. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2014). pp.681-683; & Robin Rowland. *A River Kwai Story: The Sonkrai Tribunal*. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007). pp.181, 200-201, 205-206.

⁹¹ Brune. *Descent*. p.678.

⁹² Bowden. "Pension." p.45; & AWM. 554/7/4. *Kappe Report on 'F' Force in Thailand*. p.90.

⁹³ Bowden. "Pension." p.45.

⁹⁴ Bowden. "Pension." p.45; & AWM. ART26437. *Lt-Col. C.H. Kappe of 'F' Force*. p.53.

though he was despised by the men he commanded, at the end of the war he was promoted to brigadier and awarded an OBE for his wartime service.⁹⁵



Figure 2: VX48789 Lt-Col. Charles Henry 'Gus' Kappe, 'F' Force.

SOURCE: AWM C170467

These are two contrasting representations of the Australian Burma-Thailand railway experience. That they vary so markedly from one another and from the received public narrative⁹⁶ is consistent with Joan Beaumont's 1988 comments on:

⁹⁵ Hank Nelson. *P.O.W. Prisoners of War: Australians Under Nippon*. (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1985). p.61.

⁹⁶ Evidenced by Prime Minister John Howard's speech cited earlier. See also Hank Nelson. "Beyond Slogans: Assessing the experiences and the history of the Australian prisoners of the war of the Japanese." in *Beyond Slogans: Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*. ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn. (London: Routledge, 2008). pp.31-32; & Lachlan Grant. "Monument and Ceremony: The Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial and the Anzac legend." in *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*. ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn. (London: Routledge, 2008). pp.41, 43-44. See the 'Foreword' to the film *King Rat* written by F.G. Gallegghan in Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn. *The Bridge on the River Kwai and King Rat: Protest and ex-prisoner of war memory in Britain and Australia*. in *Forgotten Captives in Japanese-Occupied Asia*. ed. Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn. (London: Routledge, 2008). pp.163-164.

the reluctance of almost all historians, official and amateur, to admit that differentiation between the officers and men actually occurred. It is not an exaggeration to say that at least an informal conspiracy of silence exists on this subject.⁹⁷

In this article I seek to make sense of these divergent narratives. First, I examine the reliability of each version and address the question of which, if either, tallies more accurately with the objective facts inasmuch as they are able to be determined. Furthermore, I seek to explain how this dichotomy between public representations and personal recollections of the POW experience arose.

Scholarly writing on the Burma-Thailand railway has long identified the divergence between Australian mythologising and practical reality. Although we know that there was considerable myth-making surrounding the Burma-Thailand railway, this article examines ways in which these myths evolved in different contexts and at different times. As previous scholars have shown, one of the key factors explaining this divergence was rank.⁹⁸ However, I acknowledge that my own research is symptomatic of the problem concerning over-representation of the officer class.

POLISHED PUBLIC RECOUNTS vs PRIVATE VERSIONS OF CAPTIVITY ON THE BURMA-THAILAND RAILWAY

The Hintok Road camp to which Uren in his Parliamentary maiden speech referred was one of a complex of four or possibly five camps in the area known variously as Hintok Mountain,⁹⁹ Hintok

⁹⁷ Joan Beaumont. *Gull Force*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988). p.74.

⁹⁸ Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson. eds., *The Burma-Thailand Railway: memory and history*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993). p.101. See also survival rates for 'H' Force in Joan Beaumont. "Rank, Privilege and Prisoners of War." *War & Society*. Vol.1, No.1 (1983). <<https://doi.org/10.1179/106980483790303126>>: p.86.

⁹⁹ Kenneth Harrison. *The Brave Japanese*. (Sydney: Rigby Ltd, 1966). <<http://guyharrison.squarespace.com/bravejapanese/>>. p.168.

English camp,¹⁰⁰ Hintok River,¹⁰¹ Hintok Jungle Camp,¹⁰² Malayan Hamlet,¹⁰³ Hintok Valley and Tiger Valley¹⁰⁴ camps.¹⁰⁵ Although Uren in his speech to Parliament made no reference to the nationality of those on the other side of the creek, he made it clear in a later recount that they were British.¹⁰⁶ Most likely, the commanding officer was Lieutenant-Colonel T.H. Newey.¹⁰⁷ Uren said it was not until the 400 British members of 'H' Force marched in that he saw the way things should not be done and he refers to indolent officers in that party acting in their own self-interest rather than for the welfare of their men. As mentioned, the consequence of that lack of leadership was a death rate of horrendous proportions—according to Uren's figures, in the order of 85 percent.¹⁰⁸ Uren's comments have been seen as evidence of the better performance and cohesion of Australian contingents and is consistent with views expressed by Lieutenant-Colonel Kappe¹⁰⁹ and other railway veterans including Russell Braddon,¹¹⁰ James Bradley,¹¹¹ Rowley Richards¹¹² and Robert Holman.¹¹³

¹⁰⁰ Edward E. Dunlop. *The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop*. (Melbourne: Nelson Publishers, 1986). p.278.

¹⁰¹ UKWO. WO32/15769 *Enquiry into allegations against Representative Officer Limi Road Camp and No 1 P.O.W. camp Changi*. 1946. See statement by Maj. Duke, p.30.

¹⁰² According to Dunlop's former batman, 'Blue' Butterworth, Hintok Mountain, Hintok Road and Hintok Jungle camps were names for the same place 'depending on who you were'. While I accept that with regard to the Mountain and Road camps, I am not convinced it applies to the Jungle camp. See Wright. *Line*. p.85.

¹⁰³ Maj. A.E. Sagers. *To Hell and Back*. 1945. MSS 10288A. State Library of Western Australia. p.13; & Wright. *Line*. p.66.

¹⁰⁴ Desmond Jackson. *What Price Surrender? A Story of the Will to Survive*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). p.46.

¹⁰⁵ See also Rod Beattie. *The Death Railway – A Brief History*. (Kanchanaburi, Thailand: TBRC, 2015); & 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion Ex Members Association. *Hintok Valley Camp, 154.00km - Thailand*. 2022. Accessed 2 July 2022. <<https://2nd4thmgb.com.au/camp/hintok-valley-camp-154-00km-thailand/>>.

¹⁰⁶ Wright. *Line*. p.90.

¹⁰⁷ See Dunlop. *Diaries*. pp.258, 268-269; & Stanley S. Pavillard. *Bamboo Doctor*. (London: Pan Books, 1962). p.21; & Ray Parkin. *Into the Smother*. (Melbourne: Wartime Trilogy ed. Melbourne University Press, 2003). p.514; & Alexander Hatton Drummond. *Papers, 1941-2001 [manuscript] Alexander Hatton Drummond 1911-1983*. n.d. MS 13716. State Library of Victoria. pp.250, 255; & Thomas Henry Newey. *Report on 'H' Force*. King's College, London: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives. 1945. p.3.

¹⁰⁸ Wright. *Line*. p.90.

¹⁰⁹ AWM. *Kappe Report*. pp.4, 5, 16, 58.

¹¹⁰ Tim Bowden. AWM S03005. *Russell Reading Braddon as a gunner 2/15th Australian Field Regiment and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1941-1945, interviewed by Tim Bowden*. 1982. Part Two, 11:15.

¹¹¹ James Bradley. *Towards the Setting Sun: An Escape from the Thai-Burma Railway, 1943*. (Wellington, NSW: J.M.L. Fuller, 1984). p.109.

¹¹² Quoted in Nelson. *POW*. pp.55-56.

¹¹³ Robert Holman and Peter Thomson. *On Paths of Ash: The Extraordinary Story of An Australian Prisoner of War*. (Millers Points, NSW: Pier 9, 2009). p.114.

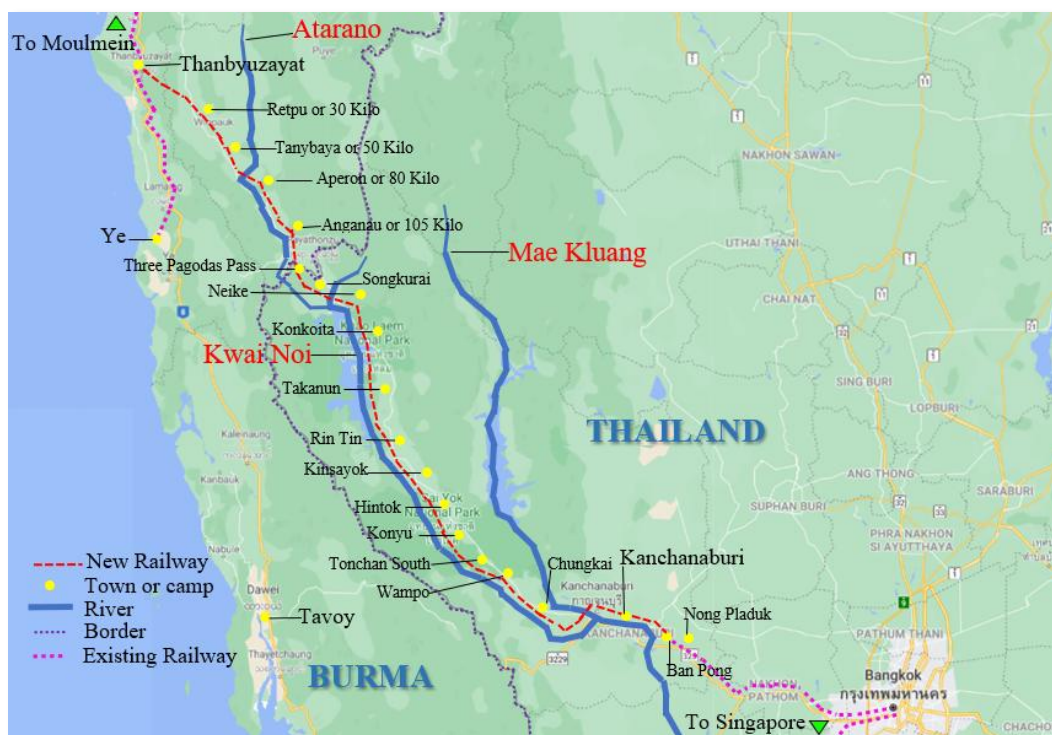


Figure 3: Map of Burma-Thailand Railway Showing Selected Camps

Source: Google Maps & Pattie Wright, 'The Men of the Line'.

In the postwar era, there was myth-making on many levels as former POWs sought to find personal meaning in their experience, sought to respect the dead and were careful about criticising the living. Attitudes changed before and after what has been described as the 1980s' "memory boom", ranging from supportive to uninterested to hostile and then to almost reverential.¹¹⁴ In Australia's popular memory figures like 'Weary' Dunlop came to encapsulate much of what we regard as best in our national character¹¹⁵ and the myth has been created that the Burma-Thailand railway was, as Prime Minister John Howard put it in a speech at Hellfire Pass in 1998, a place where "courage, comradeship, sacrifice

¹¹⁴ See Alistair Thomson. *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2013). p.1; & Christina Twomey. *The Battle Within: POWs in Postwar Australia*. (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018). p.13; & Joan Beaumont and Andrew Witcomb. "The Thai-Burma railway: asymmetrical and transitional memories." in *The Pacific War: Aftermaths, remembrance and culture*. ed. Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh. (London: Routledge, 2015). p.72.

¹¹⁵ Twomey. *Battle Within*. p.230.

and resourcefulness” prevailed.¹¹⁶ Veterans liked to say that Australians, as a result of mateship and their practical natures, did better than other national groups.¹¹⁷ But the figures don’t support that. In fact, on the railway, the mortality rates for British and Australians were similar: 21.1 percent and 20.5 percent respectively¹¹⁸—and this occurred despite significant numbers of British POWs starting work at the Thai end of the railway months before the first Australians¹¹⁹ and Lieutenant-Colonel Kappe’s conviction that Japanese personnel were “determined to do all in their power to break the British troops and to discriminate between them and the Australians.”¹²⁰ The Dutch did better than the two other main national groups and a reason for that seems to be that they were less affected by cholera than the British or Australians, partly because of earlier inoculations and their medical officers’ greater familiarity with tropical diseases.¹²¹ Notwithstanding, the notion that Australians did better in terms of survival rates than other national groups on the railway is a myth and, if extended to POW survival rates for all national groups in all locations in the Pacific War, the Australians did worse than the other main national groups (See Tables 1 & 2).

¹¹⁶ See also Prime Minister Paul Keating’s speech at Kanchanaburi in April 1994 and a 2001 speech by John Howard at the same place in Nelson. "Beyond Slogans." pp.31-32; & Grant. "Monument." pp.41, 43-44.

¹¹⁷ See comments by veterans to that effect in Bowden. *Braddon Interview*. Part One, 27:35; & Tim Bowden. S02997. *Samuel Austin Frank Pond as Commanding Officer 2/29 Australian Infantry Battalion and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1939-1945, interviewed by Tim Bowden*. 1982. Part Two, 5:45. Nelson. *POW*. pp.66-67. Stan Arneil. *One Man’s War*. (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1980). pp.91-92. Rowley Richards. *A Doctor’s War*. (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2005). p.94. Don Wall. *Singapore and Beyond: The Story of the Men of the 2/20 Battalion*. (East Hills, NSW: Sec. 2/20th Bn Assoc., 1985). p.172.

¹¹⁸ See Table 1.

¹¹⁹ Memoirs of Britons who arrived in Kanchanaburi in October 1942 include Reg Twigg. *Survivor on the River Kwai: The Incredible Story of Life on the Burma Railway*. (London: Penguin, 2014); & John Coast. *Railroad of Death*. (London: The Commodore Press, 1946); & Edward ‘Ted’ Chaplin. *Singapore and the Thai Railway: Experiences of Captivity, 1942-1945*. 1945. <<https://docplayer.net/65477377-Singapore-and-the-thai-railway-experiences-of-captivity-edward-ted-chaplin.html>>; & Ian Denys Peek. *One Fourteenth of an Elephant*. (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2003); & Pavillard. *Bamboo Doctor*. See also Brune. *Descent*. p.613. Australians arrived in significant numbers at the Burmese end of the line in October 1942 but the death toll in Burma was somewhat less, presumably because deaths from cholera were less numerous there than in Thailand. See A. Bancroft and R.G. Roberts. *The Mikado’s Guests: A Story of Japanese Captivity*. (Perth, WA: Patersons Printing Press Ltd, 1945). p.119; & A.J. Sweeting. *Part III: Prisoners of the Japanese. in Lionel Wigmore. ‘The Japanese Thrust’*. (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957). p.571; & Beattie. *Railway*. p.79.

¹²⁰ AWM. *Kappe Report*. p.37.

¹²¹ The Dutch suffered less than one percent mortality from cholera compared to 17 and 13 percent for the British and the Australians. See Beattie. *Railway*. p.79. For inoculations, knowledge of tropical diseases and hygiene regimes see Gavin Daws. *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994). pp.190-191, 200, 209-210; & Pavillard. *Bamboo Doctor*. p.109.

National Group	Total Number	Total Deaths	Mortality Rate
British	30,000	6,318	21.1%
Dutch	18,000	2,490	13.8%
Australian	12,255	2,518	20.5%

Table 1: Mortality Rates for National Groups on the Burma-Thailand Railway¹²²

National Group	Total Number	Total Deaths	Mortality Rate
American	21,580	7,107	33 percent ¹²³
Australian	22,376	8,031	35.9 percent ¹²⁴
British	50,016	12,433	25 percent ¹²⁵
Dutch	37,000	8,500	23 percent ¹²⁶
Overall	132,134	35,757	27.1 percent ¹²⁷

Table 2: Mortality Rates for POW National Groups in the Pacific War¹²⁸

¹²² The figures for British and Dutch personnel are taken from Sweeting, *Prisoners*. p.588; & Roy Mills. *Doctor's Diary and memoirs: Pond's Party, F Force, Thai-Burma Railway*. (New Lambton, NSW: Self-published, 1994). p.13 of Foreword by Hank Nelson; & DVA. *Anzac Portal British Page*. 2020. Accessed 20 July 2023. <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/burma-thailand-railway-and-hellfire-pass-1942-1943/workers/british>>; & DVA. *Anzac Portal Dutch Page*. 2020. Accessed 20 July 2023. <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/burma-thailand-railway-and-hellfire-pass-1942-1943/workers/dutch>>.

The figures for Australian personnel are taken from Sweeting, *Prisoners*. p.571; & R.W. Newton. ed., *The Grim Glory of the 2/19th Battalion*. (Crows Nest, Sydney: 2/19 Battalion A.I.F. Association, 2006). p.528; & AWM. *Encyclopedia POW Page*. AWM. Accessed 29 September 2021. <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/pow/general_info>.

¹²³ Sarah Kovner. *Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020). <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2jfvchn.1>>. p.5; & R.P.W. Havers. *Reassessing the Japanese Prisoner of War Experience: The Changi POW Camp, Singapore, 1942-5*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003). p.3.

¹²⁴ Beverley Durrant. *Manuscript*. n.d. AWM MSS1641. p.1. According to Kovner, the number of Australians who died was 7,412. According to Sweeting it was 7,777. See Kovner. *Prisoners*. p.5; & Sweeting. *Prisoners*. p.649.

¹²⁵ Kovner. *Prisoners*. p.5. According to Havers the rate is 26 percent. See Havers. *Reassessing*. p.3.

¹²⁶ Durrant. *Manuscript*: p.1; & Kovner. *Prisoners*. p.5.

¹²⁷ Sandra Wilson et al. *Japanese War Criminals: The Politics of Justice After the Second World War*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). p.15.

¹²⁸ Most of these figures are contested. The most-authoritative and -frequently quoted source in scholarly writing is the International Military Tribunal Far East. Here I have sought to ensure I compared like with like so that, when calculating a percentage, I had, from the same source, the raw numbers of those captured and of those who died. See Daws. *Prisoners*. p.299.

The claim that Australian survival rates were better than those of other national groups is not the only myth told by railway survivors. A recurring theme in memoirs and interviews is the gentle manner of deaths of those who perished while forced to slave in Burma and Thailand. According to British 'H' Force survivor, Captain Hugh Pilkington:

Those that died on the Railway, and they were over 50 percent of our party, never gave in.... None of them seemed to suffer any pain and, in spite of the squalor and misery of their conditions, they all died peacefully. Gradually they drowsed off into the coma from which they never woke, with a smile, usually a very happy smile on their lips.¹²⁹

Similar comments were made by 'A' Force survivor, Robert Holman,¹³⁰ and 'F' Force survivor, Stan Arneil.¹³¹ In September 1983 a *Canberra Times* report claimed that, on the railway, "no Australian boy died alone" and that sentiment drew approving comments in a veterans' association magazine.¹³²

¹²⁹ Stu Lloyd. *The Missing Years: A POW's Story from Changi to Hellfire Pass*. (Australia: Rosenberg Publishing, 2009). p.177.

¹³⁰ Holman and Thomson. *Paths*. p.252..

¹³¹ Nelson. *POW*. pp.55-6.

¹³² Marc Leaver. "Letter to the Editor." *The Second Nineteenth*. Vol.24, No.3, September (1983): p.39.



Figure 4: POW Murray Griffin's depiction of a cholera ward.

SOURCE: AWM ART25104

When journalist, Martin Flanagan, heard an “old digger” in a television documentary speaking of “beautiful deaths on the line” he asked his father, Arch. It was some years before Martin received a reply: “Dad told me he didn’t agree with that. He said most men died alone, dirty and homesick.”¹³³ Since diaries in their raw state tend to be warts-and-all accounts,¹³⁴ the comments of British diarist, Lt ‘Tommy’ Atkins, are apposite. Atkins was in one of the first parties sent to the railroad and, on 22 December 1942 near Banpong, he described the plight of a friend, identified only as “MacDougall DK”,

¹³³ Arch and Martin Flanagan. *The Line: A Man's Experience; A Son's Quest to Understand*. (Camberwell East, VIC.: One Day Hill, 2007). pp.161-2.

¹³⁴ Examples of edited diaries include Rohan D. Rivett. *Behind Bamboo: Hell on the Burma railway*. (Camberwell, VIC.: Penguin Books, 2005); & John Nevell. *Diary*. n.d. AWM PR00257; & Chaim Nussbaum. *Chaplain on the River Kwai*. (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1988); & Arneil. *War*; & Mills. *Diary*; & Dunlop. *Diaries*. Although it was edited by the author (in 1977) and his son prior to publication, Albert Moreton's account is unusually raw. See Albert Moreton. *Surviving the War: the secret diaries of an English POW along the Thailand-Burma Railway, 1942-1945*. (Tokushima, Japan: Education Publishing Center, 2010). One of the few diaries available in its original state is Drummond. *Papers*. Roy Mills' comments on the editing process are particularly interesting. See Mills. *Diary*. pp.20, 54, 56.

who was suffering from malaria and dysentery. Atkins was with him “most of the afternoon and it was a nightmare”.

He messed himself last evening & during the night & is still lying there with it all over him. He is covered with a fouled mosquito net over him, and is terribly filthy & emaciated. He was rambling with something about his leave being due, going to the river to wash etc. but nothing of importance.¹³⁵

MacDougall DK died the following evening.¹³⁶

According to Lieutenant-Colonel, S.A.F Pond, former POWs were reluctant to speak truthfully about the circumstances of their comrades’ deaths “because they had seen people die under appalling conditions and they didn’t want to inflict that on the relatives.”¹³⁷ Lieutenant Doug Lush, who himself lived to 97, said late in his life:

We learned to keep the details about how some of our men had died whilst in captivity to ourselves.... If we had gone into the actual details of these deaths, nothing good could come out of it.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Madge Gillies. *The Barbed Wire University: The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War*. (London: Aurum, 2011). p.320.

¹³⁶ Gillies. *Barbed Wire*. p.320.

¹³⁷ Bowden. *Pond Interview*. Part Two, 10:10.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Mark Baker. *The Emperor’s Grace. Untold Stories of the Australians Enslaved in Japan during World War II*. (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2021). p.194. Stan Arneil made similar comments to Tim Bowden in 1982. See Tim Bowden. AWM S02961. *Stanley Foch Arneil as a sergeant 2/30th Australian Infantry Battalion and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1940-1945, interviewed by Tim Bowden*. 1982. Part Two, 10:10.

THE POSTWAR RETICENCE AND RESTRAINT OF SURVIVORS

While concern for relatives' sensitivity as a motive for restraint in recounts of the Burma-Thailand railway is understandable, the reluctance to publicly criticise officers in the postwar era is less readily explained. Officers in the postwar era told outright lies about their POW experiences and were allowed to do so unchallenged by enlisted men who were there and who knew better. However, before unpacking the complexities of this dynamic, discussion must first focus on the extent of the divide between officers and enlisted men on the Burma-Thailand railway.

During the Pacific War, not only were captive officers exempted from manual labour, but they were also paid considerably more by the Japanese throughout their captivity.¹³⁹ My own anecdotal experience suggests that few Australians these days—even those well-versed in the POW story—are aware that the Japanese paid working prisoners throughout their captivity. Why they did is less clear since their military leaders consistently refused to co-operate with the Red Cross¹⁴⁰ or observe the Geneva Convention.¹⁴¹ However, it is probable that they did so in line with the provisions of the Second Hague Convention of 1907, to which Japan was a signatory.¹⁴² Furthermore, providing payment to POWs

¹³⁹ Joan Beaumont. "Officers and men: Rank and survival on the Thai-Burma railway." in *Beyond Surrender: Australian Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century*. ed. Joan Beaumont, Lachlan Grant, and Aaron Pagram. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2015). p.179.

¹⁴⁰ The Red Cross representative in Tokyo, Dr Fritz Paravicini, said as early as 15 May 1942 that 'major obstacles were placed in the ICRC's way'. See International Committee of the Red Cross. *ICRC in WW II: activities in the Far East*. 2005. Accessed 6 March 2023. <<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/57jnwq.htm>>. See also Linda Goetz Holmes. *4000 Bowls of Rice: A Prisoner of War Comes Home*. (New York: Brick Tower Press, 2002). pp.166-167; & Linda Goetz Holmes. *Guests of the Emperor: The Secret History of Japan's Mukden POW Camp*. (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2010). pp.67, 72, 75, 77; & Baker. *Emperor's Grace*. pp.124-126; & Catherine Kenny. *Captives: Australian Army Nurses in Japanese Prison Camps*. (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1986). p.134; & Cornel Lumiere. *Kura!* (Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press, 1966). p.70; & Moreton. *Surviving*. pp.110, 114, 141, 189, 204; & Mills. *Diary*. pp.141-142.

¹⁴¹ Denny Neave and Craig Smith. *Aussie Soldier: Prisoners of War*. (Wavell Heights, QLD: Big Sky Publishing, 2006). p.98; & Van Waterford. *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II: Statistical History, Personal Narratives and Memorials Concerning POWs in Camps and on Hellships, Civilian Internees, Asian Slave Laborers and Others Captured in the Pacific Theater*. (Jefferson, Nth Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1994). pp.34-35; & Holmes. *Guests*. p.68; & Kovner. *Prisoners*. p.5; & Wilson et al. *War Criminals*. pp.25-26.

¹⁴² See NAA. Series MP501/1, 255/702/1536. *Treatment of Prisoners of War by Japan*. Item ID: 384265. 1941. p.1; & David Coombes. *Crossing the Wire: The Untold Stories of Australian POWs in Battle and Captivity during WWI*. (Newport, NSW: Big Sky, 2011). p.169; & Daws. *Prisoners*. p.96; & Rowland. *Kwai Story*. p.2.

meant they could be claimed technically not to be slave labourers and added to their argument that they were subject to Japanese military law.¹⁴³

RANK	per MONTH	per DAY
Lieutenant-Colonel	\$ 220.00	\$ 7.33
Major	\$ 170.00	\$ 5.67
Captain	\$ 122.50	\$ 4.08
Lieutenant	\$ 85.00	\$ 2.83
Warrant Officer Class 1	\$ 80.00	\$ 2.67
Warrant Officer Class 2	\$ 32.00	\$ 1.07
Sergeant	\$ 20.00	\$ 0.67
Corporal	\$ 20.00	\$ 0.67
Lance/Corporal	\$ 10.50	\$ 0.35
Private	\$ 9.00	\$ 0.30

*Table 3: Pay rates for prisoners of the Japanese during the Pacific War*¹⁴⁴

Exemption from work and higher pay were critical factors in the survival of POWs in conditions as difficult as those encountered on the Burma-Thailand railway. The higher pay officers received meant they were able to purchase more luxuries, drugs and life-saving supplies from canteens established in

¹⁴³ Yuki Tanaka. *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996). pp.17, 33-34; & IMTFE. *Transcript of Proceedings 9 January 1947*. 1947. pp.14,708-14,709; & David Palmer. "Japan's World Heritage Miike Coal Mine – Where Prisoners-Of-War Worked 'Like Slaves'." *Asia-Pacific Journal*. Vol.9, No.13, July (2021). <<https://apjif.org/2021/13/palmer>>. No page numbers: search on 'slave labor'.

¹⁴⁴ Those who were sick or unable to work were not paid. See Newton. *Glory*. p.399; & Brune. *Descent*. pp.448-9; & Sweeting. *Prisoners*. p.548.

places like the 26 and 40 Kilo camps in Burma¹⁴⁵ and at Tonchan South, Rin Tin,¹⁴⁶ Hintok¹⁴⁷ and Songkurai in Thailand.¹⁴⁸ Many members of the other ranks suspected these canteens operated chiefly for personal profit and to the advantage of the officers who set them up; in effect, the charge was that they perpetuated the inequality between those of means and those without.¹⁴⁹ Military tour guide and editor of Captain Hugh Pilkington's diaries, Stu Lloyd, has estimated that, at the end of the railroad's construction, officers typically weighed 10kg more than enlisted men.¹⁵⁰ According to Gavin Daws, the reason officers insisted they bathe separate from enlisted men was to conceal the naked evidence of their privileged position, evidence he describes as being the product of "money and no work".¹⁵¹ One notorious illustration of Daws' point came from outside the Burma-Thailand railway; it was the case of Australian soldier, Private George Roy. On Hainan in October 1944, Roy had the temerity to shower in the officers' amenities. Rather than dealing with this matter in-house, Lieutenant-Colonel W.J.R. 'Jack' Scott handed Roy to the Japanese commandant for punishment. Guards suspended Roy by his arms and beat him with pick-handles so severely that he spent two weeks in hospital.¹⁵² While he survived captivity, Roy died shortly after repatriation.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁵ Thomas H. Fagan. *World War Two Diary of Thomas H. Fagan 105 General Transport Company POW 1942-1945*. (Albury: Albury and District Historical Society Papers No 31, 2018).

<<https://victoriancollections.net.au/media/collectors/53feae1c2162f1087018acb7/items/5c03651e21ea6712f4ca4d5c/item-media/5c03655721ea6712f4ca860b/original.pdf>>. p.33.

¹⁴⁶ The officer responsible for the canteens at these two locations was Briton, Captain Richard Pote-Hunt. See Newton. *Glory*. p.507; & R.W. Newton. "Grand Tour Report, Part Four." *The Nineteenth*. Vol. 3, No.4, December (1962): p.12.

¹⁴⁷ The officer responsible was former Sydney stockbroker, Captain Dick Allen. See Newton. *Glory*. pp.503-504.

¹⁴⁸ Enlisted men believed the officer responsible was Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Kappe. See Bowden. "Pension." p.45.

¹⁴⁹ Bancroft and Roberts. *Mikado*. pp.112-113; & Bowden. "Pension." p.45; & Newton. *Glory*. pp.503-504, 507-508, 512, 514; & Lumiere. *Kura!* p.174; & Jackson. *Surrender*. p.26; & Parkin. *Smother*. p.430.

¹⁵⁰ See Lloyd. *Missing Years*. p.229.

¹⁵¹ Daws. *Prisoners*. p.110.

¹⁵² Beaumont. *Gull Force*. pp.181-182; & Roger Maynard. *Ambon: The Truth About One of the Most Brutal POW Camps in World War II and the Triumph of the Aussie Spirit*. (Sydney, NSW: Hachette, Australia, 2014). pp.170-171; & I.T. Campbell. "Training and Leadership in the 2nd AIF: a case study of Brigadier F.G. Gallegan." (MA (Hons) Australian Defence Force Academy, UNSW, 1991).

<https://www.unswworks.unsw.edu.au/primo-explore/fulldisplay/unswworks_52975/UNSWWORKS>. pp.197-198.

¹⁵³ Beaumont. *Gull Force*. p.182.

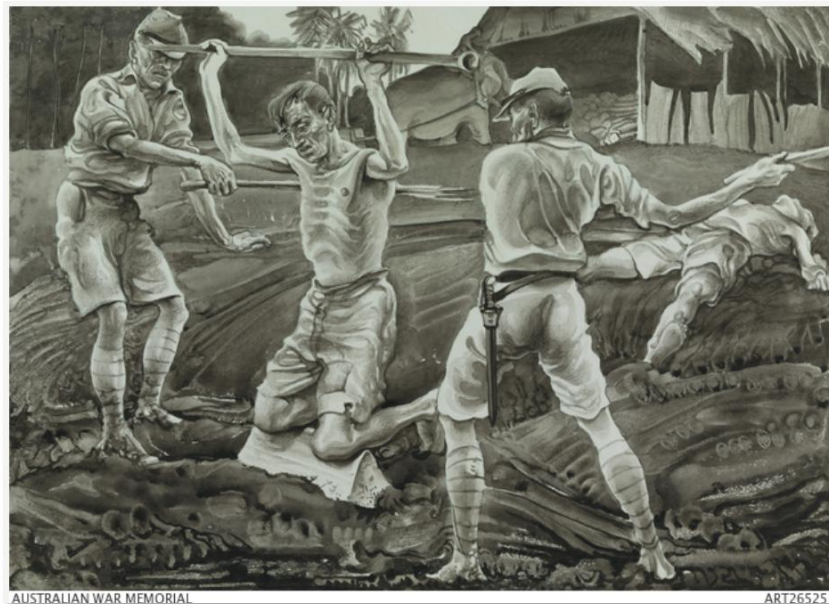


Figure 5: Murray Griffin's depiction of a beating.

SOURCE: AWM ART26525

The difference in survival rates between officers and other ranks is stark but it is difficult to find official figures demonstrating that—a point supporting Beaumont's comment about a "conspiracy of silence". Consequently, researchers must rely on the work of scholars. Amongst 'F' Force, the group that experienced the worst conditions on the railway, the overall mortality rate was 44 percent¹⁵⁴ but, for British officers of that party, mortality was between 2 and 2.5 percent; for Australian officers, it was "less than one per cent".¹⁵⁵ In her analysis of the situation, Beaumont provides three reasons officers survived in greater numbers than enlisted men: higher pay, exemption from manual labour and their leadership role, if performed conscientiously.¹⁵⁶ Hank Nelson observed that Japanese guards and engineers on the railway were at greater risk of dying than Australian officers—and, in fact, they were

¹⁵⁴ Paul Taucher. "Prosecuting Command: Allied Command Responsibility Trials of Junior and Mid-Level Japanese Officers After the Second World War." (Doctoral Thesis, Murdoch University, 2022). p.257.

¹⁵⁵ McCormack and Nelson. *Railway*. p.101. Nelson's source for this comment was evidence given under oath by Col. Kappe at the September 1946 trial in Singapore of 'Banno Hirateru and six others'. See Rowland. *Kwai Story*. p.301. There was a similar disparity in 'H' Force. See Beaumont. "Privilege." p.86. Across the whole of the Pacific, the death rate for POW officers was ten percent but that figure was probably skewed by the indiscriminate nature of drownings at sea. See Twomey. *Battle Within*. p.4.

¹⁵⁶ Beaumont. "Officers." pp.182-183.

about seven times more likely to do so.¹⁵⁷ These damning figures afford eloquent refutation of the myth of egalitarianism in the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF), particularly insofar as its experience of captivity is concerned. They also suggest that the harmony and cohesion described by Uren was not the only experience on the Burma-Thailand railway.

In the postwar era, officer recounts tended to be inconsistent with enlisted men's experiences. Yet, in the public domain, officer-versions were rarely challenged. For example, Australian Lieutenant-Colonel R.F. Oakes described as "absolutely false" any suggestion that officers were better off than the men on the Burma-Thailand railway.¹⁵⁸ This was the officer whose Hintok railway camp was described by 'Weary' Dunlop as "a shambles".¹⁵⁹ Private Alex Drummond claimed Oakes was so cowed by the Japanese that he retreated into his hut and built a model boat.¹⁶⁰ Another recount I would describe as self-serving and disingenuous is Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. 'Gus' Kappe's official report on 'F' Force; in it Kappe attributes the "high level" of "morale and discipline" amongst the Australians to the "firm organization" put in place by him.¹⁶¹ As has been mentioned, Kappe was awarded an OBE and promoted to brigadier for his railway leadership. Kappe died in 1968 and, when a representative of the Victorian Ex-POW Association expressed disappointment at the sparse POW representation at his funeral, the only public comment made in one ex-servicemen's magazine was the cryptic: "Shall we tell him?"¹⁶² In 1982, when Tim Bowden asked Lieutenant-Colonel S.A.F. Pond about the "controversial figure", Kappe, Pond replied: "he was a very good officer, a very capable officer, but I wouldn't enter into any controversy on the subject."¹⁶³ When asked about criticisms of 'F' Force Pond said, "I think the officers all did a job. I think the troops would agree with that too."¹⁶⁴ He went on to argue that, "The officers were continually with their men" and that he, personally made it his "policy to go out and see the troops

¹⁵⁷ McCormack and Nelson. *Railway*. p.19.

¹⁵⁸ Ivan Chapman. *Tokyo Calling: The Charles Cousens Case*. (Sydney, NSW: Hale & Ironmonger, 1990). p.347.

¹⁵⁹ Dunlop. *Diaries*. p.255.

¹⁶⁰ Drummond. *Truth*: p.207.

¹⁶¹ AWM. *Kappe Report*. p.5.

¹⁶² R.W. Newton. "Brig. Gus Kappe." *The Nineteenth*. Vol.9, No.3 September (1968): pp.18-19.

¹⁶³ Bowden. *Pond Interview*. Part One, 42:00.

¹⁶⁴ Bowden. *Pond Interview*. Part One, 40:10.

working”.¹⁶⁵ The questionable nature of that claim was exposed when Bowden commented that being “with their men” meant officers were frequently beaten; Pond responded: “I was never beaten on those occasions myself”.¹⁶⁶ That remarkable exemption from beatings stands in contrast to the 68 beatings received by one of the more conscientious railway officers, Captain Reg Newton.¹⁶⁷

According to author Richard Rowland, “It was not until the 1980s” that former enlisted POWs “began to tell their stories.”¹⁶⁸ Even so, Private George Aspinall felt his mates remained reluctant to name names publicly; on the other hand, their private discussions could descend into hate sessions.¹⁶⁹ Why enlisted men so long maintained their public reserve on the subject of officer-privilege is another question. As Aspinall saw it, “we were supposed to be soldiers” and “We perhaps tried to live up to a code, something set by our forefathers.”¹⁷⁰

In 1989, forty-five years after the end of the war, a former sergeant of the 2/19th Battalion, Marc Leaver, wrote a letter to the editor of Sydney’s *Sun-Herald* which was published under the headline, “Officer prisoners bludged in Jap POW camps”. The editor of the 2/19th Battalion Association’s magazine, Athol Hill, described Leaver’s comments as a “scurrilous piece of writing.”¹⁷¹ Another Association member, Ralph Bardsley wrote:

We had good officers, ordinary officers and perhaps not so good ones. To start raking up such muck in a general way that the present society would take a delight in pointing the finger at any

¹⁶⁵ Bowden. *Pond Interview*. Part One, 40:10.

¹⁶⁶ Bowden. *Pond Interview*. Part One, 22:50.

¹⁶⁷ AWM. 1010/4/109. [*War Crimes and Trials – Affidavits and Sworn Statements*]. 1945-1948. p.6.

¹⁶⁸ Rowland. *Kwai Story*. p.372.

¹⁶⁹ Bowden. "Pension." p.45.

¹⁷⁰ Bowden. "Pension." p.45.

¹⁷¹ Ralph Bardsley. "Letter to the Editor." *The 2nd Nineteenth*. Vol.30, No.4, December (1989): p.26.

officer who was a POW is a disgusting insult to the dedicated medical officers and others who were bashed to help our cause.¹⁷²



Figure 6: Chungkai War Cemetery as it is today.

SOURCE: Own photograph

Bardsley was concerned lest the families of Australian officers who died read “this degrading rubbish.”¹⁷³ And yet these men, Hill and Bardsley, who protested so volubly in defence of officers, had in wartime both been lowly privates.¹⁷⁴ Perhaps they had been so inculcated into the ‘groupthink’ mindset¹⁷⁵ that forty-five years later they were unconscious of that incongruity.

¹⁷² Bardsley. "Letter." p.26.

¹⁷³ Bardsley. "Letter." p.26.

¹⁷⁴ NX52472 Pte Ralph Bardsley, 2/19th Bn, of Drummoyne, NSW & NX35788 Pte Athol George Hill, 2/19th Bn, of Urana, NSW.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Groupthink’ is a kind of collective confirmation bias. See Ben Dattner and Darren Dahl. *The Blame Game: How the Hidden Rules of Credit and Blame Determine Our Success or Failure*. (New York: Free Press, 2011). pp.114-115.

There were, of course, occasional iconoclasts who, like Leaver, were willing to cross the invisible line and one example was Private Alex Drummond who, in the postwar era, was a founder of an organisation called the Old Comrades' Association. One of its foundational rules was that former officers were excluded from joining.¹⁷⁶ However, the Association was short-lived. An early postwar meeting ended in violence when Drummond was accused of being a communist; the Association folded four years later.¹⁷⁷ In his 1982 interview with Tim Bowden, only a year before his death, Drummond was still an angry and disenfranchised member of the ex-POW community.¹⁷⁸



Figure 7: Evidence that not all POW officers had it easy.

Australian doctor, Maj. A.W.M. Hutson, attending to a British captain

in Borneo, 16 September 1945.

¹⁷⁶ Drummond. *Truth*: p.141; & Tim Bowden. Emails and telephone conversations. 16 August 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Tim Bowden. AWM S02962. *Alexander Hatton Drummond as a private 2/29th Australian Infantry Battalion and a prisoner of the Japanese, 1941-1945, interviewed by Tim Bowden*. 1982. Part Three, 8:00.

¹⁷⁸ As examples, see his comments such as the officers' alleged refrain, 'They died that we may live' in Bowden. *Drummond Interview*. Part Two, 0:00, Part Two, 28:30, Part Two, 43:45, Part Two 51:15, Part Three, 8:00.

SOURCE: AWM C201341

A range of reasons could be advanced to explain the other ranks' long-term reticence publicly to criticise individuals or call out instances of bad behaviour including thievery,¹⁷⁹ physical punishment of wrongdoers by officers¹⁸⁰—and sometimes even by other enlisted men¹⁸¹—or to speak on a range of taboo subjects such as cowardice,¹⁸² the kindnesses of guards¹⁸³ and instances of homosexuality in the POW population¹⁸⁴ or between POWs and guards.¹⁸⁵ These shared silences or omissions from public recollections probably reflect the values of the era, what Alice Hoffman has described as the tendency for people to give answers which conform “with acceptable norms”¹⁸⁶ and part of the recollection process Alistair Thomson calls “composure”;¹⁸⁷ moreover, some veterans were keen to move on and let bygones be bygones,¹⁸⁸ but there was also a feeling that the former POWs needed to present a united

¹⁷⁹ A single passage in the 2/19th Battalion's history describes over thirty thefts experienced by a single formation on the railway. See Newton. *Glory*. p.488. See also Chaplin. *Railway*: pp.19-20. Wall. *Singapore*. p.172; & Don Wall. ed., *Heroes of F Force*. (Self-published, 1993). p.31; & Parkin. *Smother*. p.477.

¹⁸⁰ See UKWO. *Report on Newey*. pp.31, 33; & Newton. *Glory*. pp.399, 488; & Nelson. *POW*. p.62. David F. Smith. *Yasme Nei: Memoirs of F Force Thai-Burma Railway*. (Self-published, 1996). p.90.

¹⁸¹ The ‘fairly controversial’ vigilance committee on Ambon late in 1944 is one example of a structured process of physical punishment administered by enlisted men. See Beaumont. *Gull Force*. p.184.

¹⁸² Veiled references to the behaviour of some Australian troops on the eve of the fall of Singapore is a prime example. Compare the comments of Col. E.G. Keogh with those of British writer Peter Elphick. The former referred to them vaguely as “stragglers”; the latter as “deserters”. Newton. *Glory*. p.230; & Peter Elphick. *The Pregnable Fortress*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995). p.306.

¹⁸³ The same Marc Leaver of Yenda, NSW, who incurred censure for his comments on officers, was publicly castigated for commenting on the kindness of a Christian guard. See Peter Wellington. “Letter to the Editor” *The 2nd Nineteenth*. Vol.29, No.2, June (1988): p.44.

¹⁸⁴ See Yorick Smaal. *Sex, Soldiers and the South Pacific, 1939-45: Queer Identities in Australia in the Second World War*. (London: Palgrave, Macmillan UK, 2015). p.73. Showing his status as a damaged survivor, this is a taboo Alex Drummond broke in his 1982 interview with Tim Bowden when he named names. Bowden. *Drummond Interview*. Part One, 4:10, Part Two, 18:00 & 22:30.

¹⁸⁵ The most notorious incident involved the death by shooting of Sgt Ronnie O'Donnell at the 18 Kilo Camp in Burma on 26 December 1942. For the frankest accounts of this incident, see Richards. *Doctor's War*. p.108; & Lumiere. *Kura!* pp.173-175.

¹⁸⁶ Alice M. Hoffman. “Reliability and validity in oral history.” *Today's Speech*. 22, Winter (1974). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/01463377409369125>: p.25.

¹⁸⁷ Thomson. *Memoirs*. pp.11-12.

¹⁸⁸ For examples see Nevell. *Diary*: pp.252-253; & Bowden. *Braddon Interview*. Part Two, 28:30; & Stan Arneil. *Black Jack: The Life and Times of Brigadier Sir Frederick Galleghan*. (South Melbourne: MacMillan, 1983). p.27; & Peter Henning. *Doomed Battalion: Mateship and Leadership in War and Captivity. The Australian 2/40 Battalion 1940-45*. (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1995). pp.306-307; & Leslie G. Hall. *Blue Haze: POWs on the Burma Railway. Incorporating the History of “A” Force Groups 3 & 5 Burma-Thai Railway 1942-1943*. (Kenthurst, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1996). p.7.

front to the public who had little understanding of the reality of captivity.¹⁸⁹ Some of this appears to have been motivated by unit loyalty, vested interest in the telling of a positive tale and the need to put a strong case for assistance to government agencies such as the Repatriation Department with the concomitant belief that disunity in the ranks would undermine that objective.¹⁹⁰

Veterans' tendency to circle the wagons became apparent early in the postwar era as indicated by the comments of Major John Wyett when he was required to give evidence at the November 1945 Ligertwood Royal Commission into the circumstances of Major-General Henry Gordon Bennett's escape from Singapore on 15 February 1942. In his 1996 memoir, Wyett wrote that, by escaping, Gordon Bennett "did a grave disservice to the proud name of the 8th Division".¹⁹¹ However, at the Royal Commission, Wyett strove hard to ensure his evidence was not unduly damning for Gordon Bennett because he objected to the government "muddying the waters with a public enquiry open to the press" and sought to protect:

The reputation and good name of the [8th] division [which] were of more concern to me than that of its former commander [i.e., Gordon Bennett].¹⁹²

CLASS BIAS IN FACT, IN HISTORIES AND IN SCHOLARSHIP

¹⁸⁹ See Ralph Bardsley's comments on 'degrading rubbish' cited above. See also Walter Holding. *World War II Experiences of WX17634 Pte W Holding*. (n.d.). <https://www.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/Holding_Walter.pdf>. p.56; & George Shelly. "Letter to the Editor." *The Nineteenth*. Vol.13, No.2, June (1972): p.36; & Russell Braddon. *End of a Hate: a sequel to 'The Naked Island' with which is incorporated Song of War: a short story*. (London: Cassell, 1958). p.19.

¹⁹⁰ Twomey. *Battle Within*. pp.54, 75, 88; & Michael McKernan. *This War Never Ends: The Pain of Separation and Return*. (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2001). pp.142-145; & R.W. Newton. "Repatriation – Procedure on Claims." *The Nineteenth*. Vol.8, No.1, March (1967): pp.14-16; & David Hinder. "Claims to the Repatriation Department." *The Nineteenth*. Vol.13, No.1, March (1972): pp.8-12.

¹⁹¹ John Wyett. *Staff Wallah At the fall of Singapore*. (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996). p.211.

¹⁹² Wyett. *Staff Wallah*. p.204

One of the first POW officer recounts of the railway was written by Briton, Lieutenant John Coast. It began with an apology to the ORs because they “had a worse time than the Officers” and added the “hope that some of them [enlisted POWs] will write a history from their viewpoint.”¹⁹³ Despite Coast’s exhortation and the 78 years that have elapsed since he made it, the written record continues to over-represent officer-recounts. American novelist and Pacific War veteran, James Jones, believed military history is “written by the upper classes for the upper classes.”¹⁹⁴ That assertion led him to conclude:

If that is so, then the whole history of my generation’s World War II has been written, not wrongly so much but in a way that gave precedence to strategists, tacticians and theorists, but gave little more than lip-service to the viewpoint of the hairy, swiftly aging, fighting lower class soldier.¹⁹⁵

For some time, oral historians working in the military realm such as Alistair Thomson,¹⁹⁶ Michael Roper,¹⁹⁷ David Chalk,¹⁹⁸ Studs Terkel¹⁹⁹ and H.T. and T.F. Cook²⁰⁰ have sought to rectify this imbalance. In the sphere of Australian Pacific POW history, the work of Joan Beaumont²⁰¹ and Hank Nelson and Tim Bowden²⁰² had similar objectives. My own bibliography reflects the officer-bias referred to by Jones; it currently contains 101 war-related memoirs or biographies.²⁰³ Of these, 46 (i.e., 45.5 percent) were written by or about enlisted men. The remaining 53 texts (i.e., 52.5 percent) were

¹⁹³ Coast. *Railroad*. p.8.

¹⁹⁴ James Jones. *WWII: A Chronicle of Soldiering*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). p.60.

¹⁹⁵ Jones. *WWII*. p.60.

¹⁹⁶ Thomson. *Memories*. pp.10-11, 343-345.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Roper. "Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: the Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War." *History workshop*. Vol.50, No.1, Autumn (2000). <<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/2000.50.181>>.

¹⁹⁸ Coombes. *Wire*.

¹⁹⁹ Studs Terkel. *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

²⁰⁰ Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook. *Japan at War: An Oral History*. (New York: The New Press, 1992).

²⁰¹ Beaumont. *Gull Force*. pp.6-11.

²⁰² Tim Bowden. "Talking of Trauma: The Making of the ABC Radio Series Prisoners of War, Australians Under Nippon." *The 2nd Nineteenth*. Vol.25, No.2, June (1984): p.11; & Tim Bowden. *Stubborn Buggers. The Survivors of the Infamous POW Gaol that Made Changi Look Like Heaven*. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2014). pp.247-248.

²⁰³ These texts were selected primarily on the basis of availability.

written by or about officers. So, while that seems to show a slight preponderance of officer-centric recounts, it must be remembered that amongst Pacific prisoners of war from the Second AIF, the ratio of officers to men in infantry battalions was about 1:23, i.e., 4.3 percent.²⁰⁴ Therefore, having 52.5 percent of recounts written by or about officers means officer-perspectives are over-represented by a factor greater than twelve times that of enlisted men.

James Jones' reference to the "hairy ... fighting lower class soldier" is a salutary one for scholars seeking fairly to depict the experience of the majority of servicemen in two world wars. However, the reasons for this imbalance are probably more structural than deliberate. Officers in the Second AIF tended to be drawn from the better-educated recruits, usually those having finished high school or attended university.²⁰⁵ Their greater literacy was more likely to lead them to commit their thoughts to paper. During captivity, they had more time to write diaries and in the postwar era they were more likely to craft personal memoirs in forms suitable for subsequent publication or to be connected to others who could.²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, readers would do well to note the advice provided by Richard Travers based on his analysis of the attestation forms of every member of the 2/1st Battalion: from those data he concluded there was no such thing "as a stereotypical digger, or a single Anzac myth".²⁰⁷ While this may appear to indicate I claim the moral high ground, in the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that the subject of my own research is a member of the officer class—a fact which puts me squarely on the problem rather than the solution side of the equation.

How one navigates these turgid waters is a question researchers more experienced than me may answer.

In the meantime, I thrash about in an ocean of anecdotal evidence seeking to grasp hold of "hard

²⁰⁴ Beaumont. "Privilege." p.86.

²⁰⁵ Richard Travers. "The Original 2/1st Battalion: A Quantitative Study of an Australian Fighting Unit." (MA, UNSW, Australia, 2014). <http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:34684/SOURCE02>>. pp.110-111; & Beaumont. *Gull Force*. pp.27-29; & Twomey. *Battle Within*. pp.17-18; & Bowden. "Trauma." p.15.

²⁰⁶ This is a point supported by my bibliography if it is a representative guide: it contains seventeen self-published or unpublished memoirs of which six were written by officers and eleven by enlisted men, suggesting that officers who wrote memoirs were almost three times more likely to have them published commercially.

²⁰⁷ Travers. "2/1st Bn." p.15.

facts”.²⁰⁸ Perhaps in a case of the cherry-picking those comments by implication condemn, I find assurance in the folk wisdom of those who lived through events more challenging than any I have faced in my six and a half decades. While it may not convince others, I hear a ring of authenticity in comments two veterans, the first of whom, Erik Leeuwenburg, was a Dutch interpreter who, in Burma, worked with Australians in ‘A’ Force. After the Japanese surrender, he had an encounter with a “very pukka” British colonel in Bangkok. He was convinced this officer was representative of a class strangely absent during captivity “when responsibility meant danger”; but “The day the war was over, with great pomp, they immediately took charge again.”²⁰⁹ The second comes from Australian Lieutenant Walter Summons who, as a 26 year old recently liberated POW, wrote:

I am not suggesting that every member of the A.I.F. who was captured by the Japanese was a little hero, but I do say that the vast majority of these prisoners displayed an amazing amount of courage in adversity.... It is hard to get to know a man if you only meet him casually, but when you live and sleep with him, when misfortunes fall indiscriminately on everybody, then each man’s worth is made apparent, and character is revealed in all its nakedness.

Those who endured the miseries of existence under the Japanese had their faith in the fundamental qualities of man confirmed, and learned to regard many of the usually admired attributes as trivial and worthless.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ As described in Lindsey Dodd. *Feeling Memory: Remembering Wartime Childhoods in France*. (ProQuest Ebook Central: Columbia University Press, 2023).

<<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=7184437>>. p.17.

²⁰⁹ Lumiere. *Kura!* p.174.

²¹⁰ Walter Irvine Summons. *Twice Their Prisoner*. (Melbourne: Geoffrey Cumberlege, OUP, 1946). pp.160-161.

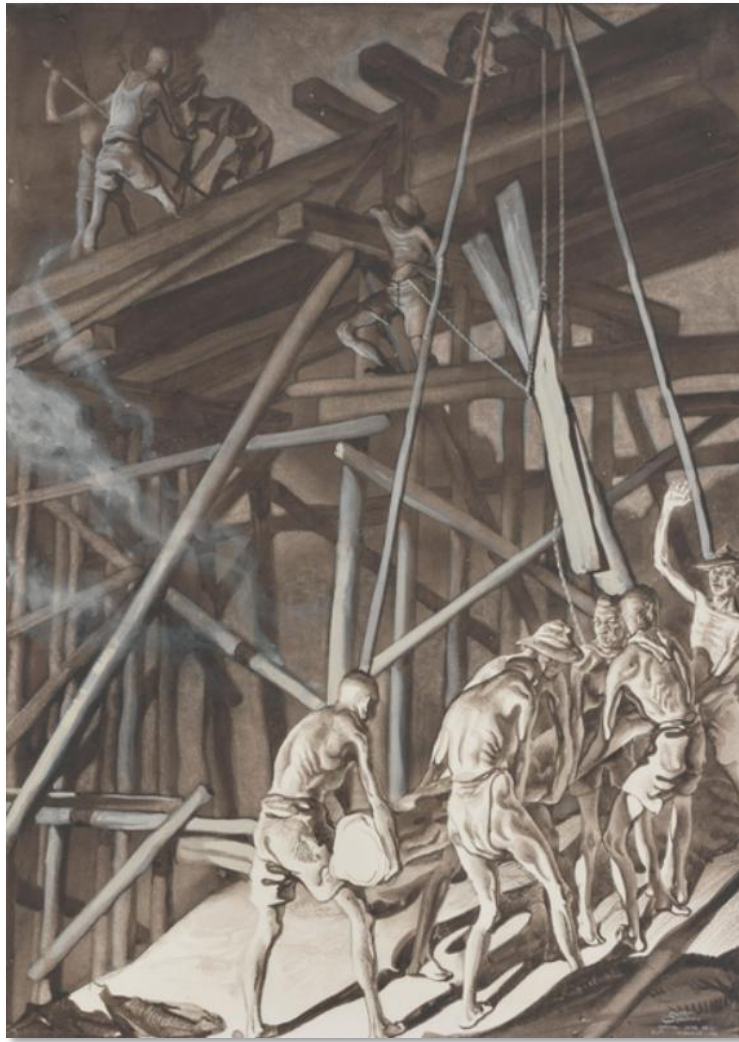


Figure 8: Murray Griffin's depiction of bridge-building on the Burma-Thailand railway.

SOURCE: AWM ART25107

CONCLUSION

Conditions for captives on the Burma-Thailand railway were grim. In such circumstances, it would be foolhardy to presume there was not selfishness amongst all ranks and there is evidence to indicate that was the case. As Private Keith Memory Firth observed, although:

mateship was something very valuable, unfortunately, and I suppose we were all guilty of it, quite often it was every man for himself. When you get down to a pretty low ebb and it's your own self you're trying to save, you'll give yourself a bit of preferential treatment even if it's unfortunately at someone else's expense.²¹¹

The question then becomes one of where the emphasis is placed in subsequent recounts and summations. Does one selfish act outweigh several examples of selflessness or do a few examples of extraordinary selflessness—such as men volunteering to remain in isolation tents to nurse those afflicted by cholera²¹² or entering an infected *romusha* camp²¹³ at grave personal risk to bury the dead and clean the area²¹⁴—outweigh many instances where self-interest prevailed? No mathematical formulae guide such calculations. Private Dick Armstrong was quoted in 2009 saying that it was while nursing cholera patients on the railway that:

most of us began building around ourselves brick walls of self preservation through which we allowed no one except our fellow prisoners to enter. In many cases we still maintain those 'walls of privacy'; even today.²¹⁵

Tom Uren's well-polished Parliamentary anecdote reflects the need of those who survive traumatic experiences to make sense of their memories and to invest them with meaning.²¹⁶ It could be argued

²¹¹ Henning. *Doomed*. pp.291-292.

²¹² Richards. *Doctor's War*. pp.151-152; & Arthurson. *13th AGH*. pp.63-65; & Mills. *Diary*. pp.160, 163; & Wright. *Line*. pp.87, 496-497.

²¹³ *Romusha* is the term used to refer to the Asian labourers who worked on the railroad. Estimates of their numbers vary but are in the order of 100,000. The numbers of their dead vary even more, ranging from 50,000 to 75,000. See Yoshihiko Futamatsu. *Across the Three Pagodas Pass: The Story of the Thai-Burma Railway*. (Folkestone, UK: Renaissance Books, 2013). pp.38-39; & Sweeting. *Prisoners*. p.588.

²¹⁴ This was at Tonchan South. See Newey. *Report*. p.5; & Peek. *Elephant*. p.181.

²¹⁵ Rosalind Hearder. *Keep the Men Alive: Australian POW doctors in Japanese captivity*. (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2009). p.197.

²¹⁶ Alistair Thomson. "Embattled Manhood: Gender, Memory and the Anzac Legend." in *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*. ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994). p.17; & Cook and Cook. *Japan*. p.17; & Terkel. *Good War*. p.401; & Laurens van der Post. *The Night of*

that it stands to Uren's credit that he saw positives in those events and took from them a hopeful message. However, that is not an exemplar for historians who should seek to reflect reality rather than project the reality we seek. In relation to the Burma-Thailand railway, where so much of the story is tied up in myth and notions of national character and where clarity is clouded by the stories veterans didn't tell, those they liked to tell and those we liked to hear, the task of fairly and accurately representing that reality is particularly challenging. Scholars seeking to gain an impression of conditions overall must deal with veterans' different experiences, interpretations and levels of candour; also at play are our own interpretations of that material so that it is as if those events are now immersed in a fog which shifts and disperses as researchers move through them, but which continues to obscure the whole.

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