Death Railway Detective

(From *Not Going to Vietnam* by Garrie Hutchinson Sceptre 1999 © Garrie Hutchinson 1999)

Ban Pong, about fifteen kilometres up the track from Nakhon Pathom, is where the POWs sent up from Singapore got off the train. George Aspinall's photographs of the train of rice wagons en route show a few blokes' legs (the men were sitting in the doorways of the wagons), some water buffalo walking along a dyke between padi fields, a house on stilts in the background, and men suffering from dysentery. On the forced march from Ban Pong to Kanchanaburi and up to the Burma border, he photographed Thai food vendors with umbrellas and baskets, looking much like the women on the train.

Stan Arneil arrived with F Force on 27 April 1943. In *One Man's War* he wrote:

> Arrived at Bhan Pong about 6 am, marched with all our gear a couple of miles through hot dusty streets to the filthiest camp it has been my misfortune to see. Great open latrines, crawling with maggots, no water. We had our first meal for 36 hours, a cup of rice, a little stew... one bright spot eggs 7c each and bananas cheap. We were searched and told we would have to march 190 miles, by night, carrying our gear. God protect us. We are in a bad way, weak, filthy exhausted from lack of sleep and food. This is the hard way.

Now the stations along the way from Ban Pong to Kanchanaburi are pretty, decorated with neat flowers, and stationmasters waved us on with green flags.

An hour and a half after leaving Nakhon Pathom the train pulled into Kanchanaburi. About five minutes' walk from the station is the war cemetery, where 6,982 men who died building the Thailand—Burma Railway are buried or memorialised. Nearly 2,000 of them are Australian, brought in from the camps between Ban Pong and Nieke near the Burma border. More than 750 men who died on the Burmese side of the border were buried at Thanbyuzayat, 415 kilometres up the line.

For 10 baht a cyclo driver took me and my pack to the front gate of the cemetery, where I went looking for Mr Rod. 'Ask anyone,' he wrote when I was making arrangements. 'They'll know where I am. And bring a bag of macadamias.'

The camp the men knew as Kanburi was just near this spot. There was also a hospital, and the beginnings of the cemetery. I asked a gardener for Mr Rod. And while he went away to find him I looked about the cemetery, another corner of a foreign field that is forever Australian, and British and Dutch, a beautifully kept sanctuary of grass and flowers, with gardeners who tend each grave with evident devotion. The gardeners I have spoken to in Commonwealth cemeteries in Thailand, Singapore, Burma, Egypt, Syria or Turkey—whatever their nationality—through their contact with this history of another country, have grown to respect those who are

buried there. Perhaps it is the arrival of solemn Australians, who find a corner and just sit, that they find moving.

While I waited, I did the cemetery shuffle, walking up the ranks of headstones, reading the inscriptions and wondering, not for the first time, whether it was worth the sacrifice of so many young men. Most of the 6,000 men commemorated here had not been killed in battle but had died as slave labourers.

Rod Beattie is the Group Supervisor for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, in charge of this cemetery and the one at Chungkai a couple of kilometres downriver. He was also the project manager for the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, which was opened by Prime Minister John Howard on Anzac Day 1998. In the past few years Rod has become first port of call for survivors and pilgrims alike.

`G'day,' I said to a short, powerful man in shorts and khaki shirt, striding through a gate. 'Need any nuts?'

Rod took me back to his office in the cemetery grounds where the interrogation began. I put my pack on the floor and stood attentively. Rod looked me up and down, waiting. I ferreted in my pack, found the macadamias and handed them over. Rod said I might as well sit. We'd had a bit of faxed correspondence in which Rod, a busy man under pressure in a tropical climate, had seemed warily cooperative. I had to prove my bona fides, which meant a passion and knowledge of the railway and the men who worked on it the equal of his own. I was about to discover that this was not possible. What did I want? I wanted to see the Hellfire Pass Memorial being built, and any other places he thought would be useful. I wanted to see what there was at Three Pagodas Pass. I wanted to see what my favourite World War II author, Ray Parkin, wrote about, and drew.

`Anything in particular?'

`Well, I'd like to stand at the 156-kilometre peg and look at the view.'

Rod seemed to relax a bit, finding we shared an interest in railway books, especially Parkin's *Into the Smother.*

One of the many remarkable aspects of the Thailand–Burma Railway was the large number of men who kept diaries and made drawings, or, in the case of George Aspinall, took photographs. This was in addition to the record keeping by doctors and officers. Many men felt that if they didn't record what was happening to them, no one would believe it after the war and their ordeal would be forgotten, so they went to extraordinary lengths to make sure the diaries, drawings and photographs were preserved.

Parkin was a midshipman on HMAS *Perth*, which was sunk in 1942, a prisoner on Java and then on the railway for eighteen months. He had the misfortune then to be sent to the coal mines of Japan. In *Into the Smother*, in my view the most humane and observant writing to come from the war, Parkin tells of a moment in May 1943, after working on the Hintok section of the line, near Hellfire Pass.

> Tonight I was conscious of a sensuous pleasure walking in the rain; warm with exertion, feeling the pull of the hill against my leg muscles, and the drive of my arms back on the ski sticks. Bow waves of water feathered away from my sliding feet... But when I got to my tent, there—absorbing the sky, in the middle of the pouring rain—was our bed platform with our belongings on it, but no pack. I searched amongst the sodden mess and could not find it; my mind paralysed with red fury at the thief who had taken my diary and drawings, which could be no good to anyone.
> Just as I was about to give way to an open show of misery and anger, Buck Pederson came over and said, 'It's all right—I saw them knocking the tent off, so I got your stuff. It's with mine under the tent flap here.' I thanked him dumbly. He went on, 'If you don't get them drawings back somehow, we've wasted our bloody time up here.'

Pederson was a Depression-era scallywag, who 'has committed almost every social offence except murder. But he is whole and balanced, with the knack and insight to give meaning to many things normally beneath one's notice. As loyalty is his unbroken rule, so he is a good mate and, at heart, one of the nicest sentimentalists.'

Reading *Into the Smother*, with its descriptions of the redemptive quality of work, the transcendent quality of nature and the healing quality of friendship and shared experience, when Parkin was enduring what I knew from his and other diaries was an experience one step short of Auschwitz, reordered my thinking about the war and what happened in it to Australians.

The Japanese conceived the idea of a railway connecting Bangkok, Thailand, and Rangoon in Burma across the steep jumble of mountains, mainly along the valley of the Kwae Noi River that separated the countries before the war broke out. The British had surveyed a route earlier in the century but had given it up as impossible to build. The invasion and capture of Rangoon in mid 1942, and the large forces Japan had there, combined with the difficulty of supplying it by sea, led to the order to build the railway. The Japanese wanted it completed by the end of 1943, if not

sooner, and it would have to carry 3,000 tonnes of ammunition, petrol and other materiel each day. An invasion of north-eastern India was planned.

The railway was built simultaneously from both ends. Japanese railway engineers and surveyors had pegged out the line ahead, enabling work to proceed digging cuttings and making embankments at many points along the track. By April 1943 it was plain that the POWs would not meet the deadline without an inhuman increase in work. This was the 'speedo' period when starving and ill men worked eighteen hours a day during the wettest monsoon in memory, finishing work such as the Konyu cutting called Hellfire Pass. Around 60,000 Allied POWs worked on the railway; 12,399 died. Some 250,000 Asian civilians, called *romusha* by the Japanese, also worked on it, and between 60,000 and 90,000 of them also died—from beatings, execution, overwork, starvation and disease.

The railway was built in eighteen months, extended 415 kilometres from Nom Pladuk in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma, but never carried anything near its required tonnage. This was partly because gradients and turns couldn't support heavy trains, and because of deliberately shoddy workmanship there were frequent collapses of the track. On 24 June 1945, RAF bombers knocked over three spans of the bridge over into the Kwae River at Tamarkan, effectively ending the use of the railway. But it was of little use anyway in 1944, when it was needed to supply the Japanese invasion forces in Burma.

Rod took me out the back to the storeroom and showed me the model of the museum building then under construction at Hellfire Pass. Next he showed me some of the things he'd collected along the track, such as railway spikes and dog spikes with various markings on them.

`Where were these from?' Rod wanted to know. This was a test of my knowledge of the Japanese planning process. I didn't know the spike-marks. I said they had been collected from prewar rail systems, but I didn't know which ones. 'Correct.'

Then he showed me a small 10-centimetre-long spike.

`What's that for?' I didn't know.

`That's your first railway mystery.'

Still testing me he asked me to identify a piece of metal about 1.5 metres long, 'Hammer and tap,' I said. It was the long drill that the men had to use to make the holes for the explosives at Hellfire Pass and the Compressor cutting. Since pneumatic drills were a rarity, they had to bash the 'drill' in with a sledgehammer.

Rod showed me a thin piece of wire with a sort of spoon on the bottom. What was this for? To get the dust out of the hole as they drilled. Ray Parkin mentions it. I got a nod of approval. Rod showed me a rusty bucket with shell holes in it and said nothing. He held up some lengths of wire and white ceramic insulator caps.

`People don't realise that the railway wasn't just a railway, there was a whole supply and repair and communications aspect to it. I reckon these are from a telephone line that ran beside the track.'

Then he rummaged in a box and found two smashed lumps of metal with copper windings springing from them, and what looked like melted valves.

`What about this?'

`Looks like a radio.'

But what kind of radio? The POW radios were more like crystal sets hidden in bamboo, or in carefully dissected and reassembled tin cans or eater bottles. The ghost radio in Changi, hidden in a wall, which is still said to turn itself on to listen to the BBC every now and again, was a mantel radio such as this metal might once have been. But not up here. Rod had pulled it from the jungle up near Hintok. He had two others just like it. Doubtful that it was Japanese, I thought it might have been a British set. The Japanese could have capture one, but two? Or from an American plane? I could imagine one being found, but again, two?

`That's your second mystery,' said Rod.

He had found these items during his epic task of clearing nearly ten kilometres of railway north from Hellfire Pass. That was the name given to the Konyu cutting because of the oil lamps and bamboo fires used for light as the men worked through the night in 1943 to finish this most terrible of jobs. They looked like the fires of a man-made hell. The Hellfire Pass Memorial project was begun at the instigation of former POW Tom Morris and others. Work on it had been undertaken from 1986 by a variety of people including soldiers from the Royal Australian Regiment and sailors from HMAS *Perth* and HMAS *Swan*.

Rod Beattie, ex army, engineer and gemnologist, was at something of a loose end in 1994. So, with his wife Thuy, and then alone after Thuy had to travel to Australia to qualify for citizenship, he began clearing the track beyond the cutting; first a path along the rail bed, then the whole of the track. He became consumed with the history and engineering of the

railway. In 1995 he was appointed part-time supervisor of the cemeteries, which meant he had a small income, but still had time to keep clearing.

After Prime Minister Paul Keating visited in 1994 the notion of building a permanent memorial and maintaining the walking track along the rail bed became more concrete. Then in January 1996 Rod was appointed project manager for the construction of the museum building. As Rod drove me the 500 metres to a guesthouse on the river, Rick's Lodge, he had more questions. When had the Japs started planning? He wanted to know. Did they just do the trace and survey in 1942. And what about the rails? The spikes? The bridges? Rod, a detective's glint in his eye, said he believed that contingency planning commenced as far back as 1934—the Japanese had agents in the Malayan rail system, in Singapore, and by the time they reached Singapore the railway engineering battalions were ready to go to work.

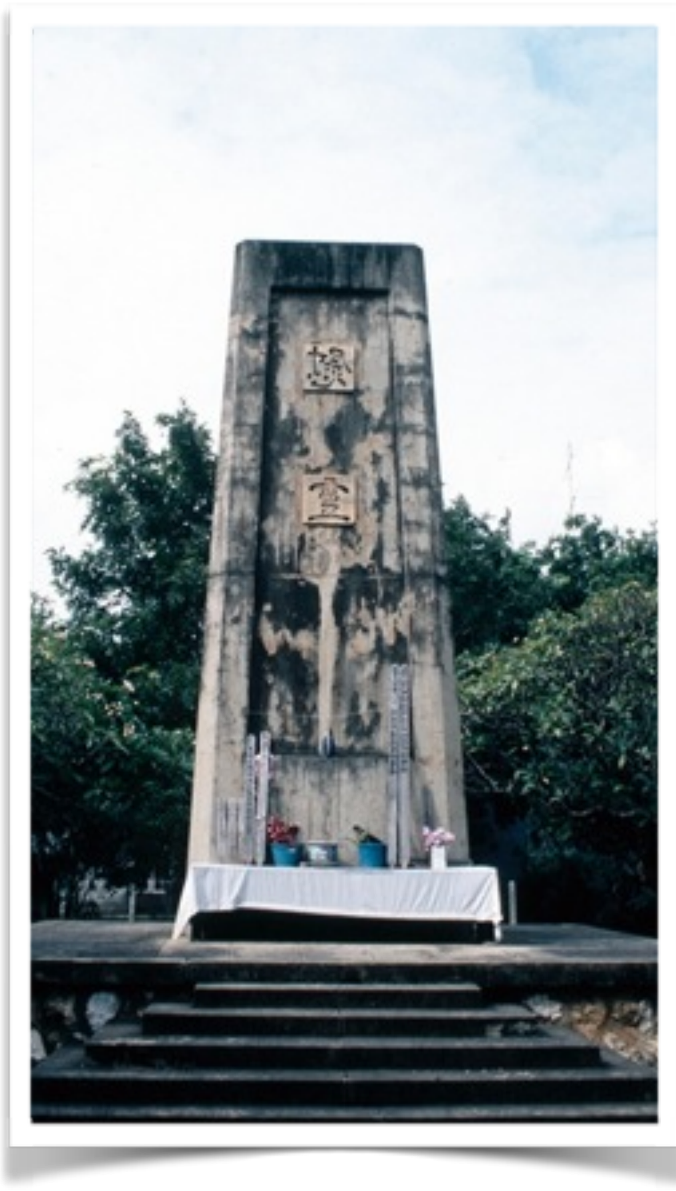
I reflected on this at the guesthouse restaurant, a bamboo platform over the river in sight of the carnival of raft discos. This was the Kwae Yai River. The so-called Bridge over the `River Kwai' of motion picture fame is at Tamarkan, now a suburb of Kanchanaburi a couple of kilometres upriver—the Kwai Yai.

The River Kwai is as fictional as the events portrayed in the famous film about it, but it has lingered in the imagination and helped keep the memory of the war in this part of the world alive. The real bridge over the Kwae Yai was built of steel and cement with Japanese engineering and POW labour; it was not a wooden bridge dreamed up by a British officer. The real bridge was blown up by American bombers in 1945, not by gallant commandos. Still, it is there, and you can walk up the river through the back streets of Kanchanaburi and cross it, on foot or by train, as far up the old route of the line as Nam Tok.

Along the road to the bridge is a Japanese memorial erected in 1944, supposedly to commemorate the POWs. As I walked around the grey stumpy cement cenotaph an old Japanese man sitting cross-legged under an atap shelter at the back seemed to glare at my interruption to his meditation. A sign on a white post read: 'May peace prevail on earth.' On the base of the column was a plaque inscribed in Thai, Japanese and English:

> This monument was erected by the then Japanese Army in February 1944, during World War II in memory of the personnel of the Allied Forces, together with other people, who died in the construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway. Once a year in March, voluntary members of

the Japanese community in Thailand assembled here to hold a memorial ceremony to those who died.



There was also a stone set in the square concrete pillar, carved with a cross and flowers with the words: 'In memory of deceased prisoners of war 1944.'

It hardly seems enough. The words 'together with other people' felt a bit flippant. More than 80,000 Asian forced labourers died in the construction of the railway. I felt that the Japanese peace lovers, in trying to make public amends with the European dead, had slighted the memory of the less commemorated Asian dead. Perhaps that's harsh.

A bit further down the road towards the bridge is the strangest museum I have ever visited. It is a white, four-storey edifice with adjacent pavilions

and basements filled with brightly coloured cement statues, bas-reliefs and paintings depicting the proud, ancient and seemingly eccentric history of Thailand. Sky-blue Siamese warriors vie with Stalin and MacArthur for attention on the exterior walls, while inside are reproductions of traditional Thai historical paintings.

Across the courtyard is a room with a truly macabre display of skulls and bones in a glass case. The sign says: 'In this glass monument, the remains of 104 of the prisoners who worked as labourers during world war II are kept on the second level and the remains of another 2 of them are kept in the 3rd level, making 106 in all.' It's a huge case about three metres long, and a couple high. The remains are those of the Thai, Burmese, Malay, Indian and Chinese labourers used to build the railway, who died in their tens of thousands from overwork, starvation and disease, and were forgotten (not necessarily by their families). Several mass graves were excavated in the 1960s, but the remains of thousands more are lost in the jungle along the track of the railway. This display was sickening and a shock to the memory. Here at least was a reminder of what happened, some unsanitised history.

I left that odd museum thinking that its naive collection was actually strangely powerful. Up at the bridge there are more memorials, including a 500-pound bomb, nose down, orange fins in the sky. Next to it is one of the Australian brass plaques that have been erected around the world, with a relief map and outline of Australia's role in the conflict in the area designed by Ross Bastiaan. A monk in an orange saffron robe stood under a red paper parasol and studied the evidence. He read the Thai words, I nodded, pointing at 'Australian' in English on the plaque. He made a wai as if he understood. Perhaps he did.

There is the question of blame. Reading the diaries of so many men who worked on the railway, the reasons for hatred of the Japanese and Korean guards, and what the men took to be an expression of Japanese society, are all too apparent. However, the spirit of forgiveness at the time and later is also quite extraordinary. Hatred or forgiveness: it is not the place of anyone who wasn't there to judge the attitudes of those who were. I think I can understand one man's undying hatred of everything Japanese, at the same time as admiring another man's forgiveness.

For 'Weary' Dunlop, the great hero of the railway, it seems that his and his comrades' experiences were so awful they had to mean something. It doesn't seem that Dunlop ever overcame his suspicion and wariness of

Japanese success after the war, despite his compassion for individual Japanese. He felt there was something in the Japanese history and culture that meant it might happen again. He was riven by the German example too, of course, and would have been deeply unhappy when war of the same kind came to the former Yugoslavia.

I crossed the black bridge and dodged the afternoon train rattling down from Nam Tok, site of the feared, diseased Tarsau camp in 1942-43. The girl who sold me a Coke earlier that morning waved.

After the cemeteries the bridge is the major part of the war tourist business here; there's even a River Kwai Festival with a son et lumiere show each year in November. Every guesthouse and hotel seems to have something to do with the railway and the war: a guided tour, souvenirs. Many proprietors will tell you their buildings are on the site of a camp, and some are. Tho opening of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum adds a significant dimension to a visit to this area, especially for Australians.

On the other side of the bridge I hired a roaring longtail boat for 400 baht to take me to the JEATH Museum and the Chungkai cemetery downriver. JEATH takes the initial letters of the combatant country names (Japan, England, Australia, America, Thailand, Holland) and is a 'peace village' with a museum constructed in the form of an atap hut, built by the chief abbot of Wat Chaichumpol at his monastery by the river in 1977. It's a pedestrian, tourist-oriented affair. When I visited, monks were working in the garden, others were in the but gazing at reproductions of atrocity, torture and starvation pictures.

Further down the river the longtail stopped at a small jetty, and I clambered ashore to the Chungkai war cemetery. This is a beautiful place surrounded by a six-metre-tall rhododendron hedge where mostly British and Dutch are buried amongst clouds of butterflies. While I was there a Dutch tour party silently and solemnly inspected every headstone in turn, and marched out. I tried to photograph the butterflies.

The next morning Rod arrived in his ute, loaded with half a tonne of rolled-up turf, and we set out for points north. The Hellfire Pass Memorial construction site was eighty kilometres up Highway 323, and we had some calls to make on the way.

First stop was for a cup of coffee at a plant nursery and backpackers' accommodation on the site of a railway camp on a high cliff above the river, a spot Rod says was known as 'Russell's Retreat'—a river supply drop-off point for the railway. A Thai colonel lives there in a pretty house with a

pond and the remains of a small zoo—the tigers and bears have gone now but there are still some big turtles. He collected antique buffalo carts, and Rod wanted to interest him in growing macadamias. We sat down for a herbal preparation and a chat.

The Colonel appeared to be a serving member of the Thai military, and from what I could glean, his job was something to do with Intelligence—knowing who was in the area and what they were up to. Hence the idea of running the backpacker accommodation. The Burmese border is, after all, just a half day's drive up the road. The route of the railway, down the valley of the Kwae Noi and over Three Pagodas Pass, had been one of the traditional invasion routes used by the Burmese. Now there was a gas pipeline coming from Burma, Mon and Karen refugees, and a significant military presence on the Burmese side of the border. Plus nosy *farang* poking around.

From the Colonel's place, we drove up the highway to the National Security Command Developmental Farm. Hellfire Pass is accessed through Thai Army–controlled land. After calling in to say hello to another colonel, we stopped at the building site of the memorial, then in full swing, and drove down to the river. This was the destination of the grass—Rod had bought a few acres of land by the river with a shack on it. The rolls of grass were part of his landscaping master plan for what would become a very beautiful weekender. The river flowed by, and below the shack was a pond. Rod asked me if I recognised it. I didn't. He pressed my memory—could there have been a camp near here? If so, what was it?

I could see the horizontal trace of the railway in the hills above the river, I knew that Hellfire Pass was not far away and further up from the Konyu cutting was Hintok. There were various camps at Hintok—Hintok Road and Hintok River. This was the site of the Hintok River camp.

Ray Parkin had drawn the 'water chain' men sending tins and buckets up from the river, with a small boat that brought the meagre supplies for the camps from Kanchanaburi. Parkin wrote that in the awful monsoon floods of July 1943 the spring was covered by water, but now, at the beginning of the dry season, it was as idyllic as peace itself. In the banana grove nearby is the site of the Hintok cholera camp. Rod said he might plant the macadamias there.

He had brought a copy of Parkin's *Into the Smother* with him, and he opened it to another drawing of the Hintok River camp, a perspective from the river showing the water elevator, the mountains behind, the railway

running in from the left, and the camp on the cliff top. I looked back from the cliff top towards the railway—there were the characteristic mountains and behind the trees was the railway. This was the camp.

We walked up from the river to the railway. It took about twenty minutes to hack through straggly jungle and abandoned banana groves, then another fifteen minutes to climb up the side of the hill. The railway was built along the thirty-metre gradient where possible above the river plain.

The 156-kilometre peg marks the end of the official Hellfire Pass Memorial project area. A red 44-gallon drum signalled the spot. Rod had cleared this area of its thick regrowth of bamboo and scrub, and had also

cleared the track for nearly four kilometres beyond 156. Just after the 160-kilometre mark the rail bed has fallen away in rock and mudslides. You can see it emerge again farther up the valley. We climbed up to the track and walked two or three kilometres along the rail bed to 156.

After the clearing it is not a difficult walk, though even in the relatively pleasant weather of the dry season the sun is hot, the humidity high, and I was in a lather of sweat after five minutes. I had to take care not to turn my ankle on the stones and rotting sleepers. Building this track, making the embankments and digging the cuttings would have been another matter altogether. Rod found me a dog spike, one of the collectibles of the railway.

We walked up through the narrow Compressor cutting, so called because of the more frequent use of mechanical drills on this stretch of the line, past the site of the wooden Pack of Cards' bridge, so called because it fell down six times, killing thirty-one men. Twenty-nine men were also beaten to death during its construction in June 1943.

It was built while the dry-stone embankment we walked on was being built, itself a marvel of stone construction. The Pack of Cards is often pictured—a tall assemblage of three tiers of wood, propped up by long poles. All that remains today is a bundle of wire, and a rotting scrap of wood from one of the props.

A kilometre further on is the Hintok station, where a siding was constructed enabling trains to pass. Now twin tracks mark where the line once ran. Further on still is a three-tier bridge, with concrete steps to climb down to the collapsed track, and the remains of a series of low trestle bridges and bomb craters. In the bamboo jungle below Rod barged off in search of the place where he had found one of the radio bits he showed me.

By now I had figured, after hints from Rod, that the radio had really been part of the wireless guidance mechanism of a bomb dropped by the Americans in 1945, the Azon bomb, one of the first 'smart' bombs the Americans experimented with.

At Hellfire Pass you get a physical sense, like a chill in the sweating heat, of the enormity of the task undertaken by the men who built the railway. Towards dusk it was an eerie place, a silent narrow defile, rather like the wadi leading to Petra, or King's Canyon in the Northern Territory—except they were created by nature in tens of thousands of years, whereas Hellfire Pass was dug, scraped and hammered out by starving, tormented men in two months. One tree has been left in the centre of the cutting, and a rock drill from the railway is fixed in a stone like Excalibur, waiting for a good man who will end all wars to come and pull it out. I imagine that 'Weary' Dunlop, some of whose ashes were scattered here, might have been able to

pull it out if he had had a go. A section of rail runs down the middle of the cutting, and above on the embankment is a section of the narrow-gauge

light rail used to carry the spoil from the cutting to be dumped—and this is where that little dog spike Rod had interrogated me about came from.

A couple of hundred metres up the track from Hellfire Pass is a lookout —the Kwae Noi Valley Lookout—where I sat and looked up at the mauve and lilac sky and the blue hills across the valley. It was utterly peaceful. Even the bats in the cave behind had not yet barged out. For all the suffering and savagery that built this railway, it wasn't hard to feel some of the magic of the environment of this beautiful place, and to feel that the jungle was just waiting to reclaim the railway. The Australian and British dead are back in Kanchanaburi, the Asian labourers, such as those that lashed together the Pack of Cards and died in the process, are down in the valley somewhere. Rod told me he had found the remains of one or two, almost certainly *romusha*, in his jungle-bashing walks in the area, and left them in peace.

We passed the site of the Hintok mountain camp next morning on the way north, following the railway. Some of the track is now beneath the road, and the bamboo and atap huts disappeared within months of being abandoned. For the most part Highway 323 follows the line of the railway, so I could see where it had once been. We diverted to Thong Pha Phum where the Kwae Noi has been dammed, flooding the track of the railway. Then we skirted the edge of the lake for sixty or so kilometres, and saw the tell-tale straight line of the embankment as it emerged from the water near the turn-off to Three Pagodas Pass. Following the lake around would lead to Sangkhlaburi, where Rod was to drop me that night.

At Three Pagodas was one of Ross Bastiaan's brass plaques commemorating the Thailand—Burma Railway at the border crossing. It was in need of a clean and a coat of white paint, one of the little maintenance jobs Rod has taken on. No one pays Rod for this, you know,' he said. For some reason when talking about his past Rod always referred to himself in the third person. I cleaned, he painted in front of the respectful Thai border police and the curious Burmese who came up the road to see what we were doing.

A sign on the Burmese side said, 'Every foreigner welcome in Myanmar. No videocams allowed.' From time to time foreigners have been permitted to make a crossing for the payment of $5 or $10 US and allowed to visit the village down the road. But then you have to return, and at the time of my visit no foreigners were allowed to make a land crossing. Thanbyuzayat, where the Australians who died on the Burmese side are buried, is only 115 kilometres down the track, or where the track was. But to get there I was going to have to go all the way back to Kanchanaburi, then to Bangkok, fly to Rangoon and catch a train several hundred kilometres south—the long way round.

Maintenance finished and honour satisfied we drove to the dusty town of Sangkhlaburi, on the edge of the lake, and checked in at the P Guesthouse. Its motto: 'Nice Clean Peaceful Private Place on the Lake Your Home Away From Home.' It is made entirely of teak: floors, walls, roof, stairs. Large logs and thick planks make the tables in the open dining verandah. The decor includes a strange collection of wagon wheels and carved Red Indians, and a few wartime souvenirs, such as steel helmets and bayonets. After the rigours of the day hunting railway spikes I had a beer with Rod and watched the sun go down over the lake, the last glimmer from the temple across the water.

As well as satisfying beer, one of the highlights of the guesthouse were the Best Fried Bananas Ever. I must have craved whatever the banana vitamin is because I had two helpings of the golden syrupy lady finger bananas. Then I slept like a log in the cosy wood-wood-wood room, even if again I did not have a window, and a party was raging next door. Sangkhla is a favourite weekend destination for the wearied young people of Bangkok.

I planned to go on a day-long elephant trek and arranged it with a small but very strong Mon woman wearing a twist of checkered cloth in her hair. She was friendly in a brusque and up-front way, wanting to make sure I

knew what I was doing and when I had to do it. Pay in advance, first night and elephant-750 baht, less than $20.

Early next morning a longtail boat awaited me at the guesthouse dock below the garden. We picked up a dozen people from other guesthouses—Japanese, Thai—and zoomed around by the bridge to the other side of the lake. The railway went through the lake somewhere—Rod had pointed out a straight line of the rail bed emerging from the water. I was quite disoriented by the boat trip and couldn't make myself clear to our guide that I wanted to know where the railway was. She said, `Railway, yes. Japanese camp,' and pointed at a sheer charcoal grey cliff with jungle like a toupee on the top and curious monkeys looking imperiously down. There had been a Japanese camp here somewhere.

After an hour we clambered ashore and walked to a family of cheerful looking elephants and equally affable mahouts. There were seven beasts with baskets on their backs, and a 1.5 metre baby that frolicked around the others' feet.

Bang, as the baby elephant was called, had a terrific time diving into any available patch of water or mud, and playing hide and seek with his mother, whom I was riding. He was extremely cute, like a huge puppy, but a trial to his mum, Komonta, who had to give him a frisk with her trunk to make him move, and occasionally even call for him to catch up. Elephant mothers such as Komonta are loyal and loving, but not so the fathers. Bang's father was a wild elephant and hadn't been seen for months.

The mahout, Nomusha, sat on Komonta's head, and aside from whacking her with a stick now and again to emphasise a point he used vocal commands. Elephants are the opposite to camels, they get up front feet first. Each part—legs, ears, tail, trunk—moves independently. Go faster, was Wh000h' with a falling tone. Steady as she goes seemed to be `Ohhh', with a rising tone. A sharp `Isluh nuh nuh' meant start, get going.

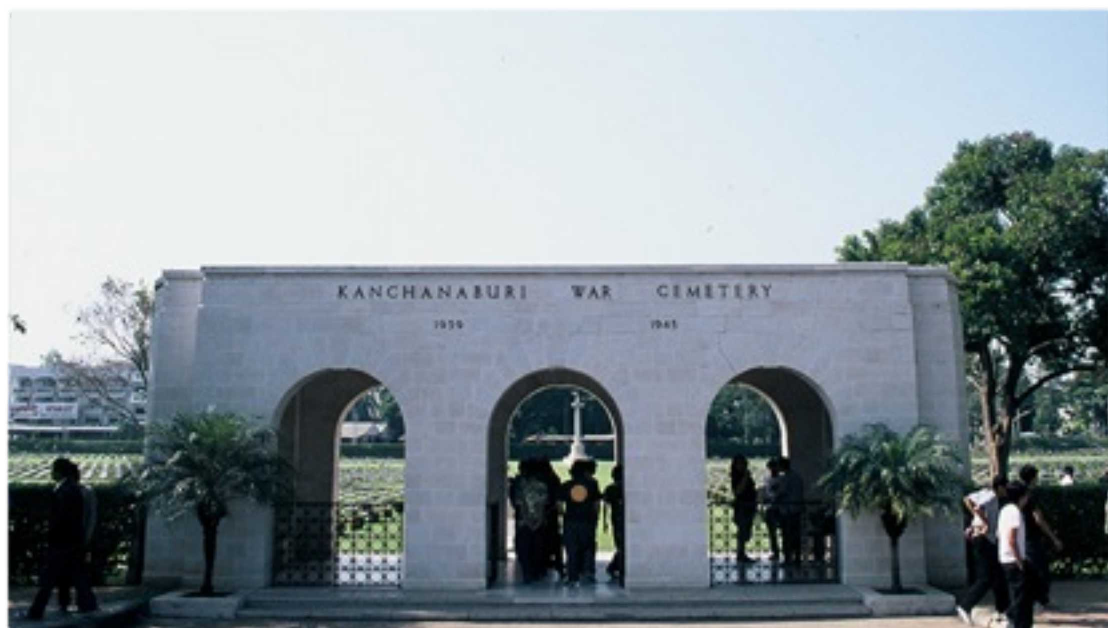
My companion aboard Komonta was a Thai medical doctor, up from Bangkok for the weekend with his wife and two children. Dr Niphon had a lot of questions for me about Australia. He was planning to visit for a holiday and was worried about how he would be received. His first questions were about, guess who, Pauline Hanson. He said he didn't want to cause offence, and he knew she only represented a minority of Australians, `but you are only abused by one person at a time'. I said that in the big cities such as Melbourne and Sydney and in the tourist areas like the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and Uluru he would be very unlucky to have

a problem. He enquired about our treatment of the Aborigines and the history of racism in Australia in general. When I asked him where he got his information from, he said that he read the Bangkok *Post* nearly every day. He asked what side of the road we drove on and what conditions were like. 'If you can drive in Bangkok you can drive anywhere,' he told me. He wanted to know what effect the ASEAN meltdown would have on Australia—facts and figures. He wanted recipes for cooking kangaroos and emu—Test you grill? Sauté?' But mostly he wanted to talk about Hanson.

On that peaceful elephant swaying through the jungle, just a few kilometres from the cholera infested Songkurai camps where many F. Force Australians died, fifty years on, I had to defend my country from polite accusations of racism. Not until I read an editorial in the Bangkok *Post* later in November did I begin to understand how uneasy and unhappy many people in Malaysia and Thailand were about Australia and racism. It was as if we had let them down.

The day trek lasted four hours (which was plenty) through light jungle, along tracks trekked many times before, across streams and through mud wallows, ending up at a shallow but swift flowing river. We were to go down this river on board a set of seemingly half submerged bamboo rafts to get back to our boat. After an adventurous ride, the boat trip back to P Guesthouse, and another night watching the sun go down behind the golden temple and eating fried bananas, I caught a small bus back to Kanchanaburi.

Next day I waited for Rod in the cemetery. I had to collect his booklist, some maps and other material about the Hellfire Pass Memorial before



catching the train back to Bangkok. While I sat under a tree, I counted five tour buses pull up at the cemetery in just half an hour. The visitors included three backpackers and three minibuses with four or five visitors each. Everyone spent fifteen or twenty minutes walking around, some looking for particular graves, others doing a line by line inspection of the names.

One bus of Japanese tourists arrived, paused and drove off.