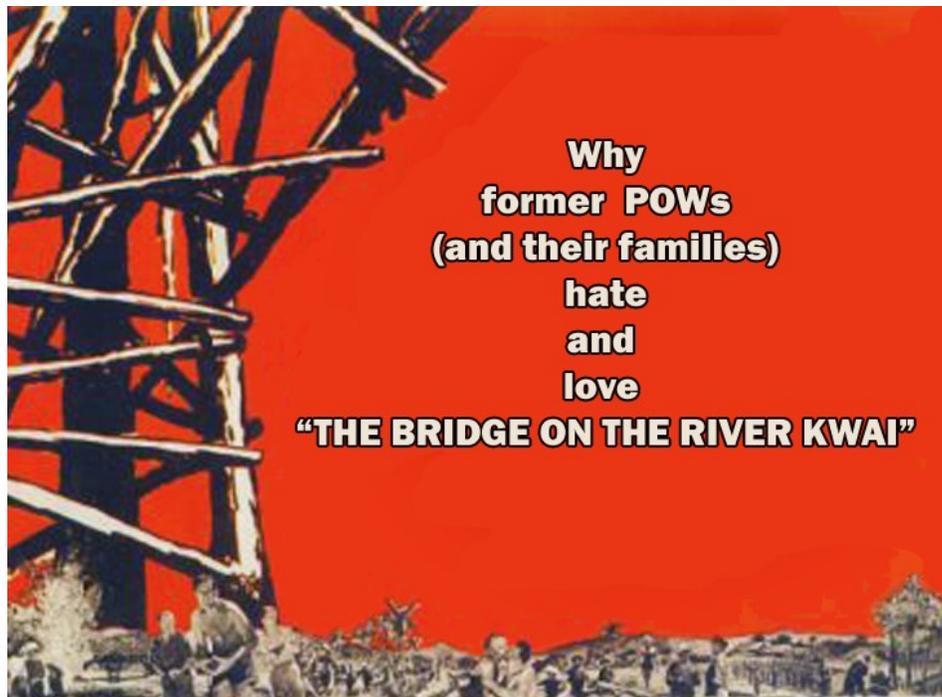


# Why Former POWs and their families hate and love *The Bridge on the River Kwai*

(The Reception of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* among Former Far East Prisoners of War)

by

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The reception of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* among former Far East Prisoners of War. Rather dry, but you have to admit it's an appropriate title for a conference at a university.

Actually the title I originally proposed was "Why Former POWs and their families hate and love *The Bridge on the River Kwai*."

Why hate? Why love?

Norman Spencer, who can't be here today, was kind enough to phone me, despite his illness and let me do some fact checking.

Spencer says, and he is right, that the once a movie project is approved, the production team then goes ahead and does the best job it can to produce a good movie. He says, "it's a dramatic presentation, not a documentary."<sup>1</sup>

There have been complaints about inaccurate portrayals in the movies since the first days of the silent era. That's never going to change.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was released in the United Kingdom on October 2, 1957. From that day until the Academy Awards on March 26, 1958, when the movie won seven Oscars, events created a situation I believe is unique in motion picture history.

If *Bridge on the River Kwai* had been ordinary run of the studio war movie, the black and white pictures churned out in both the United Kingdom and the United States in the decade or so after the Second World War, none of this would have happened.

If the actual bridge was a large studio miniature, as Sam Spiegel wanted in the beginning, the impact would have been less.<sup>2</sup>

The movie bridge was real. The movie was a masterpiece. It was a smash with the public,

Those former Far East Prisoners of War who can bring themselves to admit it would they say have to love *The Bridge on the River Kwai* because it brought to the attention of the world a story that had been ignored, forgotten, shelved and classified top secret by those who knew. Some British veterans, as they left the army were ordered never to tell what happened.

Despite the thousands of people involved, the story of the Burma Thailand Railway was largely unknown to the general public before the movie was released (although the War Office in their considerations thought otherwise)

That's a key factor that makes *Kwai* different. We can accept dramatic licence in *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Longest Day*, because when we went to see those movies, we already knew the basics of the D-Day story.

The former POWs hate the movie because it didn't tell their story, a story they were desperate to tell. David Lean's masterful production of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* took over more human lives than perhaps any other movie in the history of cinema.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* wasn't really their story, yet everyone else in their generation and their children and their children's friends, the millions of baby boomers thought it was their story—just as we will see General Arthur Percival feared even as the movie was being edited.

Martin Percival, who is the son of a POW named Frank Percival and not related to the general who surrendered Singapore told me an e-mail, "My father liked the film as a piece of Hollywood and he felt that it helped ensure the FEPOW story was not forgotten, although the whole thing was of course a piece of fiction. His reaction to Boulle's book was "a piss take of the British Army written by a

Frenchman"<sup>3</sup>

John Coast's comments are significant. In 1946, Coast wrote the first Kwai book\*, *The Railroad of Death*. In October 1969, in *Argosy* magazine, Coast said: "Most ex-POWs agree that Kwai film was magnificent cinema. But what rankles is that a satirical story by a Frenchman who was never in Thailand has become confused in the public mind with an historical fact."<sup>4</sup>

Not all POWs agree with Coast's conclusion that it was "magnificent cinema." Coast actually worked in the entertainment industry in London in the 1950s and 60s, representing then up and coming stars like Luciano Pavarotti, Bob Dylan and Ravi Shankar,<sup>5</sup> so perhaps he is willing to give his colleagues some leeway, since he knew the practical problems faced in production.

One of the most common comments I have heard is "My father hated that movie."

"That movie." When I spoke to former POWs in the UK, the US., Canada and Australia over the past 20 years, no matter what their overall opinion, the most common reference I have heard to Kwai is "that movie."

Here I am going to speculate that perhaps some *Blythe Spirit* or perhaps the Muses, or both, watched over the production of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, because so many things in the movie were so close to the facts but—if you will permit a mixed analogy from *Star Trek*—just slightly out of phase, it was this near-authenticity that made it worse for the former POWs.

As I said if *Kwai* was just another black and white war movie, it probably wouldn't have mattered.

First some facts from the official records.

At the Tokyo War Crimes trial, it was established that

The Japanese captured 112,134 allied prisoners.

Of those 35,756 died in captivity

The death rate for Allied POWs in German and Italian camps was four per cent.

The death rate in Allied POWs at the hands of the Japanese was 31.9 per cent.

On the Burma Thailand Railway

The Japanese used 61,806 Allied prisoners as labourers

Of those 12,399 died.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the work has done by Asian labourers, called "coolies" by the POWs, "*romusha*" by the Japanese. The official post-war estimate was 87,000 from Burma, 75,000 Malays and Tamils from Malaya, 7,500 from Java and 5,000 Chinese from Singapore, Malaya and Thailand.<sup>7</sup>

Modern scholarship has put the number of *romusha* around 200,000 and some estimates go much higher.

The actual casualty rate is unknown due to lack of records of desertion/escape and death, but often the *romusha* camps had a 100 per cent death rate.

What are the facts about the Burma Thailand Railway?

Here's the first case where *Bridge on the River Kwai* got it almost right, without knowing it. Pierre Boulle doesn't give Joyce, the young commando, a nationality in the book. David Lean and Sam Spiegel made Joyce Canadian so there wouldn't be two Americans in the film. (The other, of course, was William Holden as Shears)

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\* See Appendix One on the controversy over the description of the book in an earlier version of this paper.

Although it isn't generally known today, it was no secret in the closing days of the Second World War that in the alphabet soup of intelligence agencies keeping an eye on the Japanese from India and Ceylon there were quite a few Canadians in various roles. Many of the top British intelligence operatives and old China hands had been captured or killed by the Japanese in 1941 and 1942. So the War Office searched out Canadians to fill those depleted ranks, old China hands, Chinese Canadians and some university students in what today would be called East Asian studies.

One of these men was a student at the University of British Columbia named Cecil Carter Brett. It was Cecil Brett who wrote the official post war intelligence report on the Burma Thailand Railway, still the definitive document used by scholars studying the railway.

Brett, at age 25, joined the Canadian army in July 1942 as private at in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. He was recommended for officer training but was initially passed over because the quota was full. In the ranks he qualified as a motorcycle and truck driver and then was accepted for officer training. After he was commissioned, in October, 1943, Brett was sent to a base in the interior of British Columbia. His service record indicates he attended several courses at the remote base in "Mines, Minefields and Booby Traps." Not too far from Boulle's "Plastics and Destruction Company Ltd." In March 1944, Brett completed his last course and was qualified "Q1" in mines, minefields and booby traps. He was then sent back to class to a Japanese language school, He had finished three Japanese language courses by June 1945 and was then sent to Calcutta (where Boulle based the commando unit in the novel.) Brett joined a joint UK US Canadian unit called SEATIC the South East Asian Translation and Interrogation Corps. So it was not until after the war ended that Brett was given his main mission-- that report on the Burma Thailand Railway.<sup>8</sup>

I interviewed Brett by telephone in a nursing home in 2002. He told me he rode the last train to actually go from Rangoon through Burma to Three Pagoda Pass and then down along the Kwai to Kanchanaburi and then into Singapore.\* He counted the bridges. All of them. That mission must have taken some courage—he traveled with a war graves recovery team and war crimes investigators at a time when the hastily built railway was already going back to the jungle. There was an easy chance that the train could have plunged into a river without the aid of any explosives planted by commandos.

The official post-war history of Canadian army intelligence credits Brett with one other accomplishment, using his language and interrogation skills he identified the location of most of the unknown war cemeteries, so the remains could be recovered.<sup>9</sup>

After completing his journey, Brett spent the next several months in Singapore doing what the fictional Joyce dreaded. Adding up columns of figures.

The Burma Thailand Railway ran from Non Pladuk in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma a total of 262 miles or 415 kilometres of single one metre gage track,

Brett counted 688 bridges along the route. That's right, there isn't one bridge, there are 688, 680 wooden trestle bridges and eight steel bridges.

The bridge at Kanchanaburi that so many call the "Bridge on the River Kwai" was just the first of many.

One of Brett's charts shows the destruction of bridges from the Thai Burma border at Sonkrai to the Burma railhead at Thanbyuzayat. None of these attacks were by commandos, all were damaged by bombing by Allied aircraft. All the bridges were quickly repaired and put back into service.

When David Lean shot *The Bridge on the River Kwai* in 1956, Brett's analysis and all the other reports were still secret. The files on the Burma Thailand Railway held by all Allied governments would remain closed. The 30 year rule generally applied, meaning the first ones were not opened until

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\* Brett embarked on a academic career after the Second World War, eventually becoming Director East Asian Studies at Monmouth College in Illinois, see Chankar, Kavita, "Cecil Brett A Gentleman Scholar" May 2001, Monmouth College Archives

1976. Each former British Far East POW was interviewed after liberation. Those files were only declassified by the British government in 2004 after the Freedom of Information Act was passed in the UK. (POW researchers believe that the UK government's blanket declassification was a cost saving measure, they didn't want to be inundated with hundreds of FOI requests from POW families)

That secrecy is one key to the negative reaction by many POWs to the movie,

After the initial coming home publicity, there was actually very little news coverage of the Far East POW experience in the major English language movie markets, the United Kingdom and North America. The one place it was different was Australia where the story was much closer to home in a much smaller country.

At this point, if this was one of those old 1940s or early 50s movies, there would be slow dissolve from bright colours of Mile End in 2008 to a few blocks west in black and white in fall 1945. A skeletal young man in the uniform of Royal Artillery lieutenant, weighing just 83 pounds, barely able to walk, drags himself out of the Tube into Liverpool Street Station, limps to the ticket sellers, desperate to catch the a train east to Clacton-on-Sea. That man was my father. He had arrived at Southampton, with late onset beri beri, the vitamin deficiency disease that killed many prisoners—and which struck some after the worst was over. A medical officer in Southampton wanted to put my father in hospital. My father begged the MO to be discharged. He was, given a travel warrant and authorization for extra rations. At Liverpool Street, he just missed the 5:30 and with growing frustration had to wait until 6 o'clock for the next train. An uncle, expecting him on 5:30 had gone home, so my father took a taxi home.<sup>10</sup>

So that's the British version. The American story is pure Hollywood – and completely true.

Paul Papish was on a storekeeper on the *USS Houston*. And as was seen at the conclusion of *King Rat*, the Americans moved quickly get their POWs home. But Paul Papish, weighing 90 pounds, his knees crippled by beri beri missed that evacuation. When I met Papish in 2001 at the USS Houston reunion he told me was determined to make it home. So he hitchhiked his way, carried by sympathetic American flight crews from Singapore to India, India to North Africa, North Africa to Great Britain and from Britain to Washington, where out of a combat zone, the rules for tickets and priorities applied. Papish just had to get home to Denver. So the pilot on the aircraft that could take him home went on the speaker and asked someone to give up their seat. And someone did.<sup>11</sup>

The former POWs wanted nothing more to get home, to get jobs, to get on with their disrupted lives. They got jobs and got married, but were deeply scarred. Some like my father isolated themselves from the world. Many others would get together with their buddies, the only ones who could understand. Others, the more resilient, acted if as if nothing happened.

There were no victory parades for the Far East POWs. Twenty years later, in 1986, when I met Otto Schwarz, another “swab jockey” to use the term in the script, from the *USS Houston*, he mentioned that while some Americans were giving Vietnam vets a belated welcome home, he said, “No one has ever welcomed us home.”

The Kwai story was forgotten. The war crimes trials in the Far East got little coverage compared to Nuremberg. The clipping files of *The Times* has just eight stories on the Singapore war crimes trials which lasted from late 1946 to early 1948. The newspapers also paid little attention to the two year proceedings of the Tokyo trial, just reporting the verdict. Allied governments moved to publish the Nuremberg proceedings but not the Tokyo transcripts. John Dower of MIT says in his study of post-war Japan *Embracing Defeat*, “For all practical purposes, the record of the proceedings was buried.”<sup>12</sup>

There were two POW books published in 1946. As mentioned John Coast's book *Railroad of Death*, published in the UK on government approved war time austerity paper and in Australia, Rohan

Rivett's memoir *Behind Bamboo, Hell on the Burma Railway*.\*

Except for the occasional article, there was nothing significant until Pierre Boulle's novel *The Bridge on the Kwai* was published in English in 1954. The time was right for Boulle's book. The British economy had gone from austerity to recovery. The North American economy was roaring. People were buying books, going to movies.

Sam Spiegel got the rights, David Lean became the director, Alec Guinness was persuaded to play Colonel Nicholson.

The former prisoners were suspicious of the movie long before David Lean first yelled "Action," as can be seen from the War Office file on the movie.<sup>13</sup>

Writer Carl Foreman had written the first drafts of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, scripts which David Lean rejected and which Kevin Brownlow says had only a slight resemblance to the final script (written mainly by Michael Wilson).<sup>14</sup>

Foreman began writing the first draft sometime in the spring of 1955. The War Office file opens in April 1955 when Foreman writes a short letter to Major N. N. Booker, a Deputy Director of Public Relations at the War Office in charge of working with the film industry, asking for general cooperation in the anticipated production of the movie. Although it was not in the file, the then draft of the script accompanied the letter.

A later War Office memo, written as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was about to be released and creating what today would be called "talking points" in anticipation of possible questions in the House of Commons, shows that Sam Spiegel had lunch about this time with another Deputy Director of Public Relations, Col. L. J. Wood, to discuss War Office cooperation in making the movie.

At the time of the lunch, Spiegel was apparently determined to shoot in Malaya (even though the railway was in Thailand and Burma). Spiegel "asked for advice on safe and suitable areas"-- the British and Australians were still fighting Communist guerrillas in the Malayan Emergency. Spiegel also asked for the use of British troops as extras. The public relations officer estimated that the movie would need as many as two battalions (there were 13 British and Australian battalions in Malaya at the time and all were "operational") and then noted, "I pointed out that it was unlikely that the Army could even help with the protection of the company against terrorists."<sup>15</sup>

The DDPB also briefed a Major Robinson, an officer about to take a similar position as a DDPB in Malaya, telling him that any War Office cooperation on the production was "subject to approval final script which has not been submitted." The War Office appeared to believe that Spiegel sent a "recce party" to Malaya and signaled Robinson that date of its expected arrival.

A few days after the lunch date, another draft script arrived at the War Office. Wood sent the script to three officers, his brother-in-law, another officer in War Office PR, Major A. G. Close and a Lt. Col. Broughton in the M.I.11 branch of intelligence. All three men were survivors of the Burma Thailand Railway.\*

Broughton responded: "There is of course no security objections to this script. It will probably be quite a good film but part from the fact there was a Burma Siam Railway with prisoners working on it I doubt if it is accurate enough for official approval being given to being displayed publicly (with the cooperation of the War Office)."

In a handwritten note, one of the officers, probably Close (it is hard to decipher the signature) responded: "I do not think much of the story...I am perhaps biased as I worked for 3 ½ years on this

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\* See Appendix one for a note on the controversy over the book in an earlier version of this paper.

\* M.I.11 was one of the lesser known military intelligence units, responsible for counterintelligence against enemy agents who may have been a direct threat to British troops. M.I. 9 was responsible for rescuing prisoners of war, so the fictional Force 316 in the book and movie would have been associated with M.I.9 as was the real Force 136.

\* See Appendix Two. Close may not have actually been on the Railway.

particular railway I have however asked independent people to read the script. They agree with me that it would not go down well with the British public.”

Major Close was then given the job as the War Office contact for the film company and on November 11, 1955, Foreman sent a revised draft script to Close with the note: “I think that the changes in the script will remove whatever lingering doubts there have been in your mind on various aspects of it.”

At about this time David Lean was reading the script, and it is in early 1956, as Kevin Brownlow relates, that Lean called Norman Spencer to say the script was “Fucking awful.”<sup>16</sup>

Lean and Spencer wrote their own treatment which was completed March 30, 1956. In the meantime the production was gearing up and Don Ashton had recommended shooting in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

Horizon Pictures resumed contact with the War Office in July 1956, when Norman Spencer began negotiating for the use of RAF personnel in the parachute drop sequence. The RAF had agreed to cooperate and needed the War Office to sign off. Spencer also sent a new script along to the War Office, which this time was read by a Lt. Col. J. H. S. Martin who noted:

- Film generally shows British army in a bad light
- It is likely to be badly received in Britain particularly by those who were POW in Japanese hands
- The character of Lt Col Nicholson is the American idea of a typical wooden-headed British army officer,
- Lt. Col Nicholson appears to be half mad and at worst a collaborator.

It is only in April 1957, just as shooting on the film was wrapping, that the former prisoners of war became formally involved in the person of Lt. General Arthur Percival, the man who had surrendered Singapore to the Japanese and was now the president of the National Federation of Far East Prisoners of War Clubs and Associations of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Percival wrote to the War Office on April 26, 1957:

It is reasonable to expect, therefore that the public who see the film will think that the events which take place in the film are typical of what actually happened.

Although there was at the beginning of hostilities ....little in the way of written instructions to British troops about their conduct in the event of them becoming prisoners of war yet there were certain accepted principles in this regard, One was that it was the duty of all prisoners of war to endeavour to escape if the opportunity offered . Another was that prisoners of war should do everything to impede the enemy's war effort.

The conditions in the Far East made escape almost impossible but they were extremely favourable, especially on the Siam Burma Railway for sabotaging the enemy's war effort. Of this opportunity the British prisoners of war took full advantage , often at great personal risk, and there are innumerable instances of action being taken which was calculated to ensure the Railway was built but it would not fulfill its intended function.

The subsequent picture of the bridge being built under the British colonel's direction in a most efficient manner is however a very false one. It would have been wrong for prisoners of war to have willingly done for this because it would have been contrary to their duty.

Whatever may be said either in the book or in the film by way of explanation it is certain that a high proportion of those who read the book or see the film will form and retain an impression that this conduct was typical of that of British prisoners of war in the Far East.

I am writing to ask that the film censor may be requested to prohibit the showing of this film or if that is not possible, then at least to ensure that no aspersions are cast on the conduct of British troops

On May 3, 1957, Wood met Spiegel and reported back to Percival:

The Producer was quite vehement today in expressing his opinion that the final film could not possibly give a derogatory impression of the conduct of British officers or soldiers (I am not quite sure how he can reconcile the conduct of the CO in this film with this statement. And that general public would have the impression that the British POW would come out of it with the greatest credit. He also said that he had been asked to submit it as a possible candidate for the next Command Performance and he would be delighted to ask—within reason—anyone we liked to a preview of it when the film has been out and processed

Three days later, Percival responded::

The Producer, of course, is bound to say that the film will not be derogatory of British officers and soldiers because it is his job to produce a good film, which I have little doubt it will be as far as its selling value is concerned. It is our duty, supported by I hope, the War Office to see that the conduct of the British prisoners of war on the Burma Thailand Railway is properly presented to the public.

There are basic principles involved in this matter which may well have far reaching effects in the future, quite apart from the immediate effect on those who served on the Burma Thailand Railway.

I do ask, therefore, that the film should be studied with the greatest possible care and that I myself and representatives of those who served on the Railway should be allowed to see it at the earliest possible opportunity,

The exchange of letters over the next few weeks clearly sums up the dilemma and argument that would go on for the next fifty years and is still going on and not just about *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the moment when a fictional treatment of an event in a motion pictures becomes the historic reality in the eyes of the public.

On May 8, one of the technical advisors on the film, Major General Lancelot Perowne (retired) wrote to the War Office, sounding more like a Hollywood PR man than a retired general:

General Percival and those on behalf he writes should, I think, remember that we are presenting a Story (sic) and not a documentary film of life in Japanese POW camps. There may well be inaccuracies and lack of authenticity in certain details of which they will retain intimate memories and some incidents in the film open to criticism by them as being of doubtful probability but all these are, in my view, within the licence of story-telling and of a motion picture production and in no sense either objectionable or derogatory.

The treatment and conduct of our unfortunate fellow countrymen in Japanese hands are well-known and everywhere proudly respected and I, personally, have seen nothing in the production of the film which could be held by even the most sensitive to discredit this reputation or be interpreted as casting aspersions on their behaviour while Prisoners of War.

On May 10, Spiegel wrote to Wood:

We have most earnestly tried to present a case in which officers and soldiers of various nationalities are caught in the inevitable tragedy which the military traditions of their respective nations impose on them in time of war. Each one has to resolve his problem in terms of his own conscience, his own beliefs and his own traditions.

The irony of it is that, by following his own course, each one of them courts disaster and becomes the victim of his own integrity. Neither the British, or the American, nor the Japanese participants in this tragedy caused by war behave in a way that could be considered typical of their national traditions. They all act as individuals. Yet none of them would reflect discredit on their national prestige.

Obviously General Percival and whomever else induced him to write this letter to you have not read our script and not seen the completed picture. Their knowledge of the subject is limited to the novel on which the film is based. I think it would be an injustice to us not to await until the completed film before resorting to protests about its contents. While in many years of film making I have objected to restrictions being imposed by censorship or pressure from interested groups on the freedom of expression, whether this is print or in film, I feel no hesitancy in accepting your suggestion that as soon as the film is completed, it should be shown to the War Office and to anyone else you or General Shortt would invite to view at that time....

I am sure General Percival's motives in worrying about the film are entirely legitimate and I see no reason why his fears should not be allayed. It is just that, in principle, I would prefer for you to issue an invitation to him as it would otherwise seem that we accede to the idea of censorship by interested groups.

May I assure dear Colonel Wood and would you please transmit this assurance to General Shortt that having approached the War Office for sanction and help in the making of this picture, I have implicitly undertaken to respect the honour and integrity of the British and all Allied

soldiers involved in this picture. The presence of my British colleagues in this film, such as David Lean, its director and Alec Guinness and Jack Hawkins, its co-stars, is an added warranty that no slanderous treatment of British prisoners of war would be tolerated by us. I hope the picture, when you see it, will corroborate this statement.

In May 1957, the War Office PR came up with the idea that there should be some sort of disclaimer that the film was “entirely fictional.”

Percival drafted one version and sent it to the War Office on June 11, 1957.

The story in this Film is Fiction and the Characters are Imaginary. Although the conditions described in the prisoner-of-war camp are in general similar to those which existed in the camps on the Siam/Burma Railway during the Second World War, the action of British Officers and Men in voluntarily building a good bridge over the River Kwai for the Japanese has no foundation in fact and would have been contrary to the high standards of duty and loyalty maintained by the British troops who were forced to work as prisoners of war on the Siam Burma Railway.

Spiegel was agreeable, but the War Office knew that Percival's draft would not work. So here is what they submitted to Spiegel.

To what point should men follow a lawful and revered Commander, once the balance of his mind and judgment has become suspect?

This is a drama of conflicting loyalties—played out in isolation, upon a stage remote from all contact with civilization with its normal human values-- a drama in which the strength and courage of one man, in turning from nobility to obsession, becomes a challenge to accepted rules or disciplined conduct and of patriotic duty.

Spiegel was as good as his word, at least as far as seeing the movie was concerned. Percival and the secretary of the FEPOW association were shown a preview of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and reported back to a POW conference on Sept. 14, 1957:

The film is in Technicolor and I can be said at once that as far as technique and drama are concerned it is a wonderful production. No expense has been spared in producing it and there is little doubt that it will prove very popular.

The first part of the film gives a true and vivid picture of the conditions in the camp and the account of Japanese officers and soldiers. And it brings out well the splendid behaviour of British officers and men in the face of great adversity.

The second part ... is both unreal and contrary to the duty of prisoners of war because it involves helping the enemy war effort.

In some vital respects the story in the book has been changed for the purposes of the film very much to our advantage.

Percival told the War Office “that the film will do much to bring home to the public the wonderful courage shown by the British troops in the appalling conditions in the prisoner of war camps.” Percival added that if the disclaimer was included “there should now be little danger of the public forming a wrong impression of the conduct of British POW in the Japanese camps.”

The negotiations on the disclaimer continued at the highest level, with the head of War Office PR Major General A. C. Shortt meeting with Spiegel to iron out the wording of the disclaimer. Spiegel found the War Office disclaimer too long. On October 1, the day before the London premiere, the negotiations broke down and Shortt apparently reluctantly agreed to a draft proposed by Siegel. Shortt wrote to Percival he was “satisfied that there would be no reflection whatsoever on the British Prisoners of War, so from the War Office point of view, there is nothing than more to be done.”

The movie had its British premiere on Oct. 2, 1957 and as the critics and guests left the theatre, everything had changed. On October 1, no one but the prisoners cared about the *Kwai* story. Beginning on October 3, and specially after the Oscars in March 1958, the whole world wanted to know more.

That day, October 3, the former POWs met at the Royal Festival Hall and then went to a West End theatre to see *The Bridge on the River Kwai*—and there was a disclaimer with the opening credits.

The War Office was still withholding approval, “although it is first class we have agreed not to give any official publicity in England owing to the sensibilities of Far East Prisoners of War.”

It quickly became clear that Spiegel had pulled a fast one on the former POWs. While the print exhibited in the West End had the disclaimer, the prints shown outside of London did not. Shortt would note in May 1958, he “saw the film for second time in Brighton and third time in Singapore that the statement agreed with Mr Spiegel was not included.”

Percival attended the next meeting of the POW group in May 1958 and wrote to the War Office: “there was some very straight talking about this film by officers and men who had actually worked on the railway. They were without exception very angry at the misrepresentation of their actions. They do not see why they should be used in this way to make large sums of money for everyone concerned with the film. They asked me to everything possible to bring this matter to the public.”

All Percival could do was write a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*.

So, apart from the leadership of the POW organizations, the negative reaction was generally muted. One of the characteristics of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the desire among some to tell their stories, to get it off their chests. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* allowed some of the men to do that. The growing success of the movie created a market for their memoirs, a market that didn't exist a month earlier, and a market that would be sustained into the 1980s. Even if the movie wasn't their story, it gave them the opportunity to tell their own story. But PTSD can mean also bring isolation and many former POWs quietly fumed and ruminated about the perceived injustice.

(There was also some negative reaction in Japan where Boule's idea that the Japanese couldn't build bridges was roundly condemned.)

The scene now shifts to Thailand and a set of circumstances that created a legend.

The Burma Thailand Railway was built in haste. At the end of the war, the strategic necessity that cost so many lives, Japan's invasion of India no longer existed. Most of the railway was abandoned to the jungle. In Burma much of the tracks remained. In Thailand, after the railway was sold to the Thai government, most of the tracks were torn up. The rail line ended at Nam Tok, about an hour's journey from the rail yards at Kanchanaburi, and a great steel bridge, a bridge that had been built

by prisoners, that crossed the river Mae Khalung.

Soon after the publication of the novel, tourists began looking for the “Bridge on the River Kwai” and since there was only one bridge available, the steel bridge in the flood plains at southern Thailand, the tourists were told by the Thais yes that was “the Bridge on the River Kwai.”

Kevin Brownlow's book on David Lean tells how Don Ashton rejected the site at Kanchanaburi because it was so different from what was described in the novel. Norman Spencer said Don Ashton went in search of the area that had the best look and was closest to the book.

Boulle had placed the bridge on the River Kwai in the mountains on the Burma Thailand border. So did the movie, for that is what Warden, played by Jack Hawkins, tells Shears, played by William Holden in their pre-mission briefing.

That area would remain inaccessible for all but the most intrepid adventurer until the period of 1979 to 1984 when construction began on a huge dam across the Khwai Noi and a highway following the route of the old railway was built to the border with Burma at Three Pagoda Pass.

There is also the unfortunate idea in Brownlow's otherwise excellent biography of Lean that somehow Boulle and everyone else got it wrong. The Bridge was the Bridge at Kanchanaburi and that idea is now accepted. But it may not be right—and that again affected the POW reaction.

John Coast who was actually there, one of the POWs who built the bridge at the Tamarkan crossing, now part of the city of Kanchanaburi put it this way: “For the Thai Tourist Office has subtly confused one of our very real bridges with the product of Pierre Boulle's imagination.”

In this Coast is both right and wrong. Remember there were 49,407 surviving Allied POWs when the war ended. They worked over 415 kilometres of track in two countries. They didn't all have the same experience. So it is natural for Coast who worked at one point to believe that the bridge in Boulle's novel and the bridge in the movie were products of an author's imagination.

Prisoners who worked up country would certainly disagree, since the story in both the book and the movie takes place in mountainous jungle.

Now to be purely technical there are no bridges over the River Kwai. None. The railway followed the route of the Kwai Noi, or Little Kwai, coming down from the mountains until it reaches the flood plains near Kanchanaburi.

For those who can travel today along the route of the railway and as seen in my 1998 mini-documentary for CBC television, you see the route of the railway taken from the west bank of the Kwai. The railway actually followed the route on the east bank of the river and most of the bridges crossed not rivers but ravines.<sup>17</sup>

There are two prime candidates for a bridge that does cross a river—and which bridge it is important to the prisoners reaction.

The first candidate is the famous steel bridge at Kanchanaburi which is downstream from where the Kwai Noi and Kwai Ye meet to form the Mae Khalung. It was built by prisoners but under very different circumstances than that described in the novel.

The second candidate, the one I prefer, is at Sonkrai, as the novel and as Warden's briefing describe in the mountains of the Thai Burma border. The bridge at Sonkrai didn't cross the Kwai, but it did cross a major tributary, the Huai Ro Ki.<sup>18</sup>

I am not going to go into detailed arguments because there are other up country camps and bridges that could also be considered.

At this point, if we accept for a moment that an upcountry bridge is correct, we have another case where the Muses were shining on the production. The movie, from the location that Don Ashton chose in Kitugala in what is now Sri Lanka bears a remarkable resemblance to the mountainous country around Sonkrai.

The prisoners reaction, based on my interviews and reading, and is by no means a scientific

survey, can roughly be divided into four

First are the men at Kanchanaburi who built the wooden temporary bridge and later the steel bridge, but had little or no experience in the mountains and jungles further up the line.

Second are the men who were in the jungles of Thailand and for whom the novel and the movie gave somewhat of a description of their experiences.

Third are the men who were working in Burma, most of whom knew little or nothing of events in Thailand, who went through the same horrendous experience in the jungle, but who generally accept that the location of the bridge is at Kanchanaburi.

Fourth are the prisoners in other areas who also went through the experience as slaves of the Japanese era, and for whom the movie was an echo of their experience.

The man who had commanded the prisoners at the steel bridge at Kanchanaburi was Lt. Col. Philip Toosey, a territorial artillery officer from Liverpool, Toosey became both a prominent businessman in Liverpool after the war, and to use a modern term the “go to guy” for former prisoners who had troubles, especially medical problems. Toosey began urging the medical establishment to treat the former POWs as special cases as early as 1947. It was Toosey who drafted a letter from Percival that appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* which warned of the consequences of turning fact into fiction.

The 60s came. With *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dr. Zhivago* Lean was acclaimed, and justly, as one of the great film directors. And so *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was popular on television and that also released a decade of pent up rage.

By this time some former prisoners were well established, had business and media contacts. It was the 60s, a time of turmoil and revolt. The media had changed, there were millions more television sets than there were in 1957. Newspaper and television technology meant it was easier to produce stories for print or broadcast. The re-release of the movie once again raised interest in the story of Far East Prisoners and gave reporters a news peg. And as the media does, they went to those who had already voiced their opinion.

The loudest in their condemnation of the movie were the men who worked on the steel bridge at Kanchanaburi under the command of Philip Toosey. Given the myth that the steel bridge was the Bridge on the River Kwai, came the inevitable idea that the collaborator Nicholson was based on Toosey.

Toosey himself never saw the connection, in her biography, Toosey's granddaughter says “He never associated himself with Alec Guinness. It never entered his head he was being portrayed. He knew what he had done in the Far East and the film bore no resemblance to that.”<sup>19</sup>

Others did and leapt to his defence. John Coast was one. His “Return to the River Kwai” was the subject of a BBC documentary, a major article in the *Sunday Telegraph* and another in *Argosy* magazine.

One former prisoner, a young soldier under Toosey's command at Kanchanaburi, had in the 20 years after the war, become a prominent academic, Ian Watt, by then at Stanford University in California, known in English departments around the world for his *Aspects of the Novel*, wrote the “The Myth of the Bridge on the River Kwai,” which appeared in *The Observer Magazine*. In 1968, which has become the definitive POW criticism of the movie. If Coast thought placing the bridge at Kanchanaburi was a convenient fiction, Watt, like most former prisoners, whose view was confined to the time and place of their experience, got it half right, not knowing about the bridge at Sonkrai and several nearby bridges that also crossed tributaries, said of the Kanchanaburi bridge “Though he took the river's real name, Boule placed his bridge near the Burma border, 200 miles from the only bridge across the Kwai....”<sup>20</sup>

As for men in the other groups, the myth stuck. For those who served under and were protected by competent commanders in other parts of the Kwai railway, like those in Dunlop Force, mostly

Australian, commanded by a doctor, E. E. Weary Dunlop, a man who saved thousands of lives not just as a doctor but as a commanding officer in a situation where doctors are not part of the military chain of command.<sup>21</sup> Nicholson couldn't have been their commanding officer, it was that other guy, Toosey—or perhaps it wasn't. For there were, especially in the upper reaches of the Kwai, where conditions were even harsher at Kanchanaburi, officers who could not meet the challenge, who failed in their duty. In *F Force*, the group I write about in my book, there were officers who failed to do their duty, officers who were true heroes and there was, not one, but several heroic doctors.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the former prisoners began to complete their careers, many had the time to write memoirs, and for some of those books, the legacy of the movie left a commercial marketplace. Others, rejected once again by the mainstream, turned to self publishing and vanity presses.

By the mid-1990s when I was teaching journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto, none of my students had heard of the movie. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was a late late movie and later a newly released DVD.

Most of the former POWs are gone now. The last time I was in London was for the final memorial service at St. Martin in the Fields in May 2002.. That doesn't mean the families aren't carrying on. There are new web sites, and active e-mail lists among the children and grandchildren of former POWs. So the controversy over the movie is going to continue--at least among the POW families and among an audience of film scholars and fans like this.

If all the family critics of the book and the movie can agree, what turns the picture for them is this one key scene. Nicholson has been released from the box, is beginning to win the psychological battle with Col. Saito and is determined to bring order and discipline back to his disorderly troops.

So Nicholson comes to a work site and confronts a corporal who wink, wink, tries to explain to his commanding officer that they are slacking off, getting on the sick list and sabotaging the work. Boule in the novel, and the movies script, see this, at least through Nicholson's eyes, as an appalling and scandalous lack of discipline. So he begins his campaign to use the bridge to bring back the men's pride.

The rest of the story of the building of the bridge, the meeting with Saito, moving the site, the construction are just details springing from this one scene.

All along the railway, the only means of resistance for the prisoners was passive resistance. They were tired, starved and sick, they couldn't work that hard in any case. But when they did they did what they could to slow things down as much as they could, finding a crucial balance between resisting the enemy and endangering themselves and their fellows from punishment from the Japanese.

I can agree with those who say that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is a great anti-war movie, but I cannot agree with Kevin Brownlow's statement that it is a brilliant allegory on collaborator<sup>22</sup> Passive resistance, often called “laziness” and sabotage when possible is a common reaction by slaves to their overseers and their forced labour, documented for example, in Eugen Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll* about the lives of African slaves in the Caribbean and America.<sup>23</sup>

My father's own POW interrogation form which I retrieved this week shows: “Work done badly where possible and general small damage done where possible.”<sup>24</sup>

Watt described Toosey's role this way:

Toosey's obviously involved a slight increase in the degree of our collaboration with the enemy. But anybody on the spot knew the real issue was not building the bridge, but merely how many prisoners would die, be beaten up or break down in the process., There was only one way to persuade the Japanese to improve rations, to provide medical supplies, allow regular holidays or

reduce the brutality of the guards, to convince them that the work got done better that way.

Before I move on to a couple more brief points about the movie, let's take another look at this remarkable scene. For it is another example of what may be the Muses inspiring Don Ashton and the production team. The cutting behind the corporal, nicely lit by the way, bears a remarkable resemblance to one of the worst places on the Burma Thailand Railway, known as Hell Fire pass, the site of the present day POW memorial, an area inaccessible in 1956-1957.

So for a moment, let's imagine just for a minute that David Lean had followed just one crucial historic fact in the building of the Railway of Death and how that would have changed absolutely everything by changing the look.

First the marches up country were at night, not during the heat of the day, starting at dusk and ending at dawn or perhaps one or two hours later. So the scene of the arrival at the camp should have been shot in total darkness, or with bare moonlight coming through the canopy or perhaps a blazing dawn. When there was no moon, it was pitch black in the jungle and men were injured and killed trying to make their way up to their work camps.

Then there was the weather, There is just one scene in the movie shot in the rain, although the accounts on the DVD extra on how the movie was made say production was held up by the rain.

The building of the Burma Thailand Railway was done almost entirely in the rain. In fact, the period from April to November 1943, when most of the railway was built, was one of the worst monsoon seasons in the twentieth century. The rain helped spread cholera and dysentery, drenched the huts, turned the roads into so much mud that neither six wheel drive Marmon trucks nor elephants could make through but men had to, carrying tools, equipment and essential for life, 100 kilo sacks of rice.

All but one scene in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* were shot in brilliant sunshine, which is the same for every other Far East POW movie. Norman Spencer told me this week the idea was to have the heat of the tropical sun dominate the picture. It was hot, but unlike the desert of *Lawrence of Arabia*, the sun was hidden behind monsoon clouds.

It is an expensive pain to shoot in torrential rain but lots of age of sail movies have been shot in raging tempests, so a Kwai movie could be done with a wet look.

And now the bridge.

Every historian who has considered the issue has pointed out the Japanese were expert railway engineers and bridge builders, that the biggest problem with the book and the movie is Boullé's idea that they were incompetent,

Keith Best who designed the movie bridge and who passed away just a few weeks ago, based his design on the Forth Bridge in Edinburgh. And for me, although it is historically inaccurate, it works and works well for the movie. It was the right decision.

Here's why. In the early scenes in Saito's office, we see a model of a standard wooden trestle. The 680 wooden bridges on the railway were that kind of design. The production team not only wanted the bridge to have a distinct look, they wanted to mark the transition from the Japanese engineers to the British engineers by changing the trestle into a cantilever bridge.

Here once again the Muses smiled.

In his book Boullé talks about the British using a book called "The Bridge Builders." Cecil Brett says the Japanese used "Merriman Wiggin."

Merriman Wiggin is *The American Civil Engineers Handbook*,<sup>25</sup> by Thaddeus Merriman and Thomas Wiggin, used for decades all over the world for not only building bridges, but dams and docks and roads and buildings.

It was the manual used to build railway bridges across America.

There were hundreds of trestle bridges in western North America from Mexico to northern British Columbia.

Sam Spiegel and Columbia were worried about how the American audience would accept *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

What if they had been historically accurate? And used a trestle? It would have looked like a Western! And left the American audience feeling something wasn't right. So by transferring a Scottish bridge to the jungle of Ceylon, the *Kwai* production team, achieved an exotic structure that of course became the icon for the movie.

To conclude

We all know that great factual history seldom makes a good movie, and that a great movie seldom makes good history,

There is one huge difference between *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Bridge on the River Kwai*. The story of T. E. Lawrence was well known, the story of the Burma Thailand Railway was not. *Dr Zhivago* was fiction, but the events of the Russian revolution were well established in the public mind, as was the British Raj in *A Passage to India*.

The legend of the River Kwai was created by the movie.

This is warning for future writers and producers to take care, especially in today's conflicts.

Not to still their creativity but to be consider consequences of the characters they write about.

The last line of *Bridge on the River Kwai* is Dr. Clipton and his words: "Madness, Madness." That has always been taken to mean the war itself is madness. And war is madness.

We should now ask what "madness" mean to the men who were there.

Thanks again to the Muses or the blithe spirit, I found the answer just a week ago, in the Toronto Globe and Mail, and an interview with Dr. Zurab Kekielidze, of the Serbisky Psychiatric Institute in Moscow. He treats Soviet veterans of their Afghan war and has coined the term "Afghan Syndrome."

He says "If a society sees a war as a good thing then that's a form of therapy that helps. Soldiers readjust to society after all the horrors and stresses of battle."<sup>26</sup>

But if a war is unpopular or pointless, then the situation is reversed and returning soldiers are forced to try and find some justification for what they have done..

Kekielidge told Paul Koring of *The Globe and Mail* his Afghan Syndrome could also be called the Vietnam Syndrome. And I would add it could be called the Kwai syndrome.

The Second World War has been called the Good War, and the men who fought it the Greatest Generation. But the fall of Singapore and the subsequent events on the Burma Thailand Railway left most of the former soldiers and POWs feeling their service and sacrifice was pointless. And therefore madness.

Pierre Boulle followed a standard literary device by transferring his experience in Vichy Vietnam to the Kwai. The fault lies not with Pierre Boulle or David Lean and his production team or Alec Guinness and his interpretation of Nicholson.

Take for instance the famous scene of the men whistling as they come into camp. In the DVD commentary David Lean and Norman Spencer came up with using Colonel Bogey as a subtle way of sticking it to the Japanese. But as one former "swab jockey" from the *Houston* told me, "We were too god damned tired to fucking whistle."

The fault lies with a media that naturally prefers victory to defeat. And governments and generals that too often bury their mistakes and miscalculations.

The War Office files show the high command were rightly concerned that the image of the POWs would be changed forever by the movie. But there was no counter publicity, the kind you would see today, former POWs made available to the media; no strategic leaks of secret documents to the

Sunday papers.

The fates have never been kind to most of the men who were on the River Kwai. There are hundreds of stories that show human triumph over adversity and human failing and human frailty. If they had been available in 1956, David Lean might have made a much different masterpiece and still won those seven Oscars.

## Appendix One John Coast's *Railroad of Death*

In the first version of this paper I called John Coast's *Railroad of Death* a novel. When I first read the book in 1960s, when my father lent me his original copy, I thought of it as a novel and continued that belief during my research for *A River Kwai Story*, *The Sonkrai Tribunal*.

However, the characterization of the book as a novel did create controversy on FEPOW mailing lists.

My response to the criticism was:

To call *The Railroad of Death* a novel is not a criticism. It is a very good book but "The Railroad of Death" simply does not doesn't meet the standards of non-fiction for either 1946 or 2008. Coast says in the introduction "the names of all Allied characters have been invented and though I have sometimes rolled a few of them up together and typified them as one one, every single Japanese in this book is called by his right name and is very much a real person."

While some non-fiction books may change the names of one or two characters, for example sources of information who spoke on condition of anonymity or victims of sexual assault, changing the names of all Allied characters makes the book a novel.

In addition, the use of composite characters has always been considered unacceptable in a modern non-fiction work and publishers have withdrawn books with composite characters or re-marketed the book as a novel rather than non-fiction..

On the other hand, it has always been acceptable to write novels that are very close to the truth, using composite characters and changed names. I would simply point to Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's Ark*, which was the basis of the later movie *Schindler's List*.

*Schindler's Ark* like *Railroad of Death*, is to quote the introduction John Coast wrote "This is an almost true book" and calling either a novel does not in any way take away from the work or Coast's achievement.

After that I decided to consult with other writers and editors

Everyone I spoke to agreed that no matter well-meaning Coast's motives may have been in the immediate post-war period in changing the names of the Allied characters, that meant the book did not meet the standard for a non-fiction book, whether academic or popular, the ability of both the reader and future researchers to verify the information in the book.

In comparison, Rohan Rivett's *Behind Bamboo*, written at the same time and under the same conditions circumstances, a diary during captivity and written upon liberation, fully meets the standards for non-fiction. Rivett was an Australian journalist who worked for the Malayan Broadcasting Corp.

No one I consulted either personally or on the Writer-L literary nonfiction writers list could agree what to call the book.

Noting that their response was largely based on my description and not reading the book, the suggestions ranged from "personal account," (Coast calls it "a personal narrative") to adding the movie type disclaimer, "based on a true story." (which Coast sort of does in the introduction I quote above)

One e-mail from an academic friend suggested calling it an "historia" which my contact described as "a combination of inquiry, observation, myth, fact and analysis, presented as either nonfiction or *roman à clef*." Wikipedia defines a *roman à clef*. This way: (French for "novel with a key") is a novel describing real life, behind a façade of fiction.

One poster on Writer-L pointed to Jeff Shaara's *The Rising Tide: A Novel of World War II*, where Shaara writes ". . . The events are real, the history is accurate, the conversations are from

recorded memory. But this is a novel by definition because I take you into the character's minds, using dialog and action to tell a story, as they might have told it themselves."

An e-mail from another contact pointed to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as a famous example of war fact presented in a fictional manner.

*Railroad of Death* doesn't go "into the character's minds," so it is not really a novel.

In the end I opted to just call it a "book." If Coast had used real names and had forgone composite characters, *Railroad of Death* might have been a classic of the history of war, and may have been the book that became the Oscar-winning movie I speculate that David Lean could have directed.

Unfortunately, Coast's decision, as I said no matter how well meaning, left *Railroad of Death* in a sort of literary limbo.

So Pierre Boulle's novel-- and it is clearly a novel-- was the book that captured the public's imagination.

## **Appendix Two A. G. Close**

After the initial posting of the paper, Jean Roberts, a prominent member of the UK FEPOW community sent this note (reproduced with her permission) I sent Roberts a copy of Close's letter to Roberts and in her opinion, the handwriting in the MOD letter and Close's diary is identical.

"Robin states that one of those consulted over the script was Major A.G. Close. Close states that he worked on the railway for 3 1/2 years, however, this is patently untrue. I have a copy of Close's diary which clearly shows him to have been in Saigon until late 1944. He went from there to the Officers camp in Kanchanaburi and at no time was he ever involved in the building of the railway.

Close was a major with the HKSR and was attached to 3HAA and sent to Saigon to act as interpreter because of his Japanese language skills. I understand that his behaviour did not endear him to the POWs there and was closer to Nicholson's character than was wished for.

Close's diary is available for view at the Imperial War Museum."

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