

People wanting to honour our World War II dead still make the pilgrimage to the bridge on the River Kwai. But what they're shown there is far from being the whole truth. **Mark Dapin** travels the remembrance trail and tries to sort fact from fiction.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

IN THE WORLD WAR II MUSEUM IN THE TOWN OF KANCHANABURI, Thailand, on the banks of a river that has become known as the Kwai, lies a horrific diorama of an unknown war crime: the massacre of Australian and British POWs, herded by their Japanese captors onto the bridge over the river as it was about to be bombed by Allied planes. Plaster figures of naked men lie bleeding and tormented in brackish water, as friendly bombs rain upon their skeletal bodies. It is as if the dead have been dragged to hell to be murdered again.

Captions on the exhibit describe the tragedy: "They waved their hands stopping the said aircraft from going to bomb the bridge ... in vain ... The bridge got broken into pieces in a twinkling of the eye, together with the lives of those hundreds of prisoners of war who suddenly rank [sic] and disappeared in the torrent ... The whole of the river turned red with the blood gushing forth from the bodies of those prisoners of war ... The water of the River Kwai turned non-potable for several days because of the stench of the corpses."

No Japanese soldier was ever brought to justice for the killings on the Kwai. This is because they never happened.

Elsewhere in the museum are the remains of "104 of the prisoners who worked on [sic] labourers in World War Two", including two reconstructed skeletons. Their bones used to be dressed in Allied uniforms, until protests forced their removal because the bodies did not belong to Allied POWs. They were of Asian "coolies" – probably Tamils – who died in much greater numbers than the POWs, but never wore a uniform except in death. Their bodies were found in a mass grave near Kanchanaburi Town Hall in 1990 and their bones were purchased by the World War II Museum's Thai owners.

The museum is like a pardoner's reliquary, stuffed with fraudulent bones. It's an affront to the intelligence, an insult to the fallen, and no help at all to the pilgrims who come to Kanchanaburi to honour the Allied war dead.

North-west of the river, beside the graveyard where the remains of 7000

Allied POWs are buried, is the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, whose Australian founder, Rod Beattie, manages the cemetery for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. An engineer by profession, he is acknowledged by both academics and ex-POWs as one of the world's foremost experts on the railway. He says the World War II Museum is "just awful ... absolute rubbish".

In fact, most of what people think they know about the Burma Railway and the bridge on the River Kwai is mistaken. The bridge at Kanchanaburi actually straddled the River Mae Klong, not the Kwai. The stretch of the Mae Klong that runs through Kanchanaburi was arbitrarily made a part of the Kwai in the 1960s, to please tourists who came to the area looking for the site of the 1957 David Lean movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which was filmed in Sri Lanka.

The movie, in which British officer Colonel Nicholson, played by Alec Guinness, collaborates with his Japanese captors to build a better bridge, was based on a novel by the French author Pierre Boulle. During the war, Boulle was a French secret agent captured and imprisoned in Indo-China. His memoir of the period is entitled *My Own River Kwai*. Boulle's own River Kwai was actually the River Nam-na, down which he tried to raft to Hanoi, until he was apprehended by Vichy loyalists in Lai Chau.

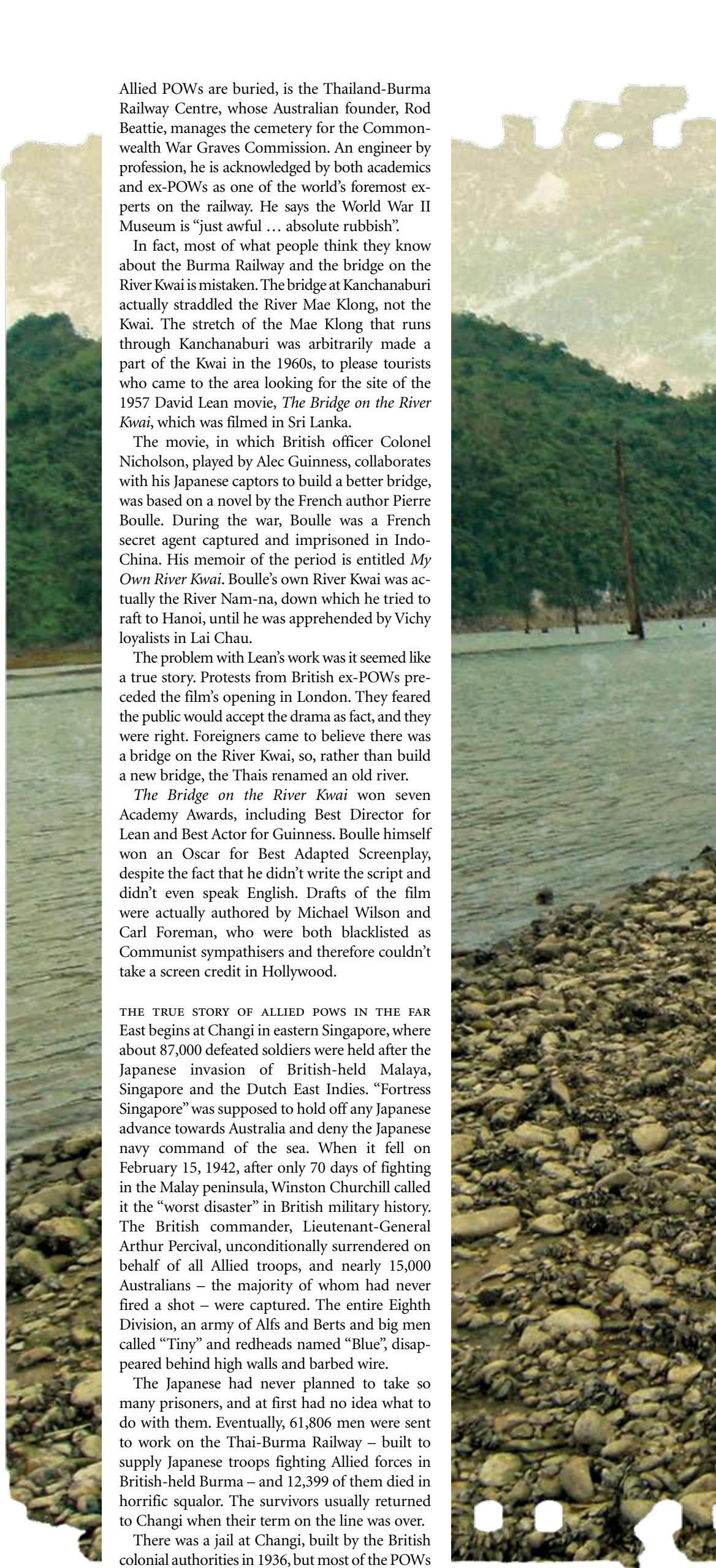
The problem with Lean's work was it seemed like a true story. Protests from British ex-POWs preceded the film's opening in London. They feared the public would accept the drama as fact, and they were right. Foreigners came to believe there was a bridge on the River Kwai, so, rather than build a new bridge, the Thais renamed an old river.

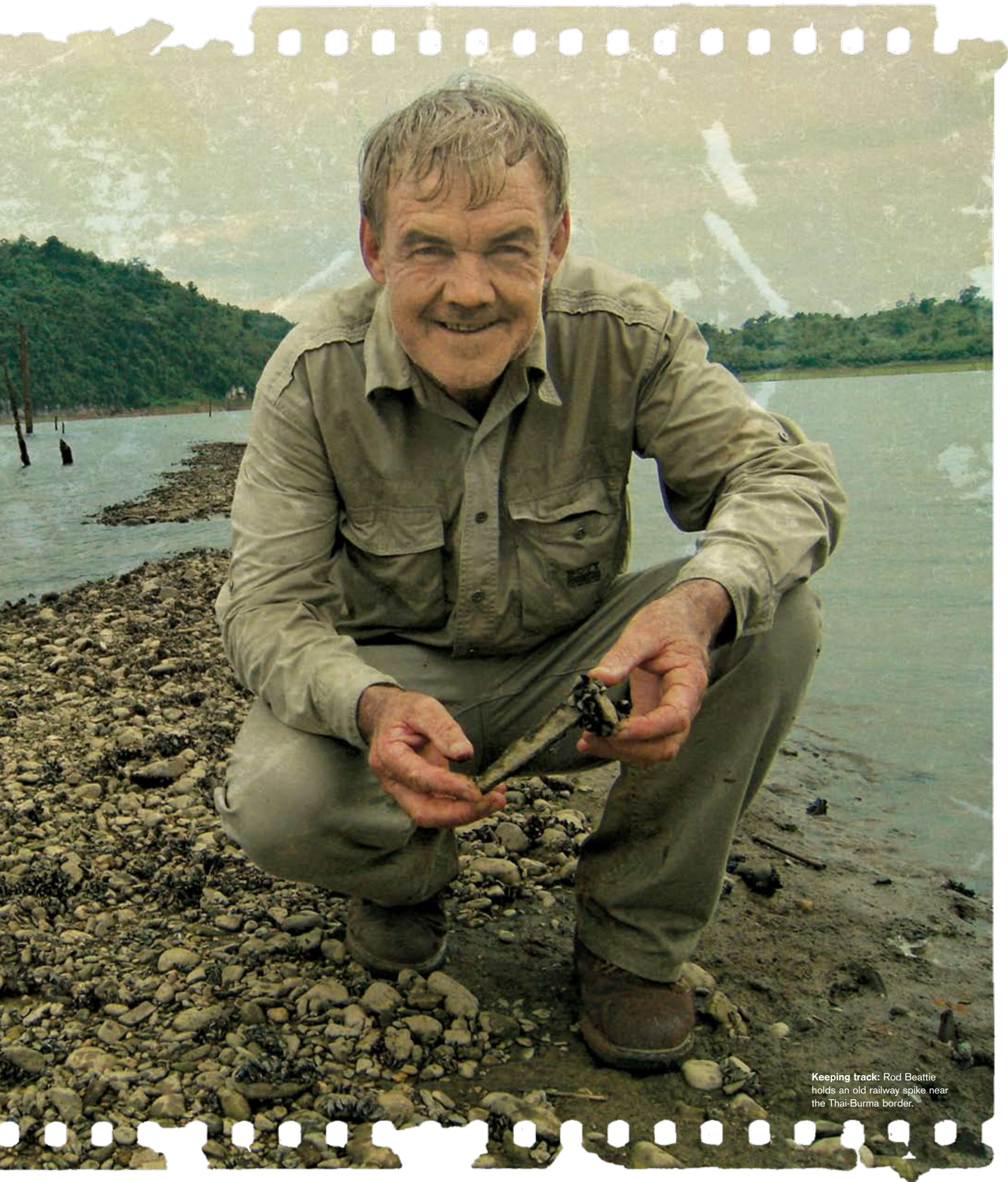
The Bridge on the River Kwai won seven Academy Awards, including Best Director for Lean and Best Actor for Guinness. Boulle himself won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay, despite the fact that he didn't write the script and didn't even speak English. Drafts of the film were actually authored by Michael Wilson and Carl Foreman, who were both blacklisted as Communist sympathisers and therefore couldn't take a screen credit in Hollywood.

THE TRUE STORY OF ALLIED POWS IN THE FAR East begins at Changi in eastern Singapore, where about 87,000 defeated soldiers were held after the Japanese invasion of British-held Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. "Fortress Singapore" was supposed to hold off any Japanese advance towards Australia and deny the Japanese navy command of the sea. When it fell on February 15, 1942, after only 70 days of fighting in the Malay peninsula, Winston Churchill called it the "worst disaster" in British military history. The British commander, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, unconditionally surrendered on behalf of all Allied troops, and nearly 15,000 Australians – the majority of whom had never fired a shot – were captured. The entire Eighth Division, an army of Alfs and Berts and big men called "Tiny" and redheads named "Blue", disappeared behind high walls and barbed wire.

The Japanese had never planned to take so many prisoners, and at first had no idea what to do with them. Eventually, 61,806 men were sent to work on the Thai-Burma Railway – built to supply Japanese troops fighting Allied forces in British-held Burma – and 12,399 of them died in horrific squalor. The survivors usually returned to Changi when their term on the line was over.

There was a jail at Changi, built by the British colonial authorities in 1936, but most of the POWs





Keeping track: Rod Beattie holds an old railway spike near the Thai-Burma border.

were kept outside the prison itself in camps nearby. Australian prisoners were largely confined to the former British barracks at Selarang.

Changi has entered the public imagination as a “hell camp”, where men were regularly tortured, beaten and starved to death by brutal Japanese guards. But the idea of Changi as a place of horror is “quite odd in a way”, says Associate Professor Kevin Blackburn of the University of Singapore, a specialist in POW history. In fact, only 850 men (less than one in a hundred of those captured) died in Changi, the running of which was left largely to the Allies. It would’ve been possible to spend months in Changi and not see a Japanese face.

Blackburn thinks the camp’s reputation comes in part from photos of ruined, skeletal bodies taken in Changi after the war. “This type of visual image was enshrined in the national consciousness of Australians in particular,” he says. “There were, of course, tropical diseases and unfortunate experiences in Changi, especially towards the end when the food became scarce.” But, he adds, many of the POWs photographed in Changi were actually mutilated or starved on the Burma Railway.

Many of these pictures are exhibited at the fine Changi Chapel & Museum in Singapore, where the government has shrewdly utilised the Allies’ story of capitulation and captivity to support the argument that outsiders failed to protect Singapore, so now the Singaporeans – and their largely conscript army – have to take responsibility for their own security. “In Singapore, there is commodification or commercialisation [of the POW experience] and it’s co-ordinated by the Singapore Tourism Board,” says Blackburn. “In Thailand, it’s not co-ordinated by the government at all. It’s local entrepreneurs and businessmen, even religious organisations.”



“Families believe these men were up here for 3½ years, building a railway. No, they weren’t. There were men here for five or six months.”

Off the rails: POWs on the Burma Railway in 1943.

Whereas the Japanese occupation of Singapore is studied in all Singaporean schools, the Japanese domination of Thailand “doesn’t really feature in their national history at all”, says Blackburn. The Burma Railway is “seen as something that’s just for tourists”. This has led to the grotesque distortion of the POW story in Kanchanaburi’s World War II Museum, the farcical trade in nearby markets, where stalls sell stills from Lean’s film passed off as photos from the prison camp, and a road sign pointing to the war cemetery that promises a “feel good journey”.

IN 1994, ROD BEATTIE WAS WORKING AS A GEM dealer in Kanchanaburi when he heard somebody was needed to clear the pathway to Hellfire Pass – a notoriously gruelling section of the railway where, according to the official Australian war history, 69 Australian POWs were

beaten to death by their guards – in advance of a visit by then PM Paul Keating. The maintenance of Hellfire Pass was nominally handled by the Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce but it had “just about fallen back into jungle”, says Beattie. As a private individual, he organised workers to clean up the trail. Spurred by a mix of expat’s ennui, an amateur archaeologist’s enthusiasm and a technical interest in railways, Beattie took to looking after the path himself, and eventually became the official project manager of Hellfire Pass memorial work, paid by the Australian government.

He also independently set out to find the remains of dozens of jungle work camps that stretched from Kanchanaburi to the Burmese border, where the Thai side of the railway met a POW-built line from Thanbyuzayat, south-east of Rangoon. He cleared and explored in his own time, at his own expense, fascinated by both the horror of the POW experience and the engineering achievement of the railway.

Before the war, the idea of a Thai-Burma railway had been canvassed by British, German and Japanese engineers, who had all discounted it because – even with modern tools – the jungle, the monsoons, tropical disease and the almost impassable terrain would make the job impossible without vast expense and huge loss of life.

But tens of thousands of diseased, abused and starved POWs, and hundreds of thousands of coolies, began the project in June 1942 and finished it in 16 months, largely with implements that wouldn’t have looked modern in the Iron Age.

And they died. They died of cholera, of beriberi, of malaria, of malnutrition and dysentery. What did not kill them, by and large, was the sadism of individual guards. According to Beattie, it

is a widely held fallacy – first quoted in Lionel Wigmore’s official history, *The Japanese Thrust*, and endlessly cited since – that 69 men were beaten to death at Hellfire Pass.

“The true figure,” says Beattie, “is one.”

At this point, Beattie sounds a little like the notorious American engineer-cum-“historian” Frederick Leuchter, who took it upon himself to test the walls of the concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau for cyanide and, when he didn’t find much, declared that there had been no gas chambers at the site. But Beattie, unlike Leuchter, is respected by researchers and revered by veterans. “He has definitely got insights that are new, that are unique and highly original, and are a contribution to the area,” says Blackburn. His archaeology of the camps is widely admired. “A lot of those places would’ve been very hard to locate,” says Blackburn.

An ex-POW, Bill Haskell, of the Burma Thailand Railway Memorial Association, which conducts tours of the railway sites, says, “He is an authority on the railway to the nth degree. His Thailand-Burma Railway Centre is magnificent. Rod is the last word on the railway. He does not publish or say anything unless he is absolutely sure. His research is absolutely spot on.”

WHEN BEATTIE BEGAN TAKING CARE OF the small area around Hellfire Pass, “I started to realise things weren’t quite the way they were written about”, he says. He had no emotional bond to the story – his own father had spent World War II fighting in North Africa and Papua New Guinea – but he had been an army reservist, brought up on the Anzac legend, and he felt a connection with the ex-POWs.

“If you meet enough POWs, a lot of them will quite happily admit – once they know that you know a bit – that they were never beaten by the Japanese.”

“I’d go out there and spend an hour brushing the leaves off the pathway,” he says, “and what do I do with the rest of the day? I go and explore. So I set out digging up more and more bits of the railway. The more I explored, the more interesting it became, and the more significant I realised the whole thing was. Then I started getting a few books about it, and reading things that didn’t match what I found on the ground.”

Kanchanaburi gets a lot of tourists, most of them on short package excursions from Bangkok. They might get 10 minutes in the cemetery, a boat ride under the bridge and a baffling tour of the World War II Museum (or the sincere but clumsy JEATH Museum) before they are whisked off on an elephant trek or a visit to a tiger temple.

Some come to see the graves of their fathers or grandfathers, to find out a little about how they lived and died, but local guides tend to know little and care less. Beattie says the “most extreme case” of insensitivity he has seen involved an Australian man who was about 60 years old, and looking for his father’s tombstone. Beattie, as war cemetery manager, directed him to the plot, when the guide said, “We’ve got to leave!”

“It was the first and perhaps the only time he would stand in front of his father’s grave, and as he got to the grave, the guide grabbed him by the shirt and started to drag him away,” says Beattie. “He had less than two minutes. I walked with them as far as the gate, trying to give this guy a bit of information. ‘What do you know about your father?’ ‘Nothing at all. ‘I know exactly what happened to him and where it happened.’” Because Beattie – off his own bat and out of his own pocket – has consolidated death records, hospital records and military records held throughout the world, and

discovered exactly how and where every single Australian casualty of the railway died.

Most families of POWs have only a hazy idea of their relative’s experiences during the war, and their impressions are usually wrong. Many men believed to be murdered by the Japanese on the Burma Railway never even worked on the railway, says Beattie. They were POWs elsewhere in Asia. Besides, he says, “There were very few men beaten to death on the entire railway project.”

At the end of the war, a combined Australian, Dutch and British war graves party came to Thailand and took all the death records that had been compiled by soldiers and, says Beattie, “The Australian government made a decision in 1945 that the families would never be told what their relatives had died of.” In some archives, the death records have actually been stripped out. “A lot of families believe these men were up here for 3½ years, building a railway,” he says. “No, they weren’t. There were men here for five or six months ... and they were returned to Singapore as soon as they were fit to face the train trip.”

Beattie is an intense, compact man, energetic in the tropical heat. He has spoken to hundreds of veterans, travelled the world examining archives, entered material from countless handwritten documents into his own database, to try to reconstruct the death records – and, to an extent, the life stories – of every man on the railway. There remain a few gaps in his knowledge, but every Australian death is accounted for in his files. “The vast majority died of disease,” he says. Dysentery was the biggest killer. Most of the men could have been cured with a handful of pills and cleaner living conditions, but the Japanese refused to help them.

They died from the brutality of neglect.

“Russell Braddon’s book [the million-selling post-war memoir *The Naked Island*] is one of the classics,” says Beattie, “but if you believe Braddon, every POW got flogged every day of his existence. No, they didn’t. If you meet enough of them, a lot of them will quite happily admit – once they know that you know a bit – that they were never beaten by the Japanese during their captivity, apart from a bit of face slapping. Or if they were, it was because they did something wrong and were caught. The vast majority of the prisoners were not beaten. The vast majority of the Japanese did not carry out beatings.”

Beattie is using a tight definition of beating, and a generous characterisation of face slapping, but Blackburn supports his conclusions. “Very few were bashed to death,” Blackburn agrees, “but the Japanese were extremely negligent in looking after these men, and making men work who were unfit to work and eventually killing them through that process. When the Japanese talk about this and whitewash it, they say, ‘The men all died of tropical diseases.’ I think, ‘What? You couldn’t do anything about the tropical diseases?’”

Beattie is particularly dismissive about the myth of the bridge, which gives Kanchanaburi its tourist cachet. There were two river bridges in the town, one made of timber, the other of steel. Some 3500 POWs built them over eight months, and only nine men died, due largely to the intelligent and careful leadership of the commander of the Allied prisoners, Philip Toosey, who came to consider his reputation unfairly damaged by Lean’s film and a public identification of his own character with the fictional Nicholson.

Both bridges were destroyed by Allied bombing, although there were no prisoners standing



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Stretching the truth:

(above) Alec Guinness and Sessue Hayakawa in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

on either. (Some POWs were accidentally killed, however, when Allied bombs hit their camp.)

That which is now the bridge over that which is now the River Kwai is, like so much else, a post-war reconstruction, repaired by the Japanese with rectangular spans where the original bridge was curved. “It looks nothing like it,” says Beattie.

WHEN BEATTIE BEGAN HIS WORK, THERE were many more ex-POWs still around. Fifteen years ago, 20 men might turn up in Kanchanaburi on Anzac Day alone. Now, with so many of the survivors gone, he might see that number in a year. The story of the Burma Railway in Thailand is more British than Australian. The great sweep of line on the Thai side, from Kanchanaburi to Tarsao, was largely built by British prisoners. Kanchanaburi caters for

British tourists in a miserable strip of bars such as Ting Tong, which is decorated with murals of the Kray twins. The Cheers Bar offers “free pool”, whereas the Candy Bar next door, either by accident or design, promises “free pull”. A makeshift food stall sells chip butties and kebabs. Beattie’s Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, privately funded and run as a business, is one of the few foreign businesses with any apparent integrity, and the majority of its visitors are Dutch.

“The old myth is that the Australians survived far better than anyone else,” says Beattie. “‘The Poms, oh, their officers were hopeless, they were dirty, and they died like flies. And the Dutch, they were just so despicable’ ... The reality is the British and Australian death rates are almost identical, and the Dutch survived far better than either.

“The British and Australians died of cholera in large numbers. On the entire railway, we had 17 Dutch die of cholera. Tropical ulcers took out huge numbers of Australian and British, and almost no Dutch. Why? Because they knew of local conditions, were experienced in tropical medicine. Many of the Dutch troops on the railway were of mixed blood, they were Eurasian soldiers who’d lived their entire lives in the Far East. They knew how to eat, survive, behave and treat their people. The British didn’t and the Australians didn’t.”

If the tremendous death rate of one party – the sick men of F Force, who were sent from Changi in the belief that life on the railway would be relaxing and therapeutic – is taken out of the calculation, then for the rest of the railway, the British survival rate was far better than the Australian.

Survival on the railway often depended on when you arrived, where you were, and who was in charge of your camp. “You had good Australian

officers and bad Australian officers, good and bad Brits,” says Beattie. All the Australian POW autobiographies talk about the importance of mate-ship to the diggers’ survival. “But the British had mates,” says Beattie, “the Dutch had mates, and they all wrote about their mates. You had to have a mate to survive, regardless of nationality.”

HELLFIRE PASS, WHERE THERE IS NOW a memorial, museum and “heritage trail”, lies 80 kilometres north-west of Kanchanaburi. Beattie drives up the highway, past a sign pointing to the “Dead Railway”. He stops at the Wampo Viaduct, on a stretch of the railway still in operation, and walks along the track cut by POWs into the furrowed cheeks of ancient limestone cliffs. The view over the river – which, at this point, really is the Kwai – is fields and forest in every shade of green. During the war, there was a POW camp on both banks. Now there is a resort where the British Arrow Hill camp once stood.

Further up the line is the site of the camp at Tonchan South. There is a farm here, and a scout camp further into the bush. Nothing much remains of the POW camp. Some 140 POWs died in Tonchan South, mainly from cholera. Beattie points to the spot where the cookhouse stood, and the officers’ quarters. He has taken about a dozen people here, the relatives of prisoners. He can lay out the camp for them in their minds, and make sense of the stories they read in books.

Most of the railway was taken up at the end of the war. The sleepers were removed, the rest abandoned. Much of the line is just a ridge under turf, and the stations past Nam Tok, where the line now ends, are barely memories.

Among the people Beattie has taken to Tonchan

“Tropical ulcers took out huge numbers of Australian and British, and almost no Dutch. Why? Because they knew of local conditions, were experienced in tropical medicine.”

South is Andrew Snow from Sydney. Snow’s father was a POW who worked on the Thailand side of the railway. He survived the war but died when Snow was five. Snow came to Asia searching for any mention or trace of his father. Thanks to Beattie, he says, “I’ve been able to stand on the ground where my father’s camp was, to walk along the railway bed that he would’ve helped build ... to stand on the ground he would’ve been on in a number of places he would’ve been in Thailand.

“Yesterday, I was riding my motorbike just to the west of here, and into my head popped this idea that my father probably would’ve seen those mountains in the distance, and seen that over there, and felt the weather at this time of year, and it was very comforting for me to know that.”

Snow left his home in Australia to join Beattie and his general manager, Terry Manttan, working at the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre. Manttan also originally came to Kanchanaburi to follow the ghost of his father, Able Seaman Jack Manttan, who was with the HMAS Perth when she was sunk off Java in 1942, and captured by the Japanese. “He worked on the railway, survived, went home when he was 22 and died when he was 25,” says Manttan, “from the after-effects of the illnesses he had while he was here. I was six months old.”

The children of POWs, says Manttan, “have a need that’s difficult to define. Most people either never knew their real fathers, because they were born just prior to their fathers going to war and they didn’t come home, or they did come home and they came home changed. Some of these men had very troubled existences. Where they survived, they [had] ... nightmares, illness-related problems or personality-related problems. So many people have a need to get closer to what happened, what

changed them, what made them the way they were, what created the person they knew.”

Beattie took Manttan upcountry. “I now know almost everywhere he went,” says Manttan. “I’m very comfortable now with the knowledge of what he did when he was here. Not everything. You can’t know everything. But generally: when he went into captivity and where, how he got transported and where ... That’s enough.”

IT’S 10AM IN KANCHANABURI, THE HOUR WHEN the tour buses arrive at the war cemetery. Their guides are conspicuously bored, pacing, texting, waiting impatiently to move on to the next attraction and a 20 per cent kickback from the local operator. An old man, still military stiff, lays a bouquet of red, yellow and white petals on the grave of a Dutch brigadier who died in 1943.

“It’s sometimes hard,” says Snow, “if you look out into the cemetery and see somebody who’s left some flowers at a grave, and you say, ‘I wonder if that person has ever come in here and asked a question. We might know something that could help them. They might not know that we know that information.’ Sometimes it’s a bit sad. If only they’d asked, we might’ve been able to help them.” **GW**

How to get there Qantas flies daily between Australia and Bangkok; fares start at \$1293 from Sydney and \$1315 from Melbourne. There are twice-daily trains to Kanchanaburi from Bangkok’s Thonburi station, and a special service from Hualamphong station at weekends and holidays. Buses are more regular.

If you want to bypass Bangkok, take a limo from the airport. One-way fares start from 2400 baht (\$80, www.bangkokairport-transfer.com).

Mark Dapin stayed at Felix River Kwai Resort (www.felixriverkwai.co.th), Kanchanaburi’s best hotel but a bit out of town. Rooms start at 2500 baht (\$84) a night.