

I found this among Mum's papers after she died. It had been typed on a typewriter, and was too faded to scan, so I've re-typed it. I've kept exactly to the wording, spelling, punctuation, etc of the original. I don't know the date the talk was given, but I'm guessing the 1950s in Wavertree, because that's when Mum and Dad were regular members of a church (St. Mary's) and Dad's reference to me sounds as if I was a child. But it ends with giving Dad's dates, so it must have been typed after he died in 1990.

I've put the original typescript in our loft with other things of Mum's kept for sentiment.

Alan Fryer 5th April 2016

This is a talk given by my husband to our church. (Peggy Fryer)

Perhaps some of you will have seen the film "The Bridge on the River Kwai" and you will know that it is about the prisoners of war in Thailand. Tonight I hope to give you some slight idea of what life really was like for these POWs.

Singapore capitulated in February 1942. Till August 1945 I lived as a prisoner of war in conditions more or less similar to those shown in this film, sometimes better but more often a lot worse. Three and a half years working for the Japanese in Singapore, Thailand and Japan. The first eight months I spent in Changi camp, Singapore, and was in retrospect something akin to the "phoney war" period in Europe in 1940. The Japs had not yet got over their astonishment in capturing many thousands of Allied troops and did not know what to do with them, whilst we basked in the delusion that we would be treated as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. Food was short and very poor, mainly rice with which our cooks experimented to make something at least palatable. But work was easy and the British staffs would organise such amenities as university and study courses, theatre shows, newspapers and everything possible to alleviate boredom. But this period ended abruptly towards the middle of the year with rumours of a railway to be built in Thailand to connect Bangkok in Thailand with Rangoon in Burma.

Surely enough, in October 1942 I found myself packed with thirty other men into a steel cattle-truck bound for the Land of the Free, Thailand. Five days later we arrived, much the worse for our trip, and had our first taste of what the second period would be like. Bat-Hong was a small town and the beginning of the railway as far as we were concerned, but we saw little of it as we marched to a camp a few miles outside. This camp was typical of many camps that were to become so familiar to me for the rest of the time in Thailand. Our huts were made of bamboo thatched with atap palm, which seldom successfully kept out the rain, and with asap sides. Inside the hut, running alongside each wall, was a platform made of bamboo slates. This was our bed; eighteen inches of room per man, on which he laid his only blanket or sack. During the monsoons the huts were often flooded or at best a sea of mud. The cookhouse was usually a covered area near the river, cooking being done in large iron vessels called kwalis, similar in shape to an inverted umbrella. Bamboo provided our fuel as it burned with the correct heat necessary for the cooking of rice, which was, of course, our main and sometimes our only food. The river provided us with drinking and washing water. After a few days we began our walk up-country to our first task, the beginning of what was to be eighteen months of soul-destroying work, disease, shortage of food and death, and which ended for me on the Burma border, so romantically called "The Three Pagoda Pass".

The railroad was planned to follow the River Kwai-Noi through paddy fields, bamboo jungle, thick tropical forest and a mountain range. This route was surveyed years before by British engineers and

declared impossible, but the Japs had something that was not available to the British; unlimited coolie labour, provided by prisoners of war, Tamils, Malays and Chinese, to be used ruthlessly for their purpose. The labour force was organised into work battalions, each with responsibility for a certain length of line, to clear the jungle, build the embankment and bridges, blast out cuttings, and generally prepare the way for the line-laying party behind us. As each section was finished we marched ten, twenty or perhaps fifty miles up country to start a new section, and so on until the Burma border was reached and we linked with the Burma end built by troops from Rangoon. The work was supervised by Japanese army and civilian engineers, whilst our guards were specially trained Koreans. Our own part of this work was varied; digging soil and carrying it in baskets for the embankments, blasting the rocks and hillsides, tree-felling, bridge-building and a thousand and one other jobs. My son's favourite story is of the time when I was an elephant boy. This was a cushy job away from the eyes of the Japs and my job was to follow a large elephant deep into the jungle to contact a tree-felling party. I had then to attach a selected tree-trunk to the elephant's chain and simply guide it down the narrow jungle path to the bridge site. The elephant was far more experienced in this work than me and as he worked to his own union hours, which were about an hour shorter than the Japs', I was quite happy. Unfortunately, I developed trench feet and was moved to a camp job instead.

It was during this time in camp that a most extraordinary thing happened. One morning we became aware of a long squealing coming from across the river and were astonished to see hundreds of wild pig swimming directly across to the camp. This was manna from heaven and we grabbed pickaxes, shovels, anything, whilst the Japs wildly fired their rifles and made the place generally unsafe. We ate pork stew for every meal for two days until the doctor called a halt.

After this camp we moved up country again and this was to be our worst period. The deadline for the completion of the railway was near and the Japs declared a 'speedo'; no rest days, everyone, including the sick, to work, and to make matters worse the monsoons came upon us. Everything was done in torrential rain; trudging to work in the cold rain of early morning, covered all day long in wet clay, eating cold, wet, soggy rice on the job, and at the end of the day back to camp to a dinner of boiled rice flavoured with dried fish – one fish per hundred men – then to attempt to dry our ragged clothing ready for the next day. Inevitably, disease, which was always with us, flared up to a climax, with dysentery, beri-beri, terrible malaria, diphtheria, tropical ulcers and eventually cholera. In our camp alone, of eight hundred men one hundred and eighty died in two months. Every day a small procession wended its way to the cemetery carrying a Union Jack-draped body and the valley would resound to the bugle calls of the Last Post.

During part of this time I was ill with malaria. I was given the job of cremating cholera victims; six, seven or ten each day. I will never forget that valley; the oppressive morning (?), the screaming of the monkeys, the cremation fires, the Last Post.

Eventually the speedo was finished. The line joining Thailand

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old. A few letters reached me after the war ended. My mother received a postcard from me about three years after I was posted missing, and thereafter from time to time. Red Cross parcels? In Singapore we received a shipment of South African Red Cross food, shoes and hats. During eighteen months in Thailand I received one third of one box of American Red Cross food and two tins of fish bought with money given by the Swedish Red Cross. In Japan I received the equivalent of three American Red Cross parcels. After the war many thousands of Red Cross parcels were

found in Japanese warehouses and the food, clothing and medical supplies, which might have saved many lives, were therefore left to rot by the Japanese or were used for themselves.

Finally, a little story of Manila Harbour on my way home. Gracie Fields had flown out to entertain the troops and after the show she was surrounded by the usual American high-ranking officers, to the exclusion of our own troops. Suddenly a Lancashire voice called out, and Gracie must have recognised the dialect, because she immediately broke away from the American army officers and shouted in the same dialect, "Make way for a boy from the home town!" Within seconds she was hugging the Lancashire chap and obviously tears were not far from her eyes.

Well, my time is up and I hope that what I have said will give you some idea of the background to "The Bridge on the River Kwai", without the glamour and heroics of Jack Hawkins and company. To live crudely and from day to day, with only faith to keep you going; to realise that however badly one felt there was always someone worse off than yourself. So we lived.

Tom Fryer 1915 – 1990.