

Worksheet 1:

Bridge Over the River Kwai Doctors: The Unsung Heroes of the POW Camps

Introduction

The purpose of this worksheet is to provide first-hand historical resources that learners can use and reference to begin their own research into the experiences of POWs travelling between Singapore and Thailand in 1942.

Glossary

October. This is when most of Thailand's annual rainfall is accumulated and flooding can ravage the country. ^{ear}ear in Thailand when it rains from July to

Geneva Convention - The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols is a body of Public International Law, also known as the Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflicts, whose purpose is to provide minimum protections, standards of humane treatment, and fundamental guarantees of respect to individuals who become victims of armed conflicts.

Changi – Changi was one of the more notorious Japanese prisoner of war camps located in Singapore. Changi was used to imprison Malayan civilians and Allied soldiers during the Second World War.

Working Party – (in this context) refers to men being put to work to carry out manual labour.

Extract 1: Background

Empire Club of Canada Speech entitled 'Some Experiences as a Medical Officer with the Royal Army Medical Corps', written and spoken by Canadian Dr. Jacob Markowitz on 17 Oct 1946. To find out more about Dr. Jacob Markowitz see our PowerPoint 'Bridge over the River Kwai Doctors: The Unsung Heroes of the POW Camps'.

In this lively and engaging speech given just over a year after the war ended, Dr. Markowitz talks about his journey from Singapore to the POW camps in Thailand (1942), his time at the Death Railway and the treatment he and his fellow POWs experienced at the hands of the Imperial Japanese guards:

Extract 1:

'Our destination was about twelve hundred miles from Singapore. We were bundled into tiny box cars, which were somewhat smaller than the French cars for forty men or eight horses. We could not lie down, we got tired of standing up, and this nightmare journey lasted for five days and four nights.

We arrived at our destination bruised physically and numb mentally. We arrived into a flooded country at the height of the Monsoon season, with no shelter. We were drenched by rain during the night, we were scorched by the sun in the daytime. And this was our new home. This was the improvement that had been promised us.

We were told that it was our duty to build a railway from Bangkok to Rangoon. It was of course in defiance of the Geneva Convention, but our captors had never heard of this. It was an impossible, a mad undertaking, one that had been refused by a British construction company as an impossible venture years ago. The soldiers developed malaria and dysentery by the thousand, and it soon appeared that there would be no soldiers left. In the meantime coolies from Malaya had been seduced up country by the promise of good wages. Bad as we thought was our neglect, theirs was even more pitiable. When the railway was finally constructed-for the Japanese, like ourselves, are a determined race-we computed that for every rail laid a British Tommy gave his life, and for every wooden tie, or sleeper as the English call it, a coolie died. When the Medical Officers protested, they were' of course smacked about vigorously and were told that if a British soldier broke one stone before he died, it would be in the service of the emperor; and it would be counted to him as virtue.

It became evident that our job as Medical Officers was to patch up these broken wrecks so that they could do their work more efficiently in the construction of this railway. We quickly learned that a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese becomes a Japanese national, subject to Japanese military and civil law. He is expected to do his duty by the Emperor and any dereliction in this is most reprehensible. If he attempts, to escape he is regarded as a deserter and, like a Japanese, is shot.'

Link to Dr. Markowitz's full Empire Club of Canada speech online:

<http://speeches.empireclub.org/60822/data?n=14>

Extract 2: Background



This photo captures the moment the Allies surrender to the Japanese Imperial Army in Singapore, on 15 February 1942. (IWM HU 2781). Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival (far right) and his party are on their way to hand over the British flag to the Japanese army.

Our second extract is taken from a document called 'Report on Condition of POWs, May-December 1943', written by Major Cyril Wild when he was a prisoner of war of the Japanese. Major Cyril Wild (pictured above, farthest left) was a British Army officer whose fluent command of the Japanese language led to him being a significant figure in the history of Singapore during the Second World War.

On 15th February 1942, Major Wild walked beside Lt-General Percival, carrying the white flag when Singapore surrendered to the Japanese and was later the official British interpreter when the Crown Colony of Singapore was officially handed over to General Yamashita.

Wild, along with thousands of other British servicemen, had been a prisoner of war, during which time they were subjected to brutal mistreatment by the Japanese soldiers. Whilst in captivity Wild used his Japanese language skills to great effect, frequently interceding on behalf of his fellow POWs, indeed so tireless were his efforts that the Japanese referred to him, *nemuranai se no takai otoko*, 'the tall man who never slept'. But the horrors he had witnessed made Wild determined to bring his former captives to justice when the war

was over, and the accounts, like the one below, were secretly compiled and kept hidden from the Japanese by Wild and his fellow prisoners.

Extract 2:

"Early in April orders were issued to prepare 7000 Prisoners of War for a move by train. The order stated that:

- The reason for the move was that the food situation in Singapore was difficult and it would be far better in the new place
- This was NOT a working party.
- As there were not 7000 fit men in Changi, 30% of the party were to be unfit men, unfit to march or work. The unfit would have a better chance of recovery with good food and in a pleasant hilly place with facilities for recreation.
- There would be no marching except for short distances from train to a nearby camp, and transport would be provided for baggage and men unfit to march.
- Bands were to be taken.
- All tools and cooking gear and an engine and gear for electric light were to be taken.
- Gramophones, blankets and clothing and mosquito nets would be issued at the new camp.
- A good canteen would be available in each camp after three weeks. Canteen supplies for the first three weeks were to be bought with the prisoners & money before they left Changi.
- The party would include a medical party of about 350 with equipment for a central hospital of 400 patients, and medical supplies for three months.

- As each trainload of 600 arrived at Bampong, they were informed, to their astonishment, that a march of several days had to be carried out by all men including 30% unfit. All kit that officers and men could not carry was to be dumped at Bampong. This amounted to about 15 railway trucks of stores and baggage.
- The march, in fact, was one of 300 kilometres in 15 stages and lasted for two and a half weeks. Marching at nights along a rough jungle track (except for the first two stages) and the fact that all torches of Prisoners of War had been taken at Bampong, control of Prisoner of War officers and N.C.Os was difficult or impossible.

After the first stage, the unfit men became increasingly ill and were a heavy handicap to the other men, who were at first fairly fit, but they rapidly became ill and exhausted as they helped and even carried the increasing number of men who were unable to walk unaided.

Conditions at the staging camps were:-

- At no stage was overhead cover provided, except for tents (for 100 men) at one camp. Weather was variable and the rainy season started while the march was in progress.
- Food supplies were generally very poor and, in many camps, consisted of rice only.
- Water was very short in many camps and at Kamburi drinking water had to be bought by prisoners at a privately-owned well. Col. Harris protested, but the matter was not put right. No proper arrangements existed for retaining sick at these camps and the men who were absolutely unfit to march owing to disease and weakness were beaten and driven from camp to camp.
- Officers, including Medical Officers, who begged and prayed for sick men to be left behind were themselves beaten at many camps
- In one particular case the Japanese Medical Office (Lt.) ordered the Japanese corporal in charge of Tarso camp to leave 36 men behind

as they were too ill to be moved. The corporal refused to obey this order, although it was repeated in writing, and a British Officer (Major) interpreter and an Australian doctor (Major) were severely beaten when they protested. A bone in the doctor's hand was broken.

- Of these sick men who were compelled to march, nearly all have since died, including an Australian Chaplain who died at the next camp. (The Jap Medical Officer had particularly said that the Chaplain should not march as he was an elderly man with a weak heart and was already at the end of his strength.) The men marched all night as a rule from 7pm to 7am. They had to perform camp duties, get their meals and wash during the day, so they got very little rest.
- Such medical supplies as had been hurriedly collected at Bampong and carried by hand by the marching party were rapidly exhausted and the march continued with no medicines at all.
- Dysentery and diarrhoea broke out in all parties and exhaustion was general. Ulcerated feet occurred in large numbers due to sick men with blistered feet being forced to march on day after day.
- At Concoita the marching parties were quartered in the same camp as a Thai our corps who were suffering from cholera. Infection was picked up by each of the 13 marching parties.
- On 15th May, cholera broke out at Shimo Nicke; Col. Harris (C.O.) immediately reported to Col. Banno, the I.J.A. Commander and suggested that movement should cease until the outbreak was under control, and that Konkoita camp should at all costs not be used for further parties. Unfortunately Col. Banno was unable to comply with this request and as a result, cholera was spread to all 5 camps occupied by the force.
- Only a very small quantity of medical stores at Bampong were brought up later by lorry. (Over three-quarters of it was still at Bampong when the force returned to Kamburi in December.) The I.J.A. were at this time unable to provide or produce any medical supplies whatsoever

except cholera vaccine and quinine which were always supplied as required. Col. Banno gave 6 tins of milk of his own property.

- By the end of May about 5000 Prisoners of War had been distributed to several different camps. The camps consisted of huts without roofing, although the rainy season had now started and the rain was falling heavily every day and night. The camps were not fully roofed for several weeks during which time men had no proper shelter, consequently deaths from pneumonia were numerous.
- In spite of the above conditions, the general state of exhaustion of the men, the presence of the epidemic cholera in all camps, the practically universal malaria, diarrhoea and dysentery, the men were put to work at once by the I.J.A. engineers."

Link to Major Cyril's full report entitled 'Report on Condition of POWs, May-December 1943' - https://www.britain-at-war.org.uk/WW2/Death_Railway/html/major_cyril_wild.htm