

Building the Burma-Siam Railroad

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*In 1942 Imperial General Headquarters ordered the Southern Area Army to build a rail line connecting the prewar railroad systems of Burma and Thailand across southeastern Burma. This would facilitate the transfer of men and supplies to support Japan's large army in northern Burma, which faced the British from India and the Chinese and Americans from Yunnan in China. They were given eighteen months to complete the task. The 265 miles of mountainous jungle and malaria swamps between Tanbyuzayat and Ban Pong proved some of the most inhospitable country in all of Southeast Asia. Laborers from Burma and Malaya, approximately 250,000 strong, were brought in to build the line, together with some 61,000 Allied POWs. About half were British, a quarter Australian, and most of the remainder Dutch, with about 700 Americans. The line was completed in November 1943. Approximately one-fifth of the POWs died building it. Although the exact total is unknown, upwards of 80,000 of the local people also perished.**

I was surveying track for the Ministry of Railroads' newly proposed super-express between Tokyo and Shimonoseki when I was called to active duty in the army on January 10, 1941. In little more than a year, together with twenty-one other young officers just like me, I went from raw conscript to budding second lieutenant in the Fifth Rail Regiment

* Precise figures are impossible to determine. See Joan Blair and Clay Blair, Jr., *Return from the River Kwai* (New York: Penguin, 1979), pp. 15-16, and Basil Collier, *The War in the Far East, 1941-1945: A Military History* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), pp. 331-32.

under the army in Burma. About six hundred not-very-young soldiers, almost like my uncles, made up our regiment. Many were former rail-unit soldiers who had completed their active service and returned home, only to be recalled to the colors.

We left the port of Ujina on a four-thousand-ton freighter bound for Burma on August 15, 1942. They gave us officers a cash advance of six thousand yen to take these six hundred soldiers south. We consulted about what we should buy for the trip and decided beer would be best. We ordered it at headquarters and began loading it on the freighter. Beer soon filled the hold. The ship's master got angry, but when he asked, "What's the matter with this unit?" we just told him to shut up and keep loading. We were sure that those cases would get us to Rangoon.

On the trip, soldiers could purchase all the beer they wanted for twenty-five *sen* a bottle. Since there was nothing to do on the boat, they were soon clamoring for beer. All twenty-four thousand bottles were drained by the time we got to Takao in Taiwan. So we bought more beer with the money the soldiers had paid. We sailed from port in good spirits. We were dry again by Singapore. There we reloaded with Tiger Beer. We still had two or three bottles per head when we approached Rangoon on September 8. That was the end of our beer-drinking days. We didn't get another drop until the end of the war.

"Go into the jungle and build a railroad!" That was practically the only order we got in Burma. The jungle was incredible. It was deep, dark, and dense, with giant trees like you wouldn't believe. There were no roads. There were no reliable maps, only a primitive chart made by the British army long before. Here and there it had the names of hamlets. You could tell roughly where the mountains were, but that was all. Yet we got things underway. We first surveyed the area on elephant while the weather was still good and recorded the basic topography. We felled trees and estimated roughly whether and where track could be laid.

The Burma-Siam railroad was to be four hundred kilometers long. I was largely responsible for Songkrai, the border area between Thailand and Burma. You started by felling trees at the foot of the hills and then you cut a road for vehicles and brought in other materials. For a while we had gin, whiskey, and cigarettes, thanks to the British at Singapore. British tobacco was so good. Navy Cut was the best! When food didn't reach us by elephant we'd explode dynamite in the river and pick up the stunned fish. Frogs, snakes, and lizards were our normal provisions. When lunchtime approached, about ten men would be assigned to chase down lizards. They were real big and you caught them by hitting them on the head with a stick. The beautiful pink meat was delicious.

We reached the stage of laying a trackbed by September 1943. That's

when we brought the prisoners in. There was a camp for prisoners every five kilometers along the line, fifteen hundred men each. Separate guard units were in charge of them. I had to build a wooden bridge ninety meters long over a river gorge thirty meters deep. Without the elephants we couldn't have done it. For a year and a half, I had my own elephant.

The Burmese workers in the Burmese Construction Volunteer Corps were paid one rupee per head per day. We paid two rupees per elephant. Everyone took good care of the elephants. Even Japanese soldiers who beat up Burmese never took it out on the elephants. In the early stages, all our food and equipment came by elephant. We had about ten elephants per platoon. They'd be left free in the mountains in the evening, a chain hobbling their front legs. They'd search for wild bananas and bamboo overnight and cover themselves with dirt to keep from being eaten up by insects. In the morning the Burmese mahoots would track them down from their footprints. They'd usually be no more than one or two kilometers away. Then they'd get a morning bath in the river. Each mahoot would scrub his own elephant with a brush. The elephants looked so comfortable, rolling over and over in the river. It took about thirty minutes. Then they had full stomachs and were clean and in a good mood. Now you could put the saddle mount or pulling chains on them and they'd listen to commands and do a good day's work.

Once the trees were there, our soldiers who'd been carpenters in civilian life took over. The Burmese cut beams thirty-by-thirty-centimeters square, five to eight meters long. You needed sixteen of these beams for every five meters of bridge. That meant we had to prepare an almost astronomical amount of lumber. That was the hardest thing, because a solid-looking type of tree might be devoured by insects in a month. I didn't know a damn thing about trees, so whenever we found big thick trees, I just issued the order "Cut 'em down!" The elephants pulled down the trees that we'd sawed almost through, moved them away, and stacked them up with their trucks. In the beginning, we found trees nearby, but later we needed so many that we had to look further and further away.

That enormous bridge at Songkrai was my first time planning and actually building a bridge. Made of wood on a rock base! All through the dry season, when the river level was low, we dammed up the river, exposing the rocks. We drilled holes for the beams. I implored the regimental commander to find cement for me. At long last, some came. We put the pilings into the holes and filled them in with cement. It made a big difference just having a little cement to anchor them. We then built boat-shaped structures about a meter high around the piles, and packed them with stones. That was to help deflect the water and protect the foundation when the river was flowing strongly in the monsoon season.

We erected the bridge on that base. The rains began. But it held. It was a magnificent sight! The bridge gradually began to take shape as we laid beams from both ends. It grew level by level, rising from the river.

We did it with human labor alone. With rope, pulleys, and some iron bars. We were able to reach the top without even one injury. I didn't let the prisoners touch the bridge. It was too dangerous for them. All the handling and laying of lumber on the bridge was done by Japanese, and we did all the clamping of boards ourselves. Sometimes you had to go into the water. Struggling against the current, tying our bodies to the pillars, we'd set the metal fittings. I did have the prisoners help pull on the ropes. But I couldn't have them clambering on the beams and spans in their leather shoes. At a height of twenty or thirty meters, you'd die if you fell. We did it all with ten to fifteen Japanese.

Burmese and Japanese soldiers worked as one. Perhaps even the British officers thought the Japanese army had done a great job, considering the tools at our disposal. We worked in a drenching rain, wearing only loincloths. British officers in rain cloaks watched us with an expression that seemed to say, "Good show!" Every British officer had a swagger stick and sometimes they'd salute us in a funny way with it. I'd just shout at them, "Get lost! You're in the way! We're not putting on a show for your entertainment!"

The bridge looked massive and solid when all sixteen spans were in place. A trial drive was made. A C-56-type locomotive came up from below, belching smoke, blowing its whistle. It weighed a hundred and fifty tons. It couldn't drive very fast, because the tracks were not yet completely set. Finally, it reached our bridge. My battalion commander was aboard. "Abe," he shouted to me, "you get up here too!" All I could think was "If the bridge collapses, I'll have to die together with him." I hung onto the outside of the cabin and gave the order "Forward! Advance!" The locomotive inched ahead. I listened for any unusual or ominous sounds, but the bridge didn't even shudder.

"*Banzai! Banzai!*" shouted our soldiers. "*Banzai!*" the Burmese yelled, too. Even the captives let out something like a "*Banzai.*" It was unbelievable that a chugging locomotive could possibly be operating in this wild area previously untouched by man. And we had built it in a single year!

Everything railroad soldiers had to do was dangerous. After completing the tracks you had to lay gravel. Only Japanese soldiers were allowed to blast rock for the gravel off nearby mountains, and then dynamite the big boulders to make them smaller. Our captives were only given the job of turning the pieces into rocks of just the right size or digging up soil. Physically weak, they couldn't do much, but they didn't

intend to work, either. They didn't get anything in return, even if they cooperated with the Japanese army. On the contrary, if they weakened themselves, they ended up losing their lives.

That movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, is complete fiction and idealizes the behavior of British prisoners on the Kwai River at that time. In the movie, the Japanese rail unit was in charge of managing captives. That wasn't the way it was. Our unit specialized in building bridges and only borrowed prisoner labor from a prison-camp unit. We'd go there and ask, "Can we have three hundred workers today?" The guard unit would then provide prisoners and guards for them. We'd assign them to different tasks—a hundred for digging, fifty for cutting wood. In the movie, the British volunteer to build the bridge for us. They say, "The Jap army's way of doing things is all wrong. Let us do it!" Nothing like that happened and they never built us a great bridge. William Holden and his team were supposed to have sneaked behind the lines and blown the bridge up. That didn't happen either.

After the Burma-Siam Railroad was completed, our Fifth Rail Regiment was assigned to transport and maintenance of other rail lines in Burma. There were enormous Japanese forces in northern Burma and we had to get supplies through to feed them. From January to December 1944, we were on the Myitkyina Line, which stretched north from Mandalay towards the Indian and Chinese borders. The British, approaching from the east, attacked it practically every day. In daylight the British planes bombed, and we repaired the lines all night. The trains would have to pass through before dawn. We had to count the exact number of bombs that fell and keep track of the explosions, because they'd drop delayed-action bombs which would blow up while we were working. All we could do by day was sleep in the jungle. We had to change our camp every two or three days. The British didn't even have to worry about Japanese planes anymore. They spread fountain-pen mines all along the rail lines. If you stepped on one, a bullet shot straight up through your foot. Sometimes the enemy dropped leaflets identifying us by our military code numbers. It gave us a weird feeling when the British army, which we hated, knew all about us.

We were protecting a bridge near Meza when Wingate's British airborne troops, the Chindits, landed about thirty kilometers from our position. They came in gliders, but were armed with heavy machine guns and mortars. Overhead, warplanes, patrolled to protect them. The rail line was cut near Mawlu. A division of ours was up there in the mountains, cut off. We couldn't just let them dry up and die without food. We were given the order "Advance!" All we had were our own rifles and maybe two or three hand grenades. We weren't trained in combat. It was

broad daylight. Heavy machine-gun bullets flew by just above our heads. Then "Bam! Bam! Bam!" trench mortar explosions came toward us. "Forward!" I shouted. "Advance, or we'll be trapped by them!" To my right, airplanes were dropping bombs. Behind me I saw red flames, shooting out of what looked like a giant Bunsen burner. We were just a hundred railroad soldiers crawling across rice fields, armed only with single-shot rifles. We didn't even have enough bullets, and they had flame-throwers!

I came face-to-face with seven British soldiers. The moment they saw me, they opened up with automatic weapons. I dove behind a tree. I saw them preparing to target me with a rifle grenade, and rolled away from the spot just as a grenade went off. I took twenty-two pieces of shrapnel all over my body, badly enough in the left leg that it should have been fatal. One, just above my knee, went in so deep that it was there the rest of the war. Thirty of us were killed, thirty wounded. Two officers were among the dead.

I was picked up and carried to the rear on March 18, 1944, and spent all of April in the hospital. My wound was still oozing pus in early May, but the enemy was all around, and they needed officers, so I reported back to duty.

Around the time I was wounded, tens of thousands of Japanese were ordered into the deep mountains of Burma, where there was nothing to sustain them. They just piled rice and ammunition on carts and hauled them along. When they could no longer move them by cart, they divided the supplies up and carried them on their own backs. No matter how far they went, it was just jungle. There were swarms of mosquitos. They caught malaria. If the water was bad they came down with diarrhea practically instantly. There was no way for units to keep in touch with each other. There was no ammunition. No food. The soldiers ended up defeated stragglers. The bones of hundreds of thousands of soldiers were abandoned in Burma.^o The lieutenant generals and generals should have taken a stand and said there were no artillery shells and nothing to feed the soldiers, no matter what the Imperial headquarters told them to do! But the generals just issued their orders and took care of their own safety first, fleeing by airplane while urging the troops on. The top commander in Burma was executed by the British, but the "great men" in the middle-level commands went home as if nothing had happened.

About January 8, 1945, we received an order to go to a place we called Chōmei on the line to Lashio. North of that point there was much fighting, but my job was to get two divisions out by rail. Every night we marshaled cars into trains and moved them down the line. This went on

until the beginning of March. The soldiers we were evacuating kept the enemy from overwhelming us, but finally we couldn't hold them off any longer. On March 8 we put a hundred and forty sick soldiers onto the train for Mandalay and pulled out. Just as that train left the station, the enemy arrived.

I limped all the way back to Moulmein. By then my knee had swollen up and was bright red. I couldn't move. An army doctor sent me back to Bangkok to enter the hospital. I asked the train taking me to stop at Songkrai. My orderly carried me on his back to where I could see the bridge for the first time in more than a year. It had been the target of heavy bombing, but had suffered no direct hits. The bridge spanned a gorge so closely surrounded by steep mountains that a bomber couldn't make a direct run at it. It was still there, exactly as I'd built it. I was ecstatic. I went on to Thailand by train, arriving in Bangkok around July 20, 1945. But I went carrying that memory with me. Many of our soldiers withdrew to Thailand over the Burma-Siam Railroad during our disastrous defeat. Many men's lives were saved because of that bridge. I feel that I played a great role.

Abe Hiroshi was charged with war crimes for his part in the Burma-Siam Railroad. He tells that part of his story in Chapter 21.

^o Japanese war dead in Burma and the invasion of India totaled over 160,000.