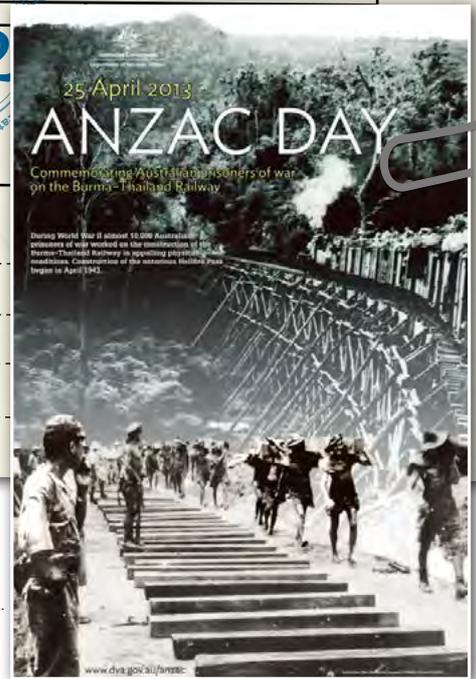


# WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

## Commemorating Australian prisoners of war on the Burma-Thailand Railway

During World War II almost 10,000 Australian prisoners of war worked on the construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway in appalling physical conditions. Construction of the notorious Hellfire Pass began in April 1943.

Australian War Memorial P00406.026 and 122309



## Background

The Japanese began the construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway in October 1942. Using a force of some 60,000 Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and 200,000 Asian civilian labourers (known as romusha), the railway eventually linked Thanbyuzayat in Burma (now Myanmar) to Ban Pong in Thailand. Japan wanted an alternative route to supply its armies in Burma as the existing sea routes were under constant attack by Allied air and naval units. The Japanese were determined to build the railway through the mountainous jungle terrain, previously thought impassable.

Conditions faced by the POWs were harsh, with meagre food rations, disease and vicious treatment by Japanese and Korean guards. Prisoners often received beatings, with severe punishments for any defiant behaviour. Sick prisoners were often forced to work though they could barely stand. Many prisoners were worked to death.

Men in camps were given a daily quota of work, and this increased during a period known as 'speedo'. The prisoners would leave their camps before dawn and return after dark, not seeing their camps during daylight. At Konyu Cutting the flickering bonfire light on the emaciated workers gave the place its name – Hellfire Pass.

The death toll was high: more than 2800 Australians lost their lives on the Burma-Thailand Railway. More than 11,000 Allied soldiers died, along with an estimated 75,000 romusha, who were often treated worse than the POWs.

The Burma-Thailand Railway was completed in October 1943, with the survivors transferred back to prison camps in Singapore and elsewhere. News of the horrendous treatment of POWs on the railway first came in 1944, when the Japanese ship *Rokyu Maru*, carrying POWs, was sunk by a US submarine. The POWs that survived machine gunning by the Japanese were picked up by US submarines and returned to Australia. Most of the remaining POWs were not freed until after the unconditional surrender of the Empire of Japan on 2 September 1945.

Today, the Hellfire Pass Memorial at Konyu remembers the sacrifice of the Australian, Allied and civilian prisoners and labourers who suffered and died to build the pass. The Memorial and associated Museum attract over 80,000 visitors each year.

## References

- Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), *Australian Prisoners of War*, 2009.
- DVA, *Australians in the Pacific War: Australian Prisoners of War 1941-1945*, 2007.
- DVA, *Australians on the Burma-Thailand Railway 1942-1943*, 2003.

## Websites

### Department of Veterans' Affairs:

- (Q2b, 6, 8) [www.dva.gov.au/commems\\_oawg/commemorations/education/Documents/1POW\\_P01913.pdf](http://www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/education/Documents/1POW_P01913.pdf)
- (Q5) [www.dva.gov.au/commems\\_oawg/OAWG/war\\_memorials/overseas\\_memorials/thailand/audiotour/Pages/Weary.aspx](http://www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/OAWG/war_memorials/overseas_memorials/thailand/audiotour/Pages/Weary.aspx)
- (Q5) [www.dva.gov.au/commems\\_oawg/OAWG/war\\_memorials/overseas\\_memorials/thailand/audiotour/Pages/HintokStation.aspx](http://www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/OAWG/war_memorials/overseas_memorials/thailand/audiotour/Pages/HintokStation.aspx)
- (Q7) [www.australiansatwar.gov.au/stories/stories\\_war=W2\\_id=152.html](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au/stories/stories_war=W2_id=152.html)
- (Q7) [www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/cleary.html](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/cleary.html)
- (Q7 & 8) [www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/index.html](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/index.html)
- (Q7 & 8) [www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/dixie.html](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au/behindwire/dixie.html)

### Australians at War Film Archive:

- (Q3 & 8) [www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/campaigns/Prisoners\\_of\\_the\\_Japanese\\_2.html](http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/campaigns/Prisoners_of_the_Japanese_2.html)

### Australian War Memorial:

- (Q2a) [www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai/](http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai/)
- (Q2a & 4) [www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awmohww2/medical/vol2/part2/awmohww2-medical-vol2-part2-ch26.pdf](http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awmohww2/medical/vol2/part2/awmohww2-medical-vol2-part2-ch26.pdf)  
(p.580 & pp.612-613)
- (Q5) [www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/dunlop/bio.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/dunlop/bio.asp)
- (Q5) [www.awm.gov.au/people/164.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/people/164.asp)
- (Q6) [www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai/story3.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai/story3.asp)
- (Q7) [www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/germany](http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/germany)
- (Q7) [www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/italy](http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/italy)



## Teaching Activities

Use the poster, background information and websites listed above, to answer the following questions:

- Look at the Anzac Day Poster: what do you first notice about this image? What people, actions and objects can you see?
- In pairs, examine the terrain, environment and climatic conditions faced by the prisoners:
  - What challenges did the landscape and climate pose for Australians working on the railway?
  - Was escape possible? Write your answer and share it with another student.
- Why did the Japanese use prisoners of war to build a railway? List two reasons and explain your answer.
- Medical officers on the railway were singled out as heroes for how they cared and stood up for injured prisoners.
  - What kinds of illnesses and diseases affected the POWs?
  - What difficulties did the Australian medical officers face when conducting medical procedures in Japanese POW camps and makeshift hospitals?
- Lieutenant Colonel Edward 'Weary' Dunlop led a group of Australian POWs on the Burma–Thailand Railway called Dunlop Force. Read about his time on the railway using the websites provided and together with your responses to question four, write a short diary entry from the perspective of a patient treated by Dunlop.
- The Australian War Memorial holds many pictures and drawings made in secret by John Chalker of the Royal Artillery, a British prisoner on the Burma–Thailand Railway.
  - Are these images primary or secondary sources? Explain your answer.
  - What do these images tell us about conditions in Japanese POW camps?
  - Why would the Japanese guards have wanted to destroy his artwork? Explain their significance after the war?
- Examine primary and secondary sources on Australian POWs held captive by Germany and Italy during World War II. List three key similarities and differences between their experiences of captivity and those prisoners of Japan. Share your responses with another student.
- In groups, discuss and answer the following questions:
  - How do we remember the sacrifice and experiences of prisoners of war?
  - Imagine you are giving a presentation at an Anzac Day ceremony at Hellfire Pass. Write a speech explaining the importance of remembering the experiences of these POWs.