

***Captive Audiences/Captive Performers:  
Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival on the Thailand-Burma Railway  
1942-1945***

By  
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***Proposed Outline:***

**Preface.**

**Foreword: Jack Chalker, noted Far Eastern POW artist.**

**Acknowledgements.**

**INTRODUCTION:**

- **Purpose of study.** This is a ground-breaking investigation of a neglected area of research: the musical and theatrical performances that occurred in Japanese prisoner of war camps in Southeast Asia during World War II, and the critical role they played in the survival of Allied POWs. *Captive Audiences/Captive Performers* not only recovers the lost history of these performances and of the Officers and Enlisted Men who were compelled by the appalling circumstances to entertain their fellow prisoners, it also examines what this entertainment was, how it was produced, and why it was instrumental in keeping the POWs alive.

- **Scope of study.** A brief survey of the Allied POW camps in Southeast and East Asia in which entertainment was introduced as a strategy for survival. The ability to produce some sort of entertainment in these camps varied widely, dependent upon their locale, the living conditions, the performers available, and their captors' receptivity.

- **Narrowed focus on the Thailand-Burma "Death" Railway Construction Project.** The POW experience on the Thailand-Burma Railway Construction Project presents both the extremes of living conditions and treatment endured by POWs in the Far East, and the extremes of entertainment produced by POWs in their camps: from spontaneous singalongs around campfires to fully rehearsed and staged musical comedies.

- **Sources:**

- **Published memoirs, diaries, histories.**

- **Unpublished materials and artifacts.**

**Major archives visited or accessed:**

i. Imperial War Museum (London)

- ii. Australian War Memorial (Canberra)
- iii. The Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, Amsterdam).
- iv. Museon (The Hague).
- v. Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and Information Center (Thailand).
- vi. National Archives (Washington, D.C.)

- **Interviews and Correspondence.** Additional information was solicited through interviews and correspondence with a number of former Far Eastern Prisoners of War (FEPOWS) who were involved in camp entertainment or had vivid recollections of it.

- **Web-based resources**, many of them initiated by former FEPOWs or their descendents, have also been closely examined.

- **Problems/Issues encountered in the source materials:**

- **The “gap”** – the un-reliability of memory.

- **The “worms’ eye view”** – the limitations of an individual’s point of view.

- **The “rounding”** – the inherent need to tell a story, which involves unconscious narrative patterns and/or dramatizations.

- **A Note about the historical context and racism.**

## **PART ONE: CONTEXTS.**

**Chapter 1. “We’ll Meet Again.” The cultural baggage the troops carried with them into captivity:**

- Popular Entertainment: 1900 – early 1940s: music hall, variety, revue, musical comedy, motion pictures, radio, etc.

- High-brow Entertainment: symphony orchestra, opera, ballet, etc.

- Civilian organizations providing the military with entertainment: USO, ENSA.

- Military entertainment organizations: “Soldier Shows” (British “Concert Parties”) – “for the troops by the troops” – as part of the Armed Forces’ Education & Welfare Schemes.

**Chapter 2: “The War Within A War.”**

With the fall of Malaya, which was quickly followed by the surrender of Singapore and The Netherlands East Indies, it soon became apparent to the thousands of Allied POWs that they were now in a very different kind of war—not one with the enemy without, but with the enemy within. Laurens van der Post, himself a Dutch POW on Java,

summarized what physical and psychological challenges the Allied soldiers would face as prisoners of war:

We were going to be engaged in a new war, a war for physical and moral survival, a war against disease, malnutrition and most probably a protracted process of starvation as well as against disintegration from within by the apparent helplessness and futility of life in the prisons of an impervious, archaic and ruthless enemy. It would be a war for sanity of mind and body.” [from “Forward” to E. E. Dunlop’s *The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop*]

Musical and theatrical activity, it was discovered, could do more than fill the empty hours of inactivity and boredom; they could also help the men adjust emotionally and mentally to their new status as POWs. They could prevent depression and keep minds and memories from atrophying.

### **Chapter 3: “In The Bag”**

- “Changi By-The- Sea”: Changi POW Camp; Singapore environs,
- “Java Rabble” (The Netherlands East Indies): Tjimahi, Bandoeng, & Bicycle POW Camps, Java; survivors from sunken US and British ships; the Texas Lost Battalion.

The Australian, British, Dutch/Indonesian and American musical and theatrical producers and performers who surfaced in these camps became the major players in the entertainment that took place on the Thailand-Burma Railway.

## **PART TWO: THE THAILAND-BURMA RAILWAY.**

**A Brief Overview of the Thailand-Burma Railway Construction Project.** This overview outlines the genesis of the railway, including the enormous logistical challenges involved in the massive construction project and its aftermath. For the sixty thousand POWs and more than eighty thousand *romusha* (civilians coerced into being laborers), life on the railway without adequate food, housing, and medical supplies, was a living nightmare.

The POW experience in Burma and Thailand can be roughly divided into four phases: construction, rehabilitation, redeployment, and repatriation. Each phase required the entertainers to adapt their performances to the exigencies of the new situation.

**A. CONSTRUCTION.** It was during the construction phase that starvation, sickness, brutality, and death were ever present. For POW entertainers like Jimmy Walker, “The [jungle] shows [were] created for men by men battling against killer-despair and to retain sanity.”

**Chapter 4: “Jungle Shows”: Thailand.**

**Chapter 5: “Jungle Shows”: Burma.**

Differences in personnel and types of entertainment produced make it important to treat the Burma and Thai ends of the railway construction separately until the two sides of the railway were joined in mid-October, 1943.

**Chapter 6: “Jungle Shows”: “The Interval: mid-October, 1943–early 1944”**

**B. REHABILITATION.** After the completion of the railway, there was a release of repressed creative energy which resulted in an explosion of musical, theatrical, and dance performances among the huge population of sick and recovering POWs in Hospital and Relocation Camps in Thailand. Construction of proscenium theatres out of bamboo and palm fronds allowed these performances to become more elaborate and artistically challenging. Involvement in performance, as well as in the construction of sets, costumes, lighting, and musical instruments, came to play a major role in the rehabilitation process. Bombing raids on two of these camps by Allied air forces in 1944 tested the resilience and fortitude of the entertainers to carry on.

**Chapter 7: “The Tamarkan Players” - Tamarkan Relocation Camp.**

**Chapter 8: “Chungkai Showcase” – Chungkai Hospital Camp.**

**Chapter 9: “The Show Must Go On” – Nong Pladuk Relocation Camp.**

**Chapter 10: “Breakout!” – Nakhon Pathom Hospital Camp.**

**C. REDEPLOYMENT.** Removal of many POWs to new camps in early 1945 created renewed challenges for the entertainers. In the segregated Officers-only camp at Kanburi, entertainment came under attack by Japanese Commandants who tried to place as many obstacles as possible in the way of its continuance or ban it altogether. For the POWs deployed to the new road and airfield construction camps, a return to heavy physical labor after months of rehabilitation in Hospital and Relocation Camps meant that many would reach the end of their mental and emotional tethers. Entertainment was one of the few things that kept them going.

**Chapter 11: “The Battle for Concerts” – the all-Officers’ Camp at Kanburi.**

**Chapter 12: “Strike a New Note!” – the Aerodrome Construction Camps at Kachu Mountain & Ubon.**

**D. REPATRIATION.** Immediately following their liberation in August, 1945, POW entertainers mounted “Victory Shows” to release and channel the POWs’ joyful celebrations. This chapter opens with a montage of the content and variety of these shows. After the celebrations were over, the entertainers were called upon once again to fulfill a new and different role: keeping the newly freed and restless troops in check until the logistics of their repatriation could be resolved.

**Chapter 13 “Out of the Blue Came Freedom.”**

**PART THREE: THEATRICAL PRODUCTION.**

This section provides a more in-depth analysis and evaluation of the personnel and the musical and theatrical activities than was possible during the ongoing narrative of Part Two.

**Chapter 14: “Precious Personalities” – producers and performers as camp celebrities.**

**Chapter 15: “Somebody had to put a skirt on” – the female impersonators.**

**Chapter 16: “Jolly Good Show!” – theatres, sets, staging practices, lights, costumes, make-up, and musical instrument construction.**

**PART FOUR: REFLECTIONS.**

**Chapter 17: “To Keep Going the Spirit.”** Reflections on the testimonies from POW entertainers and audience members concerning the role they believed that musical and theatrical performance played in their survival.

- **Value of entertainment to performers.**
- **Value of entertainment to audiences.**

Further considerations:

- **Entertainment as cultural memory bank.**
- **Entertainment as empowerment.** Entertainment provided the POWs with the mental and emotional sustenance that gave them a renewed sense of group solidarity, quality of life, and the will to live.
- **Entertainment as resistance.** In the psychological war with their captors, it was considered a minor victory when a theatrical producer could present a pantomime about Good defeating Evil containing topical references not understood by their captors, or when a performer could slip information about the current status of the war obtained from their secret radio into a song or sketch without the Japanese censor in the audience catching on.

**- Entertainment as psycho-physical healing.** For POW Medical Officers like Senior Medical Officer, Sir Albert Coates, musical and theatrical performance functioned as a critical complement to the medical treatment: “I think the psychotherapy at a jungle concert was, perhaps, of more value than the ministrations of the men of medicine . . . [it was] prophylactic mental hygiene.”

**GLOSSARY.**

**APPENDIX I: “THE FEPOW SONGBOOK” – a collection of lyrics to original songs written and performed by the POWs in their camps.**

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