The Thailand-Burma Railway: An Overview

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The Imperial Japanese Army’s decision to build a 259-mile railway line that would connect Bangkok, Thailand, with Moulmein, Burma, was based on two realities. The first was their need to find an alternative supply route for their forces in Burma. By the spring of 1942, the shipping lane through the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal had become increasingly vulnerable to Allied attacks. A railway would need to be built through dense malarial jungles, across raging rivers, and over the treacherous mountain chain that separated Burma and Thailand. The British had explored this idea earlier in the century and then abandoned it because of the difficulties—difficulties exacerbated by annual monsoon rains.

Figure Overview.1. Map of the Thailand-Burma railway.
The second reality was that thousands of Allied POWs incarcerated in prison camps in Southeast Asia provided an enormous potential labor force for such a venture. Although the Hague and Geneva Conventions forbade the use of prisoners of war in work that supported the captors’ war effort, the Japanese were not deterred. They had not signed those protocols.

Between May 1942 and May 1943, slightly over 61,000 Allied POWs from Singapore, Sumatra, and the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia) were sent Up Country in a series of drafts to construct the railway. These drafts—variously designated as “Forces,” “Groups,” or “Parties”—were reorganized by the Japanese into “Groups” or “Branches” under Southern Army Command’s POW Accommodation headquarters in Burma and Thailand. Attempts were made by various POW commands in Singapore to ensure that musicians and/or other concert party personnel were included in the drafts so they could keep morale high and affirm group solidarity with their performances. It became standard policy to keep these entertainers together as much as possible during their time Up Country. In spite of these efforts many POWs would never experience anything more than an impromptu sing-along—if that—during the construction period.

The POWs were joined by an estimated 300,000 romusha (indigenous contract laborers) from Burma, Malaya, Java, and other conquered nations whom the Japanese coerced into working on the railway. Many of them arrived with their families and were placed together with other romusha in separate work camps. Without any internal organization for support, in contrast to the POWs with their military structure, they suffered greatly. Their tragic story has only recently been the subject of serious investigation.1

1 The term Up Country in uppercase letters was used by the POWs to refer to either Burma or Thailand; up country in lowercase letters was used for locations further up the individual railway line.

2 The Japanese designation; see Tamayama, 162.
Construction of the railway—from Thanbyuzayat in Burma and from Kanchanaburi in Thailand—commenced in October 1942.

During the construction period, the engineers of the Imperial Army’s 5th Railway Regiment (Thailand) and 9th Railway Regiment (Burma) had authority over POW accommodation group and local camp commandants. Since the I. J. A. needed their top military officers and able-bodied soldiers elsewhere in the war effort, officers placed in charge of POW accommodations were either older, not the most competent administrators, or, in the case of individual camps, lower in rank, such as lieutenants or noncommissioned officers. The guards—mainly Korean conscripts—were considered inferior by the Japanese and treated as such. Each camp also had a POW commandant who had several adjutants representing various constituencies. In camps where POWs of different nationalities were billeted together, each group had its own section of the camp where it could maintain a separate identity and authority.

For the most part, the Japanese honored the Geneva Convention that said officers who are prisoners of war should not be required to engage in manual labor. Since the POWs on the railway were not segregated into officers’ and other ranks’ camps, officers were responsible for the administration and welfare of the men, but always within boundaries set by the Japanese administration.

In the spring of 1943, Imperial General Command in Tokyo, anxious to get supplies, equipment, and troops into Burma to launch the “liberation of India” campaign before the British could regroup their forces, decided to move up the deadline for completion of the railway by several months—to October 1943, which they hoped would coincide with the end of the rainy season. This acceleration became known as “the Speedo.” It was during this period that the Thailand-Burma railway earned its epithet as the “death” railway.

A Note on Camp Designations. The spelling of camp names along the Thailand-Burma railway varies widely in the literature, as the POWs transcribed what they heard into diaries and reports. A camp like Kanyu, for instance, also appears as Konyu or Kanu. Recently, researchers have attempted to standardize the spellings and correlate them to Thai or Burmese place names. “Kanyu” has now been designated “Kannyu,” for example. Because these new transliterations are rarely found in the POW dairies or memoirs—major sources of information for this study—I have selected the name or spelling that appears most often in the original sources or that will cause the least confusion.