



## Remembering the Pacific War (December 1941–August 1945): The Kwai River

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**In reminding us of the historical reality and the human drama of this tragic episode, Françoise Thibaut reminds us above all that we must not forget the Asian dimension of the last world conflict, of which we celebrated this summer the 70th anniversary of the complete cessation of hostilities**

While it is all very well to remember June 6, 1944 and the end of the conflict in Europe, we must not forget the Asian dimension of the Second World <sup>War</sup>, which continued in the Pacific until the surrender of Japan on August 14, 1945 (complete cessation of fighting on September 2).

We all know the river Kwai because of Pierre Boule's beautiful novel "The bridge over the Kwai River", published in 1952, but above all by David Lean's 1957 film with Alec Guinness, William Holden and Sessue Hayakawa, which received seven Oscars and was a worldwide success that is still going strong almost 60 years later.

The Kwai River really exists: it is located in Thailand (formerly Siam), has its source in the north near Myanmar (formerly Burma), flows through the mountains and down into the Bangpong plain, then flows into the South China Sea south of Bangkok. Quite ordinary, heavy monsoon rains or almost dry during the dry season, this river was a strategic issue during the war in the Pacific, under Japanese occupation, from March 1942.

After the surprise attack of December 7, 1941 on the American base at Pearl Harbour, the Japanese, already masters of southern China, swept over the Southeast Asian peninsula with incredible speed; the goal was the oil reserves of the Dutch colony (now Indonesia), the mineral wealth of Malaysia and above all India, the jewel of the British Empire, both symbol and economic packets. For the strategy of the Japanese general staff, it was an obsession. Singapore fell almost helplessly on February 15, 1942 ("the darkest day of the Empire" according to Churchill) and from this decisive base, everything was easy: 200. On March 1, Java was invaded: the Dutch contingent was taken prisoner and shipped to

Singapore's sinister prison,<sup>the</sup> Changi camp, a sort of anchorage where thousands of prisoners were piled up in appalling conditions. Thus, Dutch, British, Australian, New Zealand and South African soldiers found themselves mixed in a cohort intended to "help the conquest effort".

In fact, after transit through Changi, the prisoners were shipped north to Siam, where the "great project" was to be carried out as soon as possible: to build a Bangkok-Rangoon railway line through the jungle and the mountains, to support the advance of the million soldiers who were attacking India. The project extended the line to Moulmein, at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal, then split in two to serve both Rangoon and northern Burma, and further south Mandalay to enter India through the Ganges delta (now Bangladesh). A pharaonic project that the British had never carried out due to climatic and geographical difficulties, but which the Japanese will partly carry out, without being able to complete it, in 14 months. One of the main difficulties was the abundance of rivers to be crossed, with the need to build bridges capable of resisting the impetuous monsoons and to withstand the repeated passage of heavy convoys loaded with weapons, food and ammunition. The Kwai River, by its strategic position and importance, was a major obstacle.

More than 20,000 prisoners were employed in this demented exploit, more than two thirds of whom died of exhaustion, disease and malnutrition; they were assisted by 200 to 300. They were assisted by 200 to 300. The exact number of indigenous deportees - the exact number is not known -, Malay, Thai, but above all southern Chinese, who were brought on foot to the building sites and worked on the earthworks in unspeakable conditions.

The work to cross the bed of the Kwai river was very long because of the technical difficulties, the movement of the soil and the width of the space to be crossed: The main prison camp used for this infernal work was called "Spring Camp" because of the nearby springs; 41 camps were scattered along the route: Dutch and citizens of the Empire, South Africans, Indians survived as best they could, died in numbers, attacked by malaria, beriberi and typhus. It was an odyssey both tragic and fabulous, from which very few returned. The line was never completed, and the Japanese never made it to the Ganges River, barely to Mandalay. A British counter-offensive code-named "Tarzan" was planned for the autumn of 1945 under the leadership of Lord Louis Mountbatten. But on 6 August on Hiroshima, then on 9 August on Nagasaki, the two American bombs changed the situation and ended the Pacific War with an unconditional surrender a few days later, on 14 August 1945.

There is nothing left of Spring Camp, nor of the railway line: the jungle has covered everything, devoured everything. The current railway line runs much further south: the Kwai River is crossed in a suitable place, on a very ordinary Eiffel-type metal bridge, laid on concrete pillars; nothing like Colonel Nicholson's wooden masterpiece. Sometimes, a few rare elderly tourists, often Dutch, Australian, British, came to collect themselves, after an hour's walk in the jungle, in front of a small monument not far from Hellfire Pass, a narrow gorge where several thousand workers died, because the exact place of the camp could not be found. The modest building is a reminder, from all origins, of the memory of such an enormous and useless sacrifice. Now, instead, it is their children who come to remember the involuntary adventure that ended, in the silence of implacable nature and to the sound of the parrots' untiring chatter, almost 70 years ago.

One can read, of course, Pierre Boule's book (Julliard 1952 and Livre de poche), and especially Loet Velmans's beautiful book of memories "Return to the Kwai River" (Phébus), as well as chapter 7 of the book that François Kersaudy devoted to Lord Louis Mountbatten. And then watch again with delight the film by David Lean.

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