

Anonymous Asian Laborers Mobilized for the 'Death Railway': Eight Decades of Postwar Remembrance

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Allied Prisoners of War Mobilized for Construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway—
Photographed in Myanmar on July 19, 1942

In January this year, ash-colored ashes quietly spread along the surface of the Mae Klong River flowing through Kanchanaburi in western Thailand. Mr. Silva Kumar (65), a Tamil man from Malaysia, stood silently watching the scene.

On this day, a ceremony was held to scatter the ashes believed to be those of Asian laborers who perished during the construction of the Thailand-Myanmar 'Death Railway' in World War II.

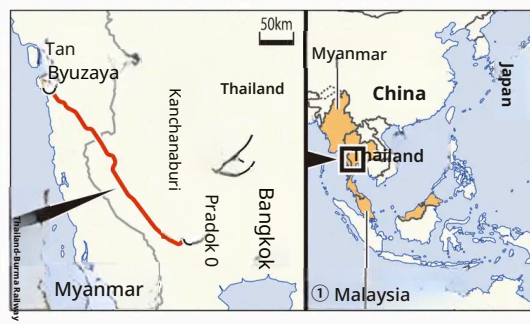


The scattering of what are believed to be the remains of Tamil laborers, previously exhibited following the closure of the War Museum, into the Mae Klong River = Provided by Mr. Silva Kumar

Constructed by the Japanese military during the war

The Thailand-Burma Railway was commenced by the Japanese military in 1942 with the purpose of supplying materials to the front lines. Approximately 60,000 prisoners of war from the Allied Forces, including Britain and Australia, along with hundreds of thousands of laborers from various Asian countries, referred to as 'Rōmusha,' were mobilized to complete the railway, approximately 415 kilometers long, in just over a year. Due to grueling labor, diseases such as malaria, and starvation, countless individuals suffered, leading to its designation as the 'Death Railway.' Although the full extent remains unclear, the number of victims is estimated to be around 100,000.

Among the Rōmusha, a significant number were Tamil individuals of Indian descent mobilized from the former British Malaya Peninsula (present-day Malaysia), which was occupied by the Japanese military.



Map of the Thailand-Burma Railway

The memorial service was conducted in accordance with Hinduism, the religion practiced by the Tamil people. It is believed that by scattering the ashes into the river after cremation, the soul is released from suffering. Eighty years after the end of the war, Mr. Kumar offered a solemn prayer for the victims.

“We do not know who these remains belong to, how many there are, or why they died. That is profoundly saddening.”

Mr. Kumar’s father, Perumal Ramasamy, was also one of the Rōmusha laborers. He somehow survived and continued to recount his experiences until his death in 2004.



Mr. Permal Ramasamy, a Tamil who participated in the construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway around the age of 14 — provided by family

The Japanese military had promised a “high wage” to induce participation, but upon arrival they found themselves in a remote jungle where wild animals such as tigers were present. The conditions concerning food supplies and sanitation were deplorable, with each day overshadowed by the fear of hunger and malaria.

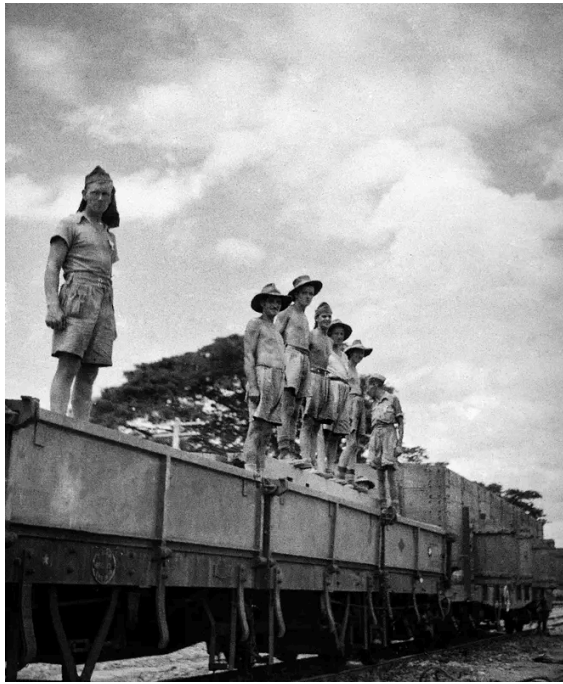
“Every morning, someone would invariably die.”

The assigned duties primarily consisted of cooking for the Japanese soldiers. Each morning, cassava (a type of tuber) was prepared and served mixed with peanuts and sugar. Daily routines included cleaning the camp, clearing the jungle, and the cremation and burial of the deceased. “Every morning upon waking, someone had invariably died.” We lived in constant fear, wondering if we would be next.

Even after the completion of the railway, the mobilization of Rōmusha and others continued for the maintenance of the tracks, which were subjected to bombing by the Allied Forces. The war ended in August 1945, but the Rōmusha did not receive any immediate notification. At one point, Allied Forces Prisoners of War and Japanese soldiers disappeared, but the reason remained unknown.

Eventually, residents of Thailand informed them of the war’s end; following the railway with his elder brothers, he returned home on foot over several months. His mother and younger sister received him with tears, yet many neighbors came asking if he knew the whereabouts of their sons. Several hundred people departed from their hometown as Rōmusha laborers, but only about half returned.

Mr. Ramasamy spoke with deep regret while he was alive.



Allied Prisoners of War Mobilized for Construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway=
Photographed in Myanmar on July 19, 1942

That was a cruel betrayal. We believed we would earn wages and return, but we received not a single cent, and many comrades perished.

A growing concern over the fading of memory

At present, while tourist trains operate on certain sections on the Thai side, the railway on the Myanmar side was dismantled after the war. The Kwai River Bridge in Kanchanaburi stands as an iconic symbol of the railway ruins and continues to draw numerous visitors. However, there are growing concerns that the memory of these events is fading, 80 years after the war.

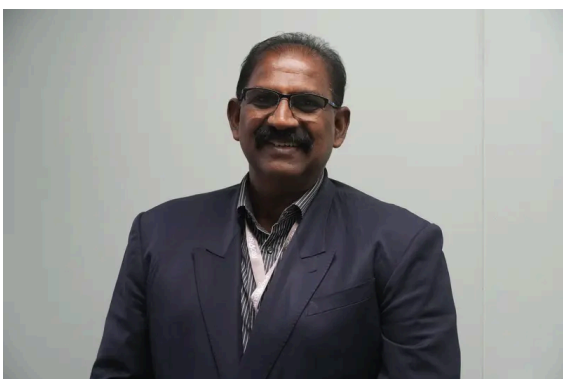
Jerry Calwaki, a 77-year-old American resident who researches the history of the Thailand-Burma Railway, stated, 'While many are aware of the "bridge," very few know why it was constructed or what transpired there.' He expresses regret, saying, 'Visitors merely take photographs, purchase drinks, have meals, and then depart.' The local war museum, which was open in the spring, has now closed due to financial difficulties.



In front of the Kwai River Bridge, which is part of the Thailand-Burma Railway, local history enthusiast Jerry Karwaki speaks about the conditions of that time. Photograph taken by Ai Kunimoto in Kanchanaburi, western Thailand, on August 5, 2025.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kumar had heard stories from his father since childhood, but he developed a profound interest in the history of the Rōmusha only after relocating to Thailand for work.

In Europe, the United States, and Australia, numerous memoirs and testimonies from former Prisoners of War were published after the war, inspiring films and dramas such as 'The Bridge on the River Kwai.' However, many of the Rōmusha who were with them were impoverished and illiterate, resulting in a profound scarcity of related records.



Mr. Silva Kumar, a Tamil man from Malaysia, speaking about the memories of his father who survived the 'Death Railway,' in Bangkok, Thailand, on August 6, 2025. Photo by Ai Kunimoto.

Mr. Kumar, determined to ensure the nameless laborers who worked alongside his father are remembered in history, together with colleagues from the Malaysian and Indian Association in Bangkok, decided to erect a monument honoring their Tamil compatriots among the Rōmusha. In 2024, the monument was established beside the ossuary of a temple believed to contain the remains of more than ten thousand Rōmusha.

Moreover, in January of this year, they took custody of remains believed to be those of Tamil Rōmusha, which had been held by a museum scheduled to close.

Scattering of ashes. The skull bones were enshrined within the ossuary along with the remains believed to belong to other Rōmusha laborers.

Mr. Kumar no longer seeks apology or compensation from Japan; he simply wishes for the truth of what happened to be known. With so few eyewitnesses left, perhaps in twenty years there will be no one remaining to pass on their stories as I do. That is why I wish to continue sharing them for as long as I live." [Ai Kunimoto in Kanchanaburi]

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