

BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAE (KWAI)

- story and photos by **Don Evans**

Your editor had an opportunity to visit Thailand in early May to attend a conference and then spend a couple of vacation days before returning home. While there, one tour I decided to take was to the north of Bangkok towards Miranmar (Burma) to see the famous Tiger Temple preserve. That could be the subject of another story, but this one is about a stop made along the way—at the “Death Railway Museum” and then the famous Bridge Over the River Kwai—(made famous by the movie of the same name).

We arrived at the town of Kanchanaburi after a two hour bus ride on our chartered coach. This was the location of the museum and the gateway to the bridge itself, now quite a tourist attraction. We alighted at the museum into stifling 40 degree heat, and quickly went inside to the air conditioned comfort of the museum. The museum specifically tells the story of the building of the Thailand—Burma railway by the Japanese during World War II, of the

atrocities that occurred there and the appalling conditions for the Prisoners of War. Cemeteries right across the street mark the graves of thousands of British and Australian casualties of this period.

The bridge just north of here was, of course, bombed during the war and the railway taken out of service. The two centre spans were knocked down in the raid. The bridge was rebuilt and



the railway reopened in the 1950's, then the location was immortalized in the movie. Two things about the movie that I learned—first, it was filmed in Ceylon (not Thailand) and the

bridge destroyed in the movie was a timber trestle (not the steel real bridge). Second, the movie got the name of the river incorrect—it is actually the River Kwae (not Kwai)

The museum consists of a series of story boards of the stages of construction and the war and political situations that were going on. There are also video stories and artifacts as well as models, but no actual rolling stock or anything like that. Following the walk through the



museum, I walked around one of the cemeteries and then sought out the railway. I found it just a block east, the metre gauge line is mostly in use today for tourists although a container loading dock with flat cars was also observed en route.

Then we were off to the bridge itself. I just had to walk across the bridge (as did most others). The bridge does look just like it should, and the two centre spans (which were destroyed in the bombing) are replaced and different in style to the other original spans. It is a busy tourist spot with people coming here by both train and tour bus. There are lots of restaurants and shops around as well as a station for the trains.

Walking the span is quite easy. It is just the railway bridge. A metal decking is applied between the guard rails (on which you walk) and you can pass other pedestrians by stepping

one foot onto the guard rail with the other on the centre decking. There are little “balconies”

that you can stand on between each span. The rails are just spiked to the ties and the ties are open to the water below from the rails to the steel side girders. It would be easy to fall through should you venture here! The bridge is generally crowded with people taking photos etc. Here one must comment on the different approach to safety over what we would be used to in North America. First—there is no “No Trespassing” signs or issue here, walking on the railway is quite normal simply at your own risk. Second—there are no real efforts made to “pedestrianize” the bridge—other than the steel plating between the guiderails to walk on. There are no extra railings, no filling of the gap between the ties and the side girders, just the little step out balconies between the spans. Third—this is an active railway, seeing somewhere around ten trains a day I was told. When a train comes, you just step aside onto the balconies and let it pass, then resume your walk. I asked if people ever fell, or were hit by a train, and the reply was none that anyone could recall.



Now—please accept that this is not a comment about the need for safety or how we approach it, but think about the challenges we face today around trespassing, even photos from a station platform are viewed as potential terrorist activities these days in the US. Would we allow people to walk on an unguarded railway bridge across a major river? Have we really progressed I wonder? This experience, halfway around the world from home, was intriguing

and a bit refreshing in approach to this writer. It occurred to me that this is the difference between accepting personal responsibility compared to expecting everything to be done for us and blaming or litigating when something happens.

Having walked the bridge, I noted quite a crowd waiting at the station. Sure enough, a train was due, so I would get to see how this all worked firsthand. The train approached the bridge, speed limit on bridge approach is 10 mph. In fact, a full stop was made then with a couple of blasts of the horn it started forward. Everyone on the bridge stepped aside as the train trundled across the bridge—a c-c diesel locomotive with seven passenger cars in tow. The cars were blue and white with open windows, and a good load of passengers aboard.

And, that was it. In no time the train was gone and the crowds back walking the bridge. As for me, I was soaked through and ready for the air conditioned environment of our motor coach. On to the tiger temple next!