

'Death Railway'

Lakenheath staff sergeant marches to remember

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More than 16,000 allied Prisoners of War and 100,000 Asian forced laborers lost their lives working on the "Death Railway" along the Thailand-Burma border in World War II. This thought was never far from Staff Sgt. Randall Hunt's mind as he joined 23 other British,

Australian and Thai police officers for a 15-day journey along the infamous Death Railway Nov. 4 through 15. More than 67,000 POWs and 270,000 Asian laborers worked on construction of the railway, of which only a small portion is useable today.

Hunt, 48th Security Forces Squadron, was the only American on the expedition. The purpose of the trek through history was to remember those who died and to help publicize "Project Remembers," a charity dedicated to the construction of a museum for the dead POWs and laborers on the banks of the River Kwai.

The walk started where the useable portion of the railway ends. Nearly 200 feet of train track continues past the wooden block that marks the end of the railway in operation today. After 200 feet, the railway tracks become hidden by bush and eventually, are

Hellfire pass, so named because of a fire that broke out while the pass was being cut.

lost in the jungle.

The 15-day expedition in temperatures up to 42.5 degrees Celsius in thick jungle was worth every blister, according to Hunt. One day, they were only able to walk nine kilometers because of the dense bamboo growth. Other days, the heat and humidity was so overbearing, despite the shade of the jungle, that some members of the group couldn't walk very far.

"It was hot, the mosquitoes were all over the place and everywhere was the smell of the jungle," said Hunt. "And we were only walking, we weren't on a forced march. We had shoes and plenty of water."

"The POWs were barefoot, worked 18-hour days and would have to walk five kilometers back to camp to clean up before going to sleep. Every day we were always reminding ourselves we can stop if we want, we have shoes, water, bandages..."

The workers in World War II were never more than three kilometers away from the River Kwai while constructing the railway, explained Hunt. The river was their only source of water and often, food, and many lost their lives to epidemics of cholera and malaria. The Asian workers were responsible for clearing away the jungle; then the POWs would come in to do the actual construction. "The Asians were pulled from the many places the Japanese ruled at that time, and were familiar with the jungle. The military POWs, because they

worked well in units, were responsible for laying the rock beds and actually constructing the railway," explained Hunt.

Because there weren't many trees, groups of POWs would often have to walk 10 kilometers just to cut trees and then walk back with the wood. The POWs were often times responsible for cutting through rock, and then breaking the rock they cut into smaller rocks to be used for the rock beds. The railway was completed in 15 months and spanned 413 kilometers from Nong Pladuk to Thanbyuzayat in Burma. Nine miles of bridges were completed, along with the famous bridge of the River Kwai that was constantly bombed by the allies during construction. The POWs struggled through the Kanchanaburi jungle to build the railway, and lived in horrid conditions at several camps along the railway.

The expedition camped at the site of one of the camps, Camp Hyntok, and searched for pieces of history.

"We searched the ground with metal detectors and some went into the caves nearby. Oftentimes, if the prisoners didn't want the Japanese to find something, they'd throw it to the side or in one of the caves on the walk back to the camp at night," said Hunt.

Seven days into the walk, on the 11th month, the 11th day and at the 11th hour, the 24-member group stopped for a special memorial. Rod Beaty, Australian War Graves Commission, helped arrange a trip to Thailand for an Australian POW who had one wish before he died.

Wally worked on the railway as a POW in World War II, and wanted to find the portion of the railway he helped work on in Thailand. Beaty, who has a detailed map of several locations where POWs and laborers worked as well as several campsites, knew the site Wally referred to. "He's done a lot of research on the railway and knew exactly where Wally was talking about," said Hunt. "He probably knows more about the railway than anyone."

The Australian War Graves Commission and an Australian veterans organization paid for Wally and his family to fly out and meet Beaty, who owns six acres of land on the site of Camp Hyntok.

Before the ceremony, one group member cut a bamboo down and made a small cross in front of the rock face. The group then placed their poppy pins on the bamboo cross and in the rock. After the service, Wally told his story to the expedition members and his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who accompanied him.

"He talked for an hour and a half and was crying. He was happy we were there and he told us his story. We started feeling what he was saying, rather than just listening, and some of us got a little teary-eyed," said Hunt.

"We tried to put ourselves in their shoes, to remind ourselves of what they went through, but we can only imagine it, we can never realize how bad it was," said Hunt.



Members of the group walk where the infamous "Stack of Cards Bridge" once was. The bridge was between 50 - 70 feet high and 250-300 yards across. It was constantly being bombed by the Allies during its construction.

Courtesy photos