

The accidental editor

Rae Luckie

My mother-in-law, Mary Luckie, was a hoarder. Among her treasures were the letters her husband Doug had written during World War II, and the letters she had written to him—unopened and marked 'return to sender'. She'd kept an album of small black and white photographs Doug had taken during the war and a scrap book that traced her efforts to find him after the fall of Singapore. By the time these items were discovered in 1988, Mary was suffering from dementia and Doug had been dead for almost twenty years. A car accident in 1976 had left him quadriplegic. For the first three months he couldn't speak and for the next four, although he was occasionally lucid, he believed he was again a prisoner of war on the Burma–Thailand Railway.



The memories began to haunt me. Perhaps also the burning desire to know more about Doug's war experiences was fired by the public commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Declared the year of Australia Remembers, many commemorative books were published, and television and newspapers featured veterans and widows telling their stories. However, like many others, Doug had rarely spoken about the war to his family—and on Anzac Day generally went fishing to Louth on the Darling River.

My husband, Barry, obtained a copy of his father's army records and we visited the Australian War Memorial to research the official war diaries of the 8th Headquarters Brigade and the 8th Division Provost Corps to which he transferred late in 1941. We were able to map Doug's movements and tie these in with the information in the letters. Place names and activities were always censored—although a few letters written in haste and given to friends being evacuated to Australia were more revealing.

I read accounts written by prisoners-of-war who were sent from Changi to work on the Burma–Thai railway to compare with Doug's correspondence, which included cards that had been sent from the various POW camps. Mary's last letter was written on Sunday 15 February 1942, the day Singapore fell. The following day she received a telegraph from Doug, postmarked on that date, telling her not to worry.

After reading a story by Tom Morris in *The Burma–Thailand Railway* edited by Gavan McCormack and Hank Nelson, I realised he would have

served with Doug and contacted him in Canberra. He said he had known Doug well, but hadn't seen him since they met in Tamarkan in Thailand in 1944.

Towards the end of June 1995 I heard a radio interview offering two vacancies on a trip to the Burma–Thai railway. The group of 24 included three ex-POWs. Over the preceding fifty years, many others in the party had unsuccessfully tried to gain permission to travel to the war graves at Thanbyuzayat in Southern Burma (now Myanmar). While it was relatively easy to travel between Rangoon (now Yangon) and Mandalay, we were only the second group to be granted special visas (on humanitarian grounds) to travel south.

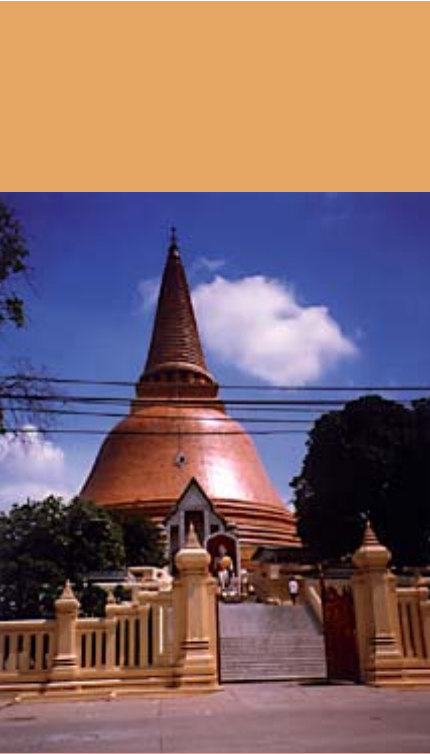
Our first stop was in Thailand where I was reminded of one of Doug's quotes: 'All the stinks of the world are in Bangkok'. Travelling to Kanchanaburi the next day we stopped at Nakhon Pathom to see the huge pagoda (or stupa as it is called in Thailand), Phra Pathom Chedi, that allied pilots used to guide them on their bombing raids into Burma.

After a memorial service at Kanchanaburi Cemetery, we went to Hellfire Pass with guide Rod Beattie who brought maps and aerial photographs. The construction had begun in April 1943 with 1000 prisoners. By the time it was completed, approximately a hundred had survived, including the three accompanying us. Rod had hacked a trail through the jungle to Compressor Cutting, so those of us fit enough were the first to go there in fifty years.

As we walked along the trail of ballast my mind kept superimposing images of Doug as I struggled with the oppressive heat and exhaustion. After a while I lagged behind the group and for some time was totally alone. I could almost feel the ghosts of the men who had been here. Among the smells of growth and decay, there were strange and beautiful flowers, bright orange and yellow fungi and giant snails. Above the undergrowth of leafy exotic plants, palms with cruel thorns and stinging 'wait-a-while-plants', the tall trees were strangled with climbers, all grasping towards the light.

The following day we visited the site of the camp at Tamarkan. With the railway completed, most of the prisoners had been moved to Thailand. Described as a paradise in comparison to the Burmese jungle camps, Tamarkan had been formerly occupied by the British under Colonel Toosey, and was one of the two camps that provided the labour to build the steel twin arched bridge over the Kwa Noi River. The bridge, which was later bombed by the US Air Force, provided the background for Pierre Boulle's fictional novel and subsequent film *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Some half a century later, it was extraordinary to walk on its replacement, and gaze at the longboats on the swiftly flowing river below, contemplating what life must have been like.

The following day we drove to Three Pagodas Pass on the Burma–Thailand border. Although we were less than a hundred kilometres from Thanbyuzayat, our final destination, entry by land or sea to Burma was forbidden.



We bussed back to Bangkok, flew into Rangoon, then travelled thirteen and a half hours by minibus on roads, many of which were dirt tracks, then navigated the Salween River from Martaban to Moulmein (now Mawlamyine) on an ancient ferry.

Waving green rice paddies were criss-crossed by brown canals and rivers. Masses of deep pink lotus bloomed in the still waters and every hill and mountain peak was topped by a pagoda—sparkling gold or stark white. Outside the villages, families lived in tiny bamboo huts just high enough to squat in, suspended over the least productive swamp. They walked through mud to toil waist deep in water tending the rice, or fished with hand nets, spending the day up to their shoulders in water. It was a journey back in time where the lifestyle of the rural Burmese has not been influenced by the technology of the previous fifty years.

Despite the beauty of the country and the hospitality of its people, we were never far from the reminders of a country ruled by a military dictatorship. Either side of the many bridges were checkpoints, concrete bunkers and soldiers, many in their teens, armed with automatic rifles. Convoys of military vehicles, horns blaring, pushed Buddhist monks, bicycles and bullock drays off the narrow, potholed road. We were warned not to take photos of military personnel, vehicles or installations or the many gaols where political prisoners incarcerated without trials laboured with primitive tools in open rock quarries.

On the journey, as we met and spoke with 'locals' there was also the constant reminder that as well as the deaths of some 13,000 prisoners of war, the building of the railway had claimed the lives of approximately 90,000 Asian workers, some indentured and others forced into slave labour.

It was an extraordinary experience to bond with twenty-four strangers—some who had learned to forgive and others who never would, but all of whom were seeking some kind of personal resolution of a story of a son, brother, husband, 'mate', grandfather, father or father-in-law who had died or suffered on the railway.

I was also intrigued with the stories of women on the trip, wives, daughters, and sisters who had survived at 'the home front' but who had continued to live in silence as many of those who returned refused to speak of their experiences. As Tom Morris had said, 'ordinary men and servicewomen' who began to tell their stories didn't begin to do so until the late 1980s, some after being approached to write for compilations of stories.

It was obvious that for the participants on our journey there was a void—a missing story that each one needed in order to come to terms with their own lives. All said the journey had eased their loss. After living with them through this intense experience, I wanted to make that sense of resolution 'concrete'.

I contacted everyone seeking their permission to gather the stories and photographs and edit them into a collective memoir. The project took

fourteen months, and required every facet of editing and self-publishing to be mastered. Although I was experienced at word processing and desktop publishing I had only 'dabbled' with photo-editing software, and there were almost 400 photographs to be included. Draft sections were sent to participants for final approval and signed permissions. I wanted to include scans of the original paintings by Jack Chalker to compare with the photographs we had taken fifty years later. A draft was sent to him in England—he phoned on Anzac Day 1997 expressing his delight and giving permission. Although the book was professionally bound, I printed off the fifty copies on colour ink jet printers. The Australian Editing Handbook written by Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill was my constant companion and guided me through the various processes from writing, editing, to proofreading and obtaining an ISBN.

The experience kindled my passion to teach people to write their life stories, and as a result I've also edited and published a number of books with even smaller print runs—books you will never hear of, books not intended for mainstream, but books that capture the voice, the life and times of the writer for the generations to come.