



Dateline Thailand

Anzac Day 1989 saw Australian soldiers at the site of the notorious "Death Railway" in Thailand. The AFP's Senior Liaison Officer in Bangkok, Superintendent Steve Polden, also attended their dawn service.

My family and I were visiting Kanchanaburi Province, the site of Allied war cemeteries, the infamous River Kwai Bridge and sections of the so-called "Death Railway", including a cutting called Hellfire Pass.

We were able to see a little history in the making. For the first time since World War II serving Australian soldiers were working on a part of the Death Railway at Hellfire Pass, reclaiming it from the jungle.

The soldiers, from C Company, Third Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (Para), normally stationed at Butterworth, were clearing the Pass and laid some railway line as part of a memorial to the Allied soldiers who died building it for the Japanese during the war.

The town of Kanchanaburi is some 122 kilometres north-west of Bangkok on the banks of the Meklang River, also known as the River Kwai Yai.

About three kilometres north of the

town is the site of the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai, which formed part of a railway constructed for military purposes by the Japanese war machine with the assistance of Allied prisoners of war and indigenous workers.

The bridge was bombed several times by the Allies during the war and the sections in the middle that were destroyed can be identified by the difference in construction.

The original, temporary, wooden structure situated some 100 metres upstream of the existing bridge, has long since disappeared.

The railway proceeded from Thailand, across the Kwai Yai River and



Section of the "Death Railway" still in use, north of Kanchanaburi.



Members of C Company at work in Hell Fire Pass.

followed the Kwai Noi River to reach the Burmese border at Three Pagoda Pass. It then proceeded into Burma.

The railway passed through dense rainforest, jungle, deep valleys and high mountains. It is estimated that as many as some 100,000 indigenous labourers and about 16,000 Allied prisoners of war lost their lives due to beatings, starvation, disease and exhaustion during the railway's construction.

War Criminals Executed

At the end of the war 32 Japanese soldiers were convicted and sentenced to death, and 79 more sentenced to life imprisonment, for crimes committed against the Allied prisoners working on the railway.

Hellfire Pass is in the jungle about 90 kilometres north of Kanchanaburi and was cut out of a mountain by the Allied prisoners. It is believed to have received its name because the Japanese, in their efforts to hasten construction of the railway, had prisoners

working 24 hours a day and had large fires burning throughout the night to provide light for the workers.

On Anzac Day the Polden family attended a Dawn Service held at Hellfire Pass and then travelled to Kanchanaburi for the main Anzac Day Memorial Service at the War Cemetery. The service was also attended by the soldiers from C Company, the Australian Ambassador and members of the Embassy, together with other people including some World War II veterans.

An L.O's Travels

From the Khunjerab Pass in the snow covered peaks of the Karakoram Mountains on the border of China and Pakistan, to the Khyber Pass in the barren hills of the Hindu Kush mountains on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, to Hellfire Pass in the steamy jungles of north-west Thailand near the Burmese border — the families of AFP LO's find themselves in odd and interesting places when serving overseas.

