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# The Round Tablette

*Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)*

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## Welcome to the second October meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is Professor Kelly Crager, author of *Hell under the Rising Sun*, who will be speaking on the experiences of prisoners of war held by the Japanese, particularly those who built the Thai-Burma Railway known to most as the "Death" Railway. He will be joined by veterans of Japanese captivity who will share their experiences.

For people of a certain age, television series like *Hogan's Heroes* or movies like *The Great Escape* immortalized the World War II POW experience. Based on the European Theater of operations, the plucky Allies outwitted the Germans. The Pacific Theater was a far more sinister affair. The most notable POW movie of the Pacific Theater was 1957's *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, which although cinematographically pleasing, is quite devoid from the reality of a POW's life in building the Thai-Burma railroad. As one POW noted, they were far too well fed to be believable. Recently, another movie, *The Railwayman* provided a more graphic portrayal of survival under the Japanese imprisonment and the long term effects of torture.

The Thai-Burma railway runs 260 miles from Nong Pladukin, Thailand to Thanbyuzayatsin, Burma (now, Myanmar). Originally surveyed by the British in the 1880s the route was scrapped because of the problems of the thick jungle, lack of adequate roads, and disease. The Japanese surveyed the route in the 1920's and did a further survey in 1942. The Japanese Army believed the railroad necessary to further its advances in Asia, by providing a land route to supply their forces in Burma and as a jumping off point for the future invasion of India. The sea routes were much more vulnerable especially after the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway in May and June 1942, respectively. The Japanese overcame the problems the British found in the 1880's by

using forced (slave) labor to build the railroad. When workers are dispensable it minimizes the logistical problems like terrain, disease, and roads.

The Americans who helped build the railroad came from two sources. First, there were the sailors and marines that were part of the crew from the *USS Houston*, known as "the Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast," which was sunk at the Battle of Sunda Strait on February 28, 1942. Most of the men were presumed dead. It was determined after the war that 368 sailors and marines survived the sinking, and 133 died building the "Death Railway. The *USS Houston* crew did receive a bit of recognition, in the movie, *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, Commander Shea, the William Holden character, explains that he was on the *USS Houston* when it sank. Second, were the men of the Texas Army National Guard's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 131<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery that were enroute to help defend the Philippines when they received news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. They were diverted to Java with orders to assist the British, Dutch, and Australian forces defend the island. On March 1942, Japanese forces overwhelmed the Allies on Java and the Texans became known as the "Lost Battalion."

Referring once again to the classic television show, *Hogan's Heroes*, many can recall how Colonel Hogan would remind his German captors of the Geneva Convention. What the character referenced was the Geneva Convention of 1929 which laid out the "rules" for the treatment of prisoners of war. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 stated that in modern warfare fighting men who surrendered were to be treated decently. The 1929 Geneva Convention attempted to define "treated decently." Soldiers who surrendered were to be removed from the battlefield, given adequate medical care, housed and fed in conditions no worse than those endured by troops of the capturing nation, and could refuse to provide any information beyond name, rank, and serial number during an interrogation. If the POW escaped and was re-captured they were to be punished with no more than a month of solitary confinement. All the warring

**If you are a veteran**, or know a veteran, **of one of these campaigns** – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)

nations in World War II agreed to the convention except two; the Japanese who signed it, but never ratified it, and the Soviet Union, because, as legend has it, Stalin stated that no Soviet soldier would ever surrender.

One might surmise that since the Japanese did not ratify the Convention they did not have to abide by the rules, but what they did went beyond the pale of any definition of human decency. They slapped, punched, and beat prisoners with whatever implements were available. They starved prisoners, feeding them rice and tea for days. They would behead prisoners if they attempted escape or even for sport. They forced POW's to stand at attention for days, and used a hose to force water down a prisoner's throat, what is known today as water-boarding.

The railway took little over a year to complete, from June 1942 to October 1943. Approximately 180,000 Asian civilians (known as *romusha*) which included Burmese, Javanese, Malays, Tamils, and Chinese, along with 60,000 Allied POW's worked on the "Death Railway." Of these numbers, 90,000 Asians and 12,399 Allied POW's died, (6,318 British, 2,815 Australian, 2,490 Dutch, 688 Americans, and 20 from the British Commonwealth – India, New Zealand, and Canada). Of the 534 Texans that were taken prisoner by the Japanese, 89 members of the unit died. Throughout the past seventy years the Japanese have downplayed the enormity of their crimes, preferring the fiction of the American cinematic interpretation to the reality of history. It is the duty of the present generation to remember the truth: the Japanese treatment of their prisoners was barbaric.

### Further Readings:

Kelly E. Crager, *Hell under the Rising Sun: Texan POW's and the Building of the Burma-Thailand Death Railway*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

Kyle Thompson, *A Thousand Cups of Rice: Surviving the Death Railway* (Waco, TX: Eakin Press, 1994).

Eric Lomax, *The Railwayman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).

Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1994).

Gregory Michno, *Death on Hellships: Prisoners at Sea in the Pacific War* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute, 2001).

James Hornfischer, *Ship of Ghosts* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

Robert S. LaForte & Ronald E. Marcello, *Building the Death Railway: The Ordeal of American POW's in Burma, 1942-1945* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

Publishers, 1993).

### Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -  
Oct. 21, 2014 – *Rebel POWs* - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) -  
[info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)

St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Sept. 29,  
2014 – Antietam - 715-386-1268 –  
[rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)

Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-  
9970; [www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org](http://www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org)  
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000  
Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050,  
<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser -  
[crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force -  
[www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org) 651-455-6942

Minnesota Air Guard Museum -  
[www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org) 612-713-2523

Friends of Ft. Snelling, [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN,  
320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

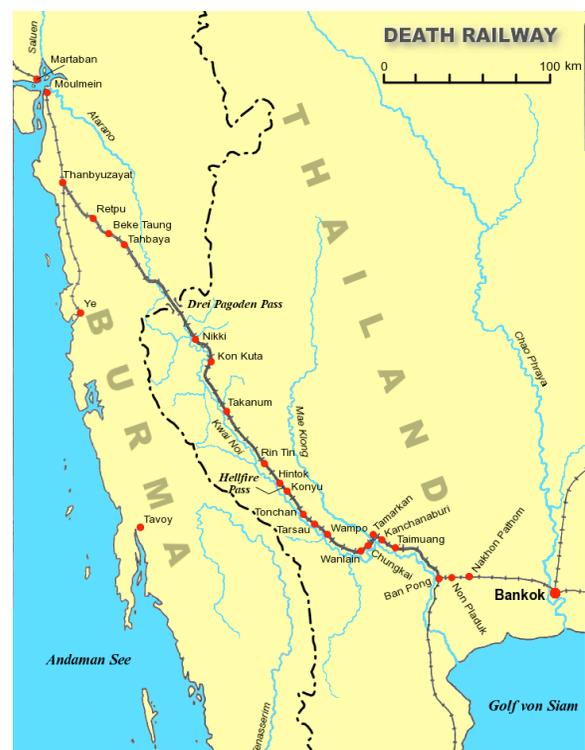
World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621,  
<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Airshow - Eden Prairie - 11/12 July 2015  
[www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org) 952-746-6100

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

### Round Table Schedule 2014 - 2015

- 13 Nov. Deutsch Lecture: The OSS
- 11 Dec. Christmas at Bastogne
- 8 Jan. Myth of the German Offensive
- 12 Feb. Italian Struggle
- 12 Mar. Logistics of War
- 26 Mar. Return to the Philippines
- 9 Apr. Air War in the Mediterranean
- 14 May Retrospective: Goals of WW2 Leaders



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burma\\_Railway#mediaviewer/File:Death\\_Railway.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burma_Railway#mediaviewer/File:Death_Railway.png)