

Eddie Fung
Part 3 - The Burma-Siam Railroad 1942-1944
By Philip Chin

Eddie Fung was assigned to the Number 3 group of prisoners of war assigned to the 5th Railway Regiment of the Imperial Japanese Army working on the northern half of the railroad being built through Burma towards the southern group working up from Thailand (then called Siam.) In this they were comparatively lucky as more casualties were suffered by the groups working in Thailand due to worse jungle and mountain terrain and harder work. The unluckiest Americans of all were the small group assigned to work at Hellfire Pass along with the mainly Australian group. They had to dig a railway passage through solid granite while suffering from starvation, tropical diseases, overwork, and the brutality of the Japanese guards. The area gained its name because the vision of starving and diseased prisoners of war at work at the pass was like a scene from Hell.

Eddie's section of 191 men from the Texas National Guard was the smallest of those assigned to the No. 3 group so they were tasked with being the mobile group that would setup jungle camps used by larger working parties following them as well as the normal work of grading the railbed, laying rails, and building railways trestles. The majority of the rest of No. 3 group was made up of Australian prisoners of war with whom the Texans got along fabulously.

How the system worked was that the Japanese engineer would designate how deep and how far the prisoners needed to dig each day to make a level railbed atop which tracks could be laid evenly as well as how many prisoners would do the work. A typical order might be for 75 meters with 100 prisoners. The Japanese didn't care whether it was mud, dirt, or solid rock or how long the prisoners had to work into the night to accomplish this. This wasn't so bad when they started, the rainy season was far past by this point so the dirt was soft and easy to move.

The Americans worked very hard at the start, starting at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning with the sunrise and finished by noon. They'd catcall the Australian prisoners still working slowly beside their own group on their way back to camp and cheekily offer them help. The Australians called back, "Yanks, you're crazy! They're going to move it up!" Sure enough the Japanese increased the work they wanted accomplished by 50% which the Americans again easily beat. The Australians told them again, "Take all day to do it. Don't do it in the shortest time possible, because they'll just keep adding it on." Nevertheless the Americans worked even harder to accomplish the ever increasing amount of work the Japanese kept adding on. The Americans were young, healthy, and they had national and state pride to work for. It was only after starvation, tropical diseases, and the rainy season turning everything into mud did they realize what a

mistake they'd made. They generally worked from 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning from sunrise to 5 o'clock in the afternoon, 12 to 13 hour workdays, 10 days at a time with 1 day off in between until May 1943. It was exhausting and backbreaking work punctuated by beatings from Japanese and Korean guards

The hardest job was clearing bamboo groves. The thick interlaced roots defeated the efforts of elephants to pull them out. Japanese attempts to motivate the elephants through beatings as they would towards their own men or prisoners of war simply led to rampaging enraged elephants crashing through the bamboo groves. The prisoners said it took 100 prisoners to equal 1 elephant in that work.

Rations were set at a pound of rice per man per day. But rations were set by how many men actually worked. If the Japanese only wanted 100 out of 500 men to work that day then only rations for 100 men were given. Later on as prisoners became weaker and sicker they were lucky to have 20% of the men available for work. 1/5 rations amounted to only a spoonful of rice per man per day. To this was added whatever vegetables and fruits the men could gather from the jungle, traded for from the natives, and some vegetables and meat provided by the Japanese. Occasionally the Japanese would slaughter an ox and give whatever remained of it to the prisoners after taking their majority share. The meat and vegetables would go into the communal stew pot. One time a python was added to the pot, shot by one of the prisoners after one of the guards kept missing and finally loaned his rifle out to the prisoner to shoot.

Eddie again had to show the cooks at this new camp the proper way to cook rice using the woks the Japanese issued the prisoners. He also showed the Australian cooks the trick of wrapping a towel around the lid to keep steam from escaping as well as how to properly wash and clean the rice before cooking it. The hard crust of rice that remained at the bottom of the wok he directed be reserved for prisoners in the camp hospital as a treat. All the eating and cooking habits of Chinatown proved to be of value as a prisoner of war. Saving the parts of animals that were usually discarded such as the hearts, livers, kidneys, blood, and tripe was not something the American or Australian prisoners were used to but Eddie was very familiar with and taught them which came to be very valued later on. He was even familiar with most of the vegetables the Japanese gave them and could advise on how they should be properly prepared to make them palatable.

One time Eddie came back from Japanese headquarters with a mess kit full of chicken liver and bitter melon soup that one of the cooks had given him. One of the curious Texans asked what Eddie had and was told that it was bitter melon, a unique Chinese vegetable. Eddie gave him a half slice to try and warned him that it was okay to spit it out because it was bitter. The man tried it and immediately spit it out exclaiming, "How can you eat that stuff?" Another time Eddie horrified his work crew by cooking and eating snails. One of his bunkmates, Leonard Drake asked, "Eddie, you mean to tell me that you had to eat all this stuff at home?" Eddie jokingly replied, "Well, why do you think I left home, Leonard?"

Within a few months of being in the jungle the uniforms of the prisoners were all gone. In humid tropical conditions the stitches holding their clothes and shoes together disintegrated and leather rotted. The remaining cloth material was fashioned into a type of underwear that Eddie jokingly refers to as a G-string that was based upon the Japanese fundoshi. A standard pair of pants legs from the GI issue khaki pants would make two such loincloths. The exposure of so much skin and bare feet in the tropics left the men vulnerable to lice, leeches, malaria bearing mosquitoes, and skin burrowing intestinal worms that would plague them throughout the war. They also had to watch out for snakes, spiders, and scorpions. Exposed skin also made them vulnerable to minor scratches during their work that didn't sound serious but often developed into large and infected bacteria filled ulcers that could prove fatal. Eddie described desperate men sitting in river water so that the fish could nibble away the infected flesh while others resorted to inserting live maggots into their wounds (something modern surgeons have experimented with as the insect larvae naturally only eat dead tissue.) Most agonizing of all was removing the infection with a sharpened spoon as the only available surgical tool. If worst came to worst then amputation was done without anesthetic or proper tools. The same bone saw used to provide for the cooking pots was also used for amputations to lack of anything better. No medicine or anti-infectious agents were ever provided by the Japanese. Despite the starvation and ever increasing poor health the prisoners always volunteered to donate blood for such rough surgeries.

Eddie's group was lucky in losing only 13 dead out of 191 men in the year and a half they were in the jungles. Much of that could be attributed to the doctor they had traded a pocketwatch to a Japanese guard for. Doctor Henri Hekking was a Dutch physician born and raised in Java who'd specialized in tropical medicine and diseases and also learned about herbal medications from his grandmother. He showed them the trick of cleaning and collecting egg shells, toasting them in a frying pan, then crushing them into a white powder to use as a calcium supplement. He told them, "At this stage, you're not really experiencing hunger yet, but you must learn to eat everything that is eatable. Don't throw anything away." He also advised the prisoners on how to protect against infection of their wounds and boosted their morale and chances of recovering by using psychology. His "magic potions" as he called them might have been harmless and ineffective placebos, medicine, or herbal medications but they made the prisoners believe in their chances of recovery so that they did in fact recover more often than not. The larger American group of 478 people without such benefit lost 120 men dead. In fact Eddie's group had the lowest casualty rate of all the prisoner of war groups serving along the Burma-Siam Railway.

To maintain discipline the Japanese organized the prisoners of war into groups of 100 known as a kumi. If any single prisoner of war successfully escaped they were told that ten members of the kumi would be executed. If all 100 men escaped from the kumi then the two neighboring kumis would be executed. Nevertheless prisoners still tried to escape. A group of three Australians were caught. One had acute appendicitis and had been left behind by the others. The Japanese removed the appendix, waited until the man recovered, then tied all three men blindfolded to stakes in front of the other prisoners where they were shot. Eddie described a series of atrocities and punishments. One of the worst was that of an interpreter who'd somehow displeased the Japanese. He

was forced to stand in a full cesspool for hours until his legs gave out and he drowned. The prisoner commander begged the Japanese to show mercy but the Japanese refused because it had been their intention to kill the man all along.

One time the prisoners openly defied their captors when a propaganda film was made showing how nice conditions were in the POW camps. Everything was cleaned up and the prisoners were even temporarily issued clothes to look presentable and a proper canteen was filmed to show the prisoners were being well fed. They were instructed to march out of camp singing, "Bless them all, bless them all, the long and the short and the tall. There will be no promotions this side of the ocean, bless them all." The prisoners marched out of camp happily singing in unison, "F*** them all." Someone caught on to this after the film was developed and the prisoners were forced to march again for the cameras, but this time without the singing.

Eddie made his name as a master scrounger, noting opportunities to steal things from the Japanese and smuggle it back into the camps. Everything had to be used right away to avoid the frequent snap inspections so Eddie had to be circumspect in what he could steal. One time Eddie and the prisoner he was with noted an unguarded basket of cigarette cartons at the train station they were working at. Without speaking a word to each other they quickly shoved it into hiding beneath a building. That way if a search was done right away nothing would be found on the prisoners and the theft might be blamed on some forgetful Japanese misplacing it or shifty natives stealing it. The next day Eddie returned and smuggled the basket into camp. Neither man smoked but those in the camp who did enjoyed a great day of smoking.

Most of the things he stole were food items. The Japanese responded by mining the kitchen. Eddie thought about observing the Japanese routine and thereby avoiding the booby traps by seeing where they went but then he thought of another way. One night he snuck out, loosened the vines that held the bamboo walls of the kitchen together and took down part of the wall. He stole a 100 pound bag of sugar, dragged the bag out, then carefully set the piece of wall back into place. He donated the bag to Dr. Hekking and the wounded under his care as well as to the prisoner mess where the evidence quickly disappeared. Part of the reason why so many more prisoners survived in this small group than in others was because more individuals like Eddie took care of the needs of the greater group. Informal groups of three or four people would band together. If one got sick then his buddies would take care of him. If all of them got sick then others would take care of them. A prisoner who was better at physical labor, or could make things, would help out a prisoner who was a better scrounger and so on. Historically these kind of informal mutual benefit associations have always led to higher prisoner of war survival rates documented from the Civil War onwards. It was just the same as how things were done among the Texans back home with neighbors taking care of neighbors. Units along the railways that descended into near anarchy with every man for themselves, especially among the civilian slave laborers who lacked any formal military structure or unity, had much higher death rates.

By May of 1943 the tide of Japanese advances had decisively reversed. Major defeats in land and sea battles in 1942 and 1943 saw the Allied forces advancing across the Pacific.

Meanwhile the Japanese push towards India had stalled due to lack of supplies coming through Burma. The urgency of building a railroad from Thailand to Burma became even more urgent to avoid the long and vulnerable sea journey by ship around the Malay Peninsula. Lieutenant Colonel Nagatomo, the Japanese official in charge of the rail project was ordered to kill himself if he failed to complete the task in time, so the so-called "speedo" was ordered. No days off were allowed, all prisoners would work including the sick ones unless they were too sick to move. The brutality of the guards also increased as they too came under pressure to hurry the work up.

Each prisoner was originally expected to move 1.5 cubic meters of dirt. This was incrementally increased to 3.2 meters. This increased work came at the start of the monsoon season where up to 280 inches of rain could fall a month. Prisoners without shoes could hardly find footing in the mud while carrying the weight of water in addition to dirt in discarded rice bags that two men would carry between two poles. This was the only equipment provided to carry dirt away. Their workdays were now "from can't see to can't see" as they said, about 18 hours everyday.

When Allied bombers took out part of a railway bridge, the prisoners had to unload one train, transport the goods across the gap, and load a train on the other side. They worked for five days and nights without any sleep. This was all done while rations were being cut more and more because of the long distance from supply sources, pilferage along the way, and the fact that more and more men were ending up too sick to work. As was the Japanese policy only enough rations were given to feed the number of men that actually worked that day with no food provided for anyone else. The Japanese also periodically weighed the prisoners. Eddie later found out their theory was that the less a man weighed the less food he needed so they cut the rations even more. The Japanese also proved to be even less helpful as scrounging targets now because they were on short rations as well.

It was during this time that Eddie got seriously sick twice. The first was a leg wound that turned into an ulcer that Dr. Hekking had to spend ten minutes operating on by scraping away the infected flesh. There was no anesthetic of course so Eddie had to endure the worst pain of his life. Nobody had to hold him down for the operation at least. The only dressing available afterwards was a boiled piece of cloth held in place by a bandage. Eddie spent a week recuperating even though he wanted to work to keep providing another full ration for the other prisoners to divide among the group. Dr. Hekking convinced him not to take the chance of developing another infection.

The second illness was when Eddie simultaneously contracted malaria and dysentery, either of which could be fatal. The chills and fever of malaria spread by mosquitoes makes people thirsty and in fatal cases literally cooked the brain by high fever. The incessant diarrhea of dysentery spread by fly infestations, infected water, or improper handling of food or water, dehydrates the body and in the worst fatal form causes internal hemorrhaging. During treatment Eddie turned out to be allergic to quinine, the standard treatment for malaria. Dr. Hekking managed to shock Eddie back to consciousness and managed to keep him going. Eddie drank boiled water, forced himself to eat, and wrapped himself in a blanket to wait out the diseases.

It was the lowest point of his prisoner of war existence and he thought about simply giving up and dying. "Adding up the pros and cons, the only thing that tipped the balance was my curious nature. I wanted to see what the next day would bring, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, I just wanted to know. So I hung in there."

He reflected as well on the plight of others, "Of course, I could have been worse off than that. A lot of the other fellows got beriberi, pellagra, and dengue fever. We were just lucky we didn't catch cholera from the natives... People would vomit and excrete as if they were dying at both ends. You could literally see them melt in front of you and fade away. After cholera broke out in one of the British camps you could smell that camp for miles. And before they cleared out of the camp, they had to burn people who were not quite dead yet. But they had to leave and they couldn't take any chances."

The terrifying experience left Eddie weighing only sixty pounds and in the camp hospital for two weeks although it took him a further two weeks to completely recover after he was released. Things got worse and worse for the prisoners from that point on as the pace of building continued to speed up. The prisoners finally reached Kilo 105, each camp being named from the distance measured in kilometers from their start point in Burma working south towards Thailand. This area was high in the mountains near the Three Pagodas Pass which marked the border between Burma and Thailand. Here they experienced cold weather for the first time due to the altitude. Many prisoners at this point just lost the will to live, gave up, and died. Eddie tells several stories about the compassion with which the prisoners treated each other and the dead. Charles "Red" Oosting promised his friend, W.F. Mattfeld, to return Mattfeld's wallet to his mother with two dollars in it. When Mattfeld died of beriberi and heart failure, Red took the wallet and safeguarded it from then on. Even though Red could have used the money then and substituted another two dollar bill later to help his own survival he kept his promise.

On October 17, 1943 the railroad was officially declared open but the work continued for the prisoners until January 1944 to finish the details such as evening out the railbed by shifting ballast. During this time Eddie memorably fainted in front of Lieutenant Colonel Nagatomo during an inspection tour when he failed to wiggle his toes during an inspection to keep blood circulating away from his feet while standing at attention. That worthy simply ignored Eddie and continued his inspection. In January the men were loaded onto a train and taken out of Burma back to Thailand. On the way they passed through the southern portion of the track in Thailand and noted just how much worse conditions were there where it was all mountains and hills and steep ravines that were bridged with rickety looking wooden trestle bridges that soared up to eighty feet high. They also passed through Hellfire Pass and were sobered to see how deeply the prisoners had had to dig through solid granite to build it. 69 prisoners had been beaten to death by the guards and over 700 had died in the six weeks of construction of that section of the railway.

They ended up in the small town of Kanburi in Kachinburi Province in Western Thailand. It seemed like paradise after what they'd experienced since May. They got at

least two bowls of rice twice a day supplemented with an occasional fish. The first time they got fish, Eddie collected the discarded heads, bones, and tails from the other prisoners, boiled them into a broth with ginger and sugar, then thickened the mixture with pounded rice. A spoonful of this was added to provide flavor to the rice of each prisoner at the next meal. The men said in admiration, "Oh, you can do something with the fish heads."

Eddie's greatest feat as a scrounger was when Dr. Hekking asked him to keep a lookout for quinine since he was running low on the medicine and added the admonition for Eddie to, "Do what you can, but don't get into any trouble." Working in Japanese headquarters by this time Eddie quickly found out where the medical supplies were kept by the medical officer stationed there and that there were four cases of quinine. He observed the area for two days then broke in using his old trick of untying the vines holding the bamboo wall together to take down part of the wall. He unpacked all 24 bottles of quinine from a case then carefully placed the empty box beneath all the others.

Realistically he should have then traded the quinine with a native and given the cash to Dr. Hekking to make his own deal for quinine. Instead, Eddie, who was in charge of bringing in food baskets that day, had an instinctual feeling that told him he wasn't going to be searched. So he weighed the idea of smuggling in 4, 5, or 6 bottles at a time. Even going 6 bottles at a time, that was 4 trips, on any of which he could be caught by the guards. Instinct again made him go for the full 24. The Australian carrying the food basket with him plainly thought he was crazy and said, "Eddie, you're going to get us killed." Eddie assured him confidently that the guards wouldn't search them then put some bananas on top of the bottles to conceal them. He told the Australian he'd give him half the bottles if he'd help. "What are you going to do with it?" he was asked. "Give it to the doc for the hospital," he answered. "Now, if you're going to do that, I'll help you carry it in," the Australian said. Once the load was safely taken past the guards and into the camp Eddie offered the Australian half the bottles again. The Australian said, "Let's see what your doctor wants first. If he's a good bloke, he'll share it with us." Doctor Hekking indeed shared the haul of quinine with all the other doctors.

Eddie always tells this part of his story with a hint of an impish smile like a naughty schoolboy that got away with a trick. This belies the seriousness of what he'd done. The least Eddie could have expected if he'd been caught was a beating and then execution. The truth was that Eddie credited Doctor Hekking with saving his life twice. He and many prisoners didn't hesitate to help the doctor whenever he needed it because they knew he'd saved their lives. Eddie even offered to steal a microscope from the Japanese for the doctor once. The doctor said, "Eddie, I would love that microscope but where am I going to hide it?"

For more information please read:

The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, Prisoner of War, edited by Judy Yung, University of Washington Press, (2007) ISBN: 978-0-295-98754-5