

THE FATE OF THE GHOST SHIP USS HOUSTON /BUILDING THE BURMA RAILROAD

THE OFFICIAL PRESIDENTIAL SHIP OF FDR

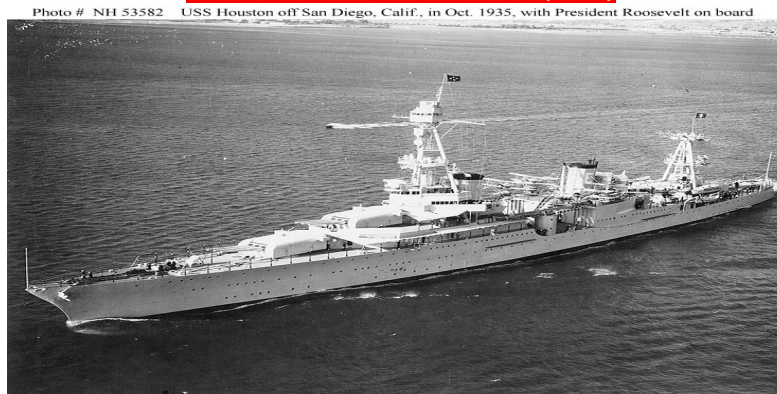
THE STORY OF THE US HEAVY CRUISER USS HOUSTON AKA "THE GALLOPING GHOST OF THE JAVA COAST"

THE SHIP OF GHOSTS

AND THE FATE OF HER SURVIVORS WHO BECAME POW'S AND WORKED ON THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI

185

THIS SECTION HAS 10 PARTS (A - J)



The USS Houston off San Diego in October 1935 with President Roosevelt on board

INTRODUCTION

*This article is actually two separate though related stories of the fate of both the ship itself and the crew members who survived. The ship was literally "on its own" on the night of February 28, 1942. She was the only ship left afloat and fought a valiant with the German Navy and was ultimately sunk by three Japanese submarine torpedoes. **The USS Houston was a victim of political budget cuts and was not ready for combat.***

Another example of our politicians sending our troops to war "unprepared and expendable". Does this procedure sound familiar in other US Wars or, as the political term reads "Conflicts".....sending our troops into "harm's way knowing they are not properly prepared...and yes indeed this has happened again in recent "skirmishes".

Many of those who survived the sinking of the USS Houston ended up in Japanese prison camps and were used as slave labor to build the "Burma Railroad" of which the movie the "Bridge over the River Kwai" was loosely based on. Most of those involved said the prison camps were their "True Hell"

When researching information for the story about the Allied POWs who were forced to build the Burma Railway and The Bridge over The River Kwai I was amazed how much the story and the events have been commercialized. Today there are lodging places, guided tours and places to eat all over the areas where the POW's have died. More than half of the websites containing data on this are advertising places to stay, how to get there etc. Unfortunately a lot of actual data has disappeared.

JOHN



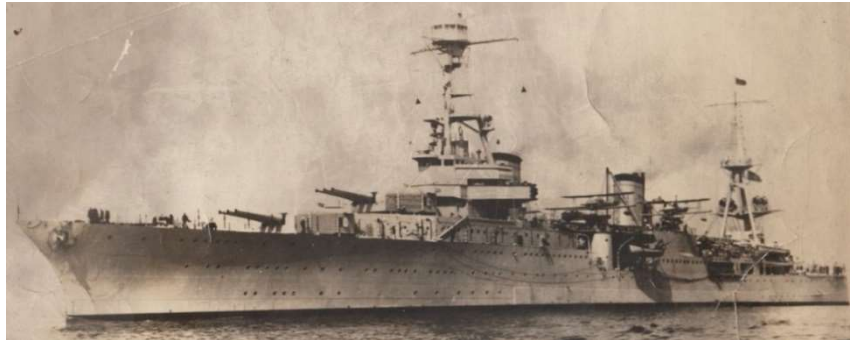
FDR aboard the USS Houston in 1938



THE STORY OF THE SHIP

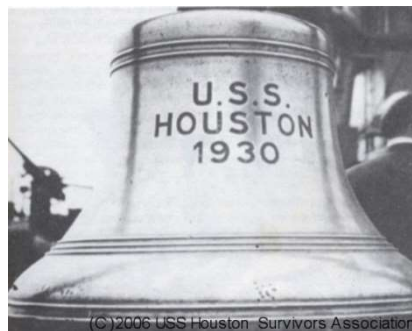
COMMISSIONED: JUNE 30, 1930

SUNK BY THE JAPANESE: FEBRUARY 28, 1942



On the night of February 28, 1942, the heavy cruiser USS Houston vanished off the coast of Java in the Dutch East Indies. The flagship of the Asiatic Fleet, the Houston had been one of the best-known ships in the prewar Navy and President Roosevelt's personal favorite. The Houston's crews, mostly professionals from the old Navy, including many old China hands, were proud and disciplined sailors They were ready for war but their ship, unfortunately, was not. A victim of budget slashing and disarmament treaties, the Houston carried thin armor plating, no radar, obsolete fire-control equipment, and faulty ammunition. America had not been willing to spend the money to maintain the nation's military preparedness, and the Houston and her crew paid the price.

For 3-and-a-half months after Pearl Harbor, the Houston did battle against overwhelming Japanese air and sea forces, left on her own to fight a delaying action while America belatedly built up its military forces. The crew knew they were expendable, but they fought and bled and died until there seemed to be nothing more to give, right through the night they fought their last, most gallant battle.



The bell of the USS Houston which was the only item saved

The ship was sunk by a Japanese submarine and eventually the survivors were picked up by the Japanese and sent to POW camps. Most of the POW's were sent to POW Camps in Burma and Thailand and were forced to work on the Burma Railroad and help build the bridge made famous in the movie "Bridge Over The River Kwai" Their story starts in the next section directly below.



This headline appeared in the Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express on March 14, 1942. The article reported that the U.S.S. Houston had not been heard from since heading for the Sunda Strait the night of February 28th

The Houston's disappearance remained a mystery for four years. It wasn't until the war's end, when 292 survivors of the 1064-man crew were found in Japanese POW camps, that her fate was finally known.thus she became "The Ghost Ship"

B

POWS FROM THE USS HOUSTON AND OTHERS COUNTRIES

STORY OF THE BUILDING OF THE BURMA RAIROAD & THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI



WATCH THE BELOW VIDEO'S

The Real Story of the Bridge on the River Kwai Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93BvEKXW0g4>

A Most accurate BBC version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Zh-T8YPmOE>

The Story of the USS Houston, FDR's Legendary Lost Cruiser, and the Epic Saga of Her Survivors In the brutal privation of jungle POW camps dubiously immortalized in such films as The Bridge on the River Kwai, the war continued for the men of the Houston—a life-and-death struggle to survive forced labor, starvation, disease, and psychological torture.



Living Conditions

Here is the gritty, unvarnished story of the infamous Burma–Thailand Death Railway glamorized by Hollywood, but which in reality mercilessly reduced men to little more than animals, who fought back against their dehumanization with dignity, ingenuity, sabotage, will–power—and the undying faith that their country would prevail.

The Burma Railway, **also known as the Death Railway**, the Thailand–Burma Railway and similar names, was a 415 kilometers' (258 mi) railway between Bangkok, Thailand, and Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar), built by the Empire of Japan During World War II, to support its forces in the Burma campaign.





You've probably seen the 1957 movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, but you might not know how much of the film was real and how much was fictionalized. **The real history of how the railway between Burma and China was built, including the bridge, is a horrific story**



The actual Bridge over the River Kwai today where it was when the allies bombed it. Some of it is still original.



The Real Bridge over the River Kwa



Bridge from the Movie

The British didn't build the railway in the 19th century because it would be too expensive. During World War II, the invading Japanese took on the project, but expected it to take five years to complete. Those plans were drawn before they found a source of free labor: the Allied POWs.

Because of the inhuman amount of labor forced on the prisoners, the railway line that was expected to take five years to complete was ready in only 16 months.

Starvation provisions, overloading of work, dismal or absent accommodation and sanitation, and the individual viciousness of Japanese and Korean engineers and guards, took their expected toll. The Japanese refused to sign the Geneva Convention in 1929 as it meant that prisoners would be treated better than their own servicemen

C

HELLFIRE PASS



REMEMBERING

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS89-zOwOXA>

Hellfire Pass in the Tenasserim Hills was a particularly difficult section of the line to build. It was the largest rock cutting on the railway, coupled with its general remoteness and the lack of proper construction tools during building. A tunnel would have been possible to build instead of a cutting, but this could only be constructed at the two ends at any one time, whereas the cutting could be constructed at all points simultaneously despite the excess effort required by the POWs.



The old rail tracks are long gone, and never will be re-laid, out of respect to the memory of those who died here, but the ties that held the tracks are still visible.

The Australian, British, Dutch and other allied Prisoners of War were required by the Japanese to work 18 hours a day to complete the cutting. Sixty nine men were beaten to death by Japanese guards in the six weeks it took to build the cutting, and many more died from cholera, dysentery, starvation, and exhaustion. However, the majority of deaths occurred amongst laborers whom the Japanese enticed to come to help build the line with false promises of good jobs. These laborers, mostly Malayans (Chinese, Malays and Tamils from Malaya), suffered mostly the same as the POWs at the hands of the Japanese. The Japanese kept no records of these deaths.



The survivors were aghast that, for many viewers, this movie reflected what occurred on the Death Railway. Photos and sketches in this documentary make a mockery of David Lean's portrayal. In addition to the scarcity of food and medical supplies, the survivors repeatedly mentioned the cruelty of the guards, especially the Koreans.

The destruction of the bridge as depicted in the film is entirely fictional. In fact, two bridges were built: a temporary wooden bridge and a permanent steel and concrete bridge a few months later. Both bridges were used for two years until they were destroyed by Allied aerial bombing. The steel bridge was repaired and is still in use today.

The sad story of the POWs. The deadly brutal use of British prisoners of war by the cruel Japanese to build a railway linking Thailand to Burma in 1943 **was one of the worst atrocities of the Second World War.**

The River Kwai Bridge was in use for 20 months before Allied Bombed it in 1945. **The Japanese even tied Allied POW's on the Bridge to discourage Allied bombing.**

D

PRISONER OF WAR & DEATH STATISTICS

WORKERS AND DEATHS ON THE BURMA RAILWAY FROM 1942-1945

NATIONALITY	POW'S	DEATHS	DEATH RATE
BRITISH	30,131	6,904	23%
DUTCH	17,990	2,782	15%
AUSTRALIAN	13,004	2,802	22%
AMERICAN	686	133	19%
TOTALS	61,811	12,621	20%



POW Cemetery, Kanchanaburi, Thailand (Above & Below)



The remains of United States personnel were repatriated. Of the 668 US personnel forced to work on the railway, 133 died.

This included personnel from **USS Houston** and the 131st Field Artillery Regiment of the Texas Army National Guard.

The Americans were called the Lost Battalion as their fate was unknown to the United States for more than two years after their capture.

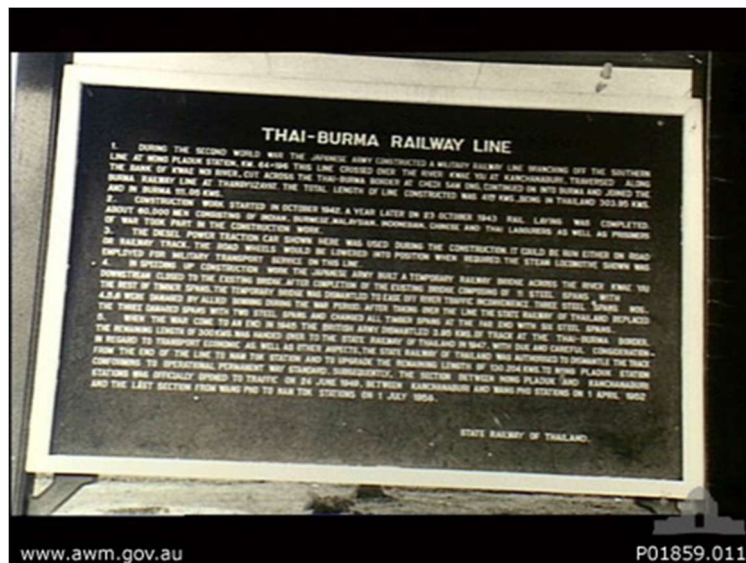


Thanbyuzayat Allied War Cemetery, Burma. At the conclusion of the war in August 1945, the graves of those POWs who died during the construction and maintenance of the railway, between Thanbyuzayat and Nieke, were transferred to this cemetery **(except Americans who were repatriated)** including 1335 Australians.



KANCHANABURI THAILAND 1973

A memorial plaque erected on the southern bank of the River Kwai, at one end of the bridge which was built over the river by allied prisoners-of-war (POWs) and Asian laborers from various countries.



The inscription on the plaque reads: "Thai-Burma Railway Line.

A memorial plaque erected on the southern bank of the River Kwai, at one end of the bridge which was built over the river by allied prisoners-of-war (POWs) and Asian laborer's from various countries. The plaque reads as follows:

1. During the Second World War the Japanese Army constructed a military railway line branching off the southern line at Nong Pladuk (also known as Non Pladuk) Station, Km.64+196. This line crossed over the River Kwai Yai at Kanchanaburi, traversed along the bank of Kwai Noi River, cut across the Thai-Burma border at Chedi Sam Ong, continued on into Burma and joined the Burma railway line at Thanbyuzayat. The total length of line constructed was 419 kms., being in Thailand 303.95 kms. and in Burma 111.05 kms.

2. Construction work started in October 1942. A year later on 23 October 1943 rail laying was completed. About 60,000 men consisting of Indian, Burmese, Malaysian, Indonesian, Chinese and Thai laborers as well as prisoners of war took part in the construction work.

3. The diesel power traction car shown here was used during the construction. It could be run either on road or railway track. The road wheels would be lowered into position when required. The steam locomotive shown was employed for military transport service on this line.

4. In speeding up construction work the Japanese Army built a temporary railway bridge across the River Kwai Yai downstream close to the existing bridge. After completion of the existing bridge composing of 11 steel spans with the rest of timber spans, the temporary bridge was dismantled to ease off river traffic inconvenience. Three steel spans nos. 4, 5, 6 were damaged by allied bombing during the war period. After taking over the line the State Railway of Thailand replaced the three damaged spans with two steel spans and changed all timber spans at the far end with six steel spans.

5. When the war came to an end in 1945 the British Army dismantled 3.95 kms. of track at the Thai-Burma border. The remaining length of 300 kms. was handed over to the State Railway of Thailand in 1947. With due and careful consideration in regard to transport economic as well as other aspects, the State Railway of Thailand was authorized to dismantle the track from the end of the line to Nam Tok Station and to upgrade the remaining length of 130.204 kms to Nong Pladuk Station conforming to operational permanent way standard. Subsequently, the section between Nong Pladuk and Kanchanaburi Stations was officially opened to traffic on 24 June 1949, between Kanchanaburi and Wang Pho Stations on 1 April 1952 and the last section from Wang Pho to Nam Tok Stations on 1 July 1958.



INTERVIEW WITH TWO SURVIVORS OF THE USS HOUSTON AND THE BUILDING OF THE BURMA RAILROAD

For the first time in 70 years, British POWs and their Japanese evil captors, many now in their nineties, open their hearts to tell the story of what really happened on the 'Death Railway'. Alongside the extraordinary experiences and stories of survival told by the British, their Japanese guards tell of different horrors of war, some never disclosed before as far as I know. Exploring how they have survived the terrible memories, this is an often inspiring story that many of these men have waited a long time to tell. What emerges is a warm and emotional journey through the lives of men from different sides reflecting on a terrible event that still haunts them



David Flynn & Howard Brooks

The USS Houston was listing and ablaze when radioman David Flynn heard a chilling order come over the public address system: "Hear this: All hands abandon ship! "At that announcement you sort of froze for a second," Flynn said. "We knew it was the end," said electrician's mate Howard Brooks.

Thursday is the 70th anniversary of the sinking of the USS Houston by a Japanese fleet off the coast of Java during World War II.

Brooks, of New Jersey, and Flynn, of Florida, were in their early 20s when they leapt for their lives from the burning warship into a bloody sea roiled by exploding shells and machine gun fire. The men now are 92 years old, but they carry visceral memories of that day. "To me, it's a very quick 70 years," Brooks said.

Of 1,068 crewmen, Brooks and Flynn were among just 291 sailors and Marines who survived both the sinking of the USS Houston and the years of brutal captivity that followed.

The destruction of the heavy cruiser hit the city of Houston hard, igniting a patriotic frenzy that culminated in a mass recruiting drive for volunteers to replace the lost crew, and an \$85 million fundraising campaign to pay for a new cruiser, as well as an aircraft carrier, the USS San Jacinto.

Fifteen of the original crew members are still living, but Brooks and Flynn are the only two expected to make it to the reunion of the USS Houston CA-30 Survivors Association this weekend in their ship's namesake city. On Saturday, they will join relatives of their shipmates for a 2 p.m. memorial service at a monument dedicated to the heavy cruiser in Sam Houston Park downtown.

The Japanese sank the USS Houston and the Australian light cruiser HMAS Perth shortly after midnight on March 1, 1942, during the Battle of Sunda Strait.

The Perth went down first, about 12:15 a.m. Outgunned and outnumbered, the USS Houston's crew fought on alone for a half hour until all ammunition was spent.

"We had no planes in the air at all, but the Japanese had planes and they were dropping what we called star shells," Brooks said. "They would light up the whole area around like daylight, and we could see the ships firing at us. We were so close we could see sailors on the decks of the Japanese destroyers."

Flynn's battle station was deep below decks in the plotting room, the so-called brains of the ship. When the order came to abandon ship, he followed another sailor who motioned for him to climb up a leg of the mast.

"I didn't think twice," Flynn said. "We had never done it in drills or anything. It was a split-second decision. "Flynn exited at the communication deck. Bleeding from shrapnel wounds, he jumped into the water and swam for his life.

"The name of the game was to distance yourself as quickly as possible from the ship, and you'd swim underwater to do this to avoid being machine-gunned," he said. Explosions jarred Flynn as he swam, feeling "like somebody was just tearing your stomach out," he said.

A Japanese boat fished him out of the water.

Brooks, unhurt, clung to the side of a life raft for three days. In the raft, several shipmates lay dying, one by one. "That was really a scary part to see those injured guys and not to be able to do anything and to see the Japanese not care about helping any wounded," he said.

The raft eventually washed ashore, where Brooks was captured by the Japanese.

He and Flynn spent the next 3½ years as prisoners of war. Brooks was among those forced to build the Burma Railway, made famous in the 1957 film "The Bridge on the River Kwai."

"I was average 30 pounds underweight the whole time," Brooks said. "I tell you it was hard work. It was pick and shovel or ax, or sawing by hand. There was nothing with a motor on it ... no electricity. We didn't even have a wheelbarrow to move the dirt. We used bags on poles."

Back in America, word of the USS Houston's fate "aroused a fever pitch of patriotism in Houston," according to a 1949 Houston Chronicle article commemorating the event.

"Her loss made the war something more of a personal conflict to more than half a million people," the article reads. "Official news of her destruction ... slapped the city squarely between the eyes, and set off a series of events that stands unequalled in the nation."

One thousand recruits volunteered to replace the lost crew of the Houston in what the newspaper enthusiastically described as "the greatest single mass recruiting drive ever seen in the United States."

During a public swearing-in ceremony, Mayor Neal Pickett read a special message from **President Franklin D. Roosevelt** that was broadcast around the world: "Our enemies have given us the chance to prove that there will be another USS Houston, and yet another USS Houston if that becomes necessary, and still another USS Houston as long as American ideals are in jeopardy," Roosevelt said.

After the war, Flynn went on to work for IBM, marry and become the father of four children. Brooks became an electrical engineer. He's married and has two sons.

If Brooks had been told back when he was clinging to a raft that he'd live long enough to attend a ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the USS Houston's loss, he would not have believed it. "I've been very, very lucky, and I tell myself that every day," he said.

G

USS HOUSTON LOCATED



Images of parts of the USS Houston taken by Navy divers

Wednesday March 18, 2015 the wreck of the USS Houston, a World War II-era cruiser sunk by the Japanese, was identified in the Java Sea by divers from the United States and Indonesia, the Navy announced on Monday.

Adm. Harry Harris told The Associated Press that divers have recorded evidence of the ship's resting place in the Java Sea, which is on the Sunda Shelf between the Indonesian islands of Borneo and Java. Harris told The AP that while there was evidence that the site had been disturbed, they were working on efforts to keep that from happening again.

"In my discussions with our Indonesian navy partners, they share our sense of obligation to protect this and other gravesites," Harris said in a statement. "Surveying the site, of course was only the first step in partnering to respect those sailors who made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure the freedoms and security that we richly enjoy today."

The USS Houston was sunk during the Battle of Sunda Strait on Feb. 28, 1942, according to the Navy. It was estimated that more than 700 people lost their lives when the ship went down. The Navy said the ship is still the property of the U.S. under international law.

The Navy estimates there are more than 17,000 sunken ships and aircraft resting on the ocean floor worldwide.



This trumpet was illegally salvaged recently from the wreck of the USS Houston. The trumpet is now under the care of The Naval History & Heritage Command's Archeology branch that preserves, protects and fights to recover looted US Naval History. Efforts are underway to preserve the trumpet while Navy divers prepare to survey the wreck of the Houston this month during annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and training exercises.



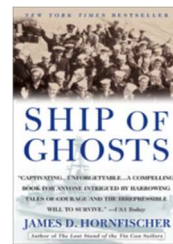
This silver service decorated with Texas motifs was presented to the ship by the citizens of Houston during her first trip to the city in 1930. The service was removed from the ship in the Philippines at the beginning of World War II and never recovered.



COMMENTS, OPINIONS & FACTS BY THE AUTHOR OF "SHIP OF GHOSTS"
(WITH COMMENTS CONCERNING THE BUILDING OF THE BURMA RAILWAY)



JAMES D. HORNFISCHER



The annals of World War II are filled with epic dramas, but who remembers the "Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast"?

That's what they called the heavy cruiser USS Houston, gallant flagship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet and President Roosevelt's personal favorite, in the early days of the war.

She initially seemed charmed; the Japanese propaganda machine erroneously reported her sunk several times before she finally did go to the bottom.

Then began the most harrowing ordeal of survival and endurance in the Pacific theater, says author James D. Hornfischer.

Her survivors washed up on Java, where they were captured and forced into slavery on the Burma-Thailand Railway, laboring for years in the jungle alongside thousands of British, Dutch and Australian prisoners.

They suffered from tropical diseases, malnutrition, festering wounds and overwork at the hands of brutal Japanese overlord's hell bent on building the railway made famous in the book and movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai."

Fate was especially cruel for a few of these sailors. At the end of the war, two died in the stinking holds of Japanese prison ships torpedoed by U.S. submarines.

For Hornfischer, author of "The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors," the tale of the Houston and the Death Railway is all the more poignant because it is relatively unsung, at least compared to such well-documented horrors as the Bataan Death March.

"The story of the USS Houston was largely unknown even in its own time," he writes. "Since then, what may have been the most trying ordeal to beset a ship's company has lain in puzzling obscurity."

His book presents the tale in straightforward journalistic fashion, relying on historical documents and the recollections of the dwindling survivors -- 42 as of February.

Most of the 1,168 men aboard died when the ship sank off the coast of Java in 1942 as the powerful Japanese navy swept through the Dutch East Indies, hammering the Allies at every turn.

For the uninitiated, Hornfischer's descriptions of war at sea are a bit heavy on Navy terminology. But the scenes he paints are riveting, especially for anyone who's ever toured one of the few remaining World War II battlewagons such as the USS Alabama or North Carolina.

In one engagement, Hornfischer writes, shells the size of automobiles took more than a minute to travel to their target. For anyone on the receiving end, a minute is a long time to wait to find out if you're going to die.

But the real story of "Ship of Ghosts" doesn't start until the cruiser goes down and several hundred survivors slosh up on the beach covered in thick oil.

They're shipped off to Burma and Thailand and put to work by Japanese captors obsessed with "speedo," their pidgin English exhortation to get the railway done quickly regardless of how many workers die.

"THE BOOK IS A LITANY OF SUFFERING"

Starving men working without tools in stifling heat and monsoons, beaten by guards who chose to ignore the Geneva Conventions, withering to skeletons and in some cases simply losing the will to live.

Estimates vary, but as many as 16,000 Allied prisoners, the bulk of them British, died in Pacific POW camps, along with as many as 200,000 native laborers.

The Americans paid a small price compared to the other Allied nations, but as Hornfischer writes, the Houston survivors came to "envy the dead."

Of the 368 men who survived the sinking, 291 made it home. An index in the back of the book shows that most of the others died of disease in the camps.

Trapped in a jungle hell, many of them felt forsaken, then forgotten as the U.S. island-hopping campaign pounded the Japanese across the Pacific.

"In the end, when the puzzle of their fate was solved, the euphoric rush of victory swept their tale into the dustbin of dim remembrance," Hornfischer writes. "The story of the Houston got lost in a blizzard of 'ticker tape'"

*Some 675 Sailors and Marines died with Houston. Most of these men were killed during her final battle, were taken down with the ship or died when the pitiless tide washed them into the vast Indian Ocean but others **were machine gunned as they swam helpless in the water.***

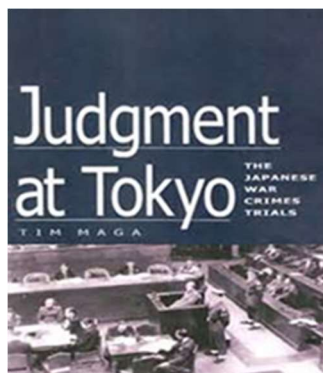
Of the crew of 1,061, only 368 survived including 24 of the 74-man USMC detachment aboard. The crew became prisoners of the Japanese for the remainder of the war.

77 men died of torture, disease and starvation while working on the "Death Railway" in Burma / Thailand (The Bridge over the River Kwai")

*The incidents portrayed in the film are mostly fictional, and though it depicts bad conditions and suffering caused by the building of the Burma Railway and its bridges, **historically the conditions were much worse than depicted***



FORCED LABOR BUILDING OF THE RAILROAD CHARGED AS A WAR CRIME



The construction of the Burma Railway is counted as a war crime committed by Japan in Asia. Hiroshi Abe, the first lieutenant who supervised construction of the railway at Sonkrai where over 3,000 POWs died, was sentenced to death, later commuted to 15 years in prison, as a B/C class war criminal.

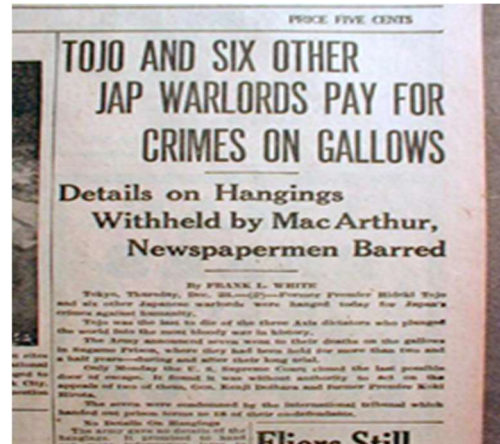
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After the end of World War II, 111 Japanese and Koreans were tried for war crimes because of their brutalization of POWs during the construction of the railway. 32 were sentenced to death.



Tojo sentenced to death at Japanese War Crimes



BRIDGE OVER RIVER KWAI NOMINATED FOR 8 ACADEMY AWARDS & WINS 7



Winners were

Best Picture — Sam Spiegel

Best Director — David Lean

Best Actor — Alec Guinness Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium — Michael Wilson, Carl Foreman, Pierre Boulle

Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Film — Malcolm Arnold

Best Film Editing — Peter Taylor

Best Cinematography — Jack Hildyard

Nominated

Best Actor in a Supporting Role — Sessue Hayakawa

FINAL NOTE

In his book, "Last Man Out", H. Robert Charles, an American Marine survivor of the sinking of the USS Houston, writes in depth about a Dutch doctor, Henri Hekking, a fellow POW who probably saved the lives of many who worked on the "Death Railway". In the foreword to Charles's book, James D. Hornfischer summarizes: "Dr. Henri Hekking was a tower of psychological and emotional strength, almost shamanic in his power to find and improvise medicines from the wild prison of the jungle". Hekking died in 1994. Charles died in December 2009



The Bridge as she appears today



Around the bend she goes