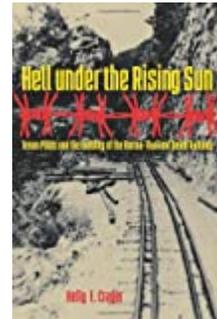




**Kelly E. Crager.** *Hell under the Rising Sun: Texan POWs and the Building of the Burma-Thailand Death Railway.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. 196 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58544-635-3.



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**Published on** H-War (June, 2008)

## Death and Survival on the Railway

This book is the story of 445 members of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment of the Texas National Guard and the 292 sailors and marines from *USS Houston*, hull number CA 30. Not since Robert S. LaForte and Ronald E. Marcello published *Building the Death Railway: The Ordeal of American POWs in Burma, 1942-1945* (2002) has the brutally dismal American experience on the Burma-Thailand or "Death" Railway been as closely analyzed as it is here. True, the list of books and articles from British and especially Australian authors, mostly former Death Railway POWs themselves but not all, is extensive, but those dealing with the Americans pale in comparison. Thus *Hell under the Rising Sun: Texan POWs and the Building of the Burma-Thailand Death Railway* is especially welcome in American prisoner-of-war studies.

The men of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment of the Texas National Guard were mostly naïve country boys from northwest Texas who joined the army for the usual reasons in 1940: fun, adventure, a little money, camaraderie, and a little patriotism to glue it together. Nearly universally, these men believed themselves vastly superior to the Japanese in stature, fight-

ing ability, courage, and military know-how. Just before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and the outbreak of World War II, the unit found itself seasick aboard a transport heading to the Philippines, but after the American declaration of war on December 8, 1941 course was changed for Java via Fiji and Australia. After a fling of tourism and hospitality in Brisbane, war came quickly to the 2nd Battalion.

At first, the unit served as ground crew for the 19th Bomb Group, United States Army Air Forces at the airfield at Singosari, East Java, and in February 1942, the Japanese got serious, beginning with air attacks that quickly destroyed the site. As a result, the Bomb Group was ordered out of Java, and the 2nd Battalion became fighting men. After the Japanese invaded in a three-pronged attack, it took only a week to defeat the Allied forces composed of Dutch, British, and Americans. Naturally, the Americans believed that Uncle Sam would send reinforcements; none came, and as morale sank, the 2nd Battalion believed they were being sacrificed to keep Dutch morale in place. None of this, of course, was true. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time, much

as the Americans on the Bataan Peninsula, Corregidor, Guam, and Wake Island. 1942 was a bad year.

At first, the Japanese treated their POWs in Java rather well. Assigned to what was called the "Bicycle Camp," the Americans were fed well, and enjoyed a virtual freedom of movement without Japanese close supervision. The Japanese front-line troops even showed a considerable amount of empathy toward the prisoners (p. 29). Yet, the time came to move everyone from the Bicycle Camp to Tanjong Priok, where Japanese guards and imperial Japanese POW policies began to show their teeth. The harsh treatment, so common in World War II, began there for the 2nd Battalion and lasted for the rest of the war. The only positive aspect of all this was that the 2nd Battalion enjoyed excellent unit cohesion among the soldiers, and remarkable leadership from its officers.

From Java, they sailed by "Hell Ship," indeed an understatement of conditions aboard the overcrowded Japanese merchant ships that transported Allied POWs around the Pacific, to Changi Prison in Singapore where the Americans, much to their disdain, came under British POW command. The book's description of this relationship reminded this reviewer of former British POW James Clavell's 1962 novel, *King Rat*. (In 1965, Bryan Forbes made Clavell's book into a film.) In short, the Americans resented the British officers, and thought them rather condescending for being in a POW camp. But time was short in Changi; the Imperial Japanese Army had undertaken the huge task of building a railway from Bangkok, Thailand to Rangoon, Burma to be built with British, Australian, New Zealand, Dutch, and American POW and forced civilian labor. It was a daunting task.

The two chapters describing life and work on the "Death Railway" are without a doubt the two most riveting parts of the book. Suffering never stopped. The Korean guards were mean and dangerous; escape impossible; men got sick with dysentery, beri beri, pelegra, malaria, and tropical ulcers on their legs. They received rations only of rice, and not much of it, as they trudged day after day on the railway, and lived in hard-scrabble

jungle camps. Life was indeed hard, death always close. Then the Japanese authorities decided that construction was behind schedule, and that the line needed to be finished and opened by May 1943. Known as the "Speedo" period, work shifts started at 4 am and lasted until laborers met the imposed quotas, sometimes as late as 2 am. At this point, POW resistance ended because the Americans of 2nd Battalion decided to get the job done as soon as possible in the hope that the Japanese would remove them from the Death Railway quickly.

And so it happened. By November 1, 1943, the Americans had buried ninety-four of their comrades, but the rail line was finished, and the trains ran from Bangkok to Rangoon for a while. The Japanese moved their POW work force to other locations in Southeast Asia, but the war was going badly for Japan. American bombers began targeting the railway, and one after another, the bridges and rail line built at great human cost came under the rain of American bombs. Nonetheless, liberation came only at war's end, and the men of the 2nd Battalion, now known as the "Lost Battalion," returned to American hands, slowly recovering from their captivity and resuming their lives in their communities. But did they?

The book's final chapter addresses this issue with considerable vigor and honesty. Some men did well, but others suffered endless bouts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, then virtually unrecognized as a real psychological malady. Others turned to alcohol, abusing themselves and their families, sometimes to death. As in the United Kingdom and Australia, Death Railway POWs died earlier than they should have, many from the residual effects of the jungle diseases untreated or barely treated in Asia. Yet, in retrospect, those 2nd Battalion men who survived Japanese military captivity, perhaps the harshest treatment imposed on soldiers in the twentieth century, insist that they remained disciplined and went to extraordinary lengths to aid one another in the worst of times. Historically strong and emotionally powerful, this book honors the men of the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment of the Texas National Guard. Surely, they have a great deal to be proud of, and this book does them justice.

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**Citation:** Robert C. Doyle. Review of Crager, Kelly E., *Hell under the Rising Sun: Texan POWs and the Building of the Burma-Thailand Death Railway*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14593>

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