

# To hell and home again

## The Burma Railway revealed through the brushstrokes of a genius who survived

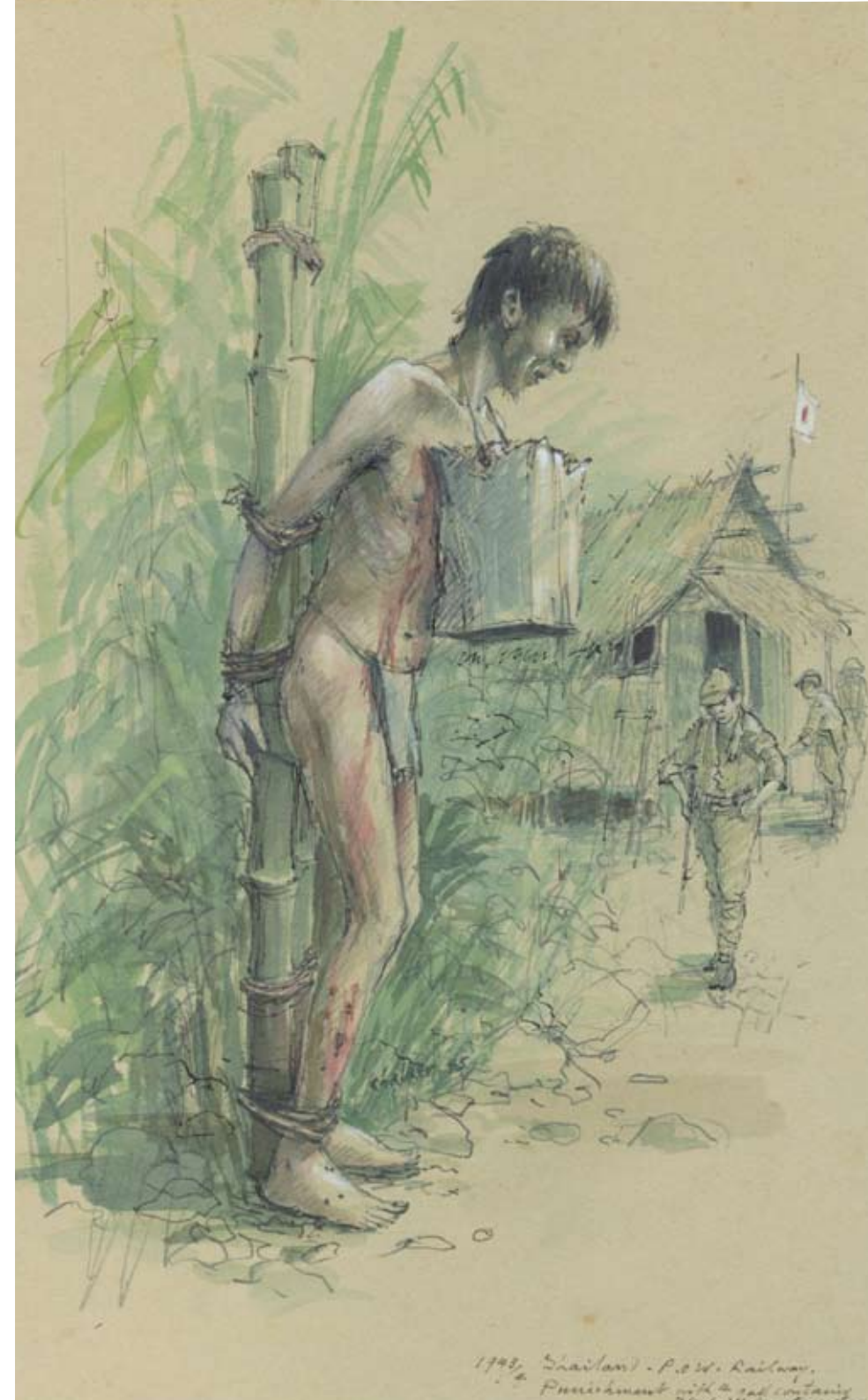
In September 1939 a young art student named Jack Chalker was looking forward to taking up the post-graduate scholarship he'd recently won to study painting at the Royal College of Art.

Instead, his call-up papers arrived, and the Second World War swept him away on an adventure which was to culminate in the nightmare of three years labouring on the Burma railway. Here his talent as an artist and illustrator found an unexpected and at times gruesome outlet, chronicling not only the misery, squalor, savagery, heroism and fortitude of the prison camps, but also the horrific reality of the diseases which attacked them, the wounds their Japanese and Korean guards inflicted, and the genius for improvisation with which the medical staff saved whatever lives they could.

In doing so Jack Chalker captured for posterity a picture of life at the limits of human endurance, where his survival depended on a genius for improvisation.

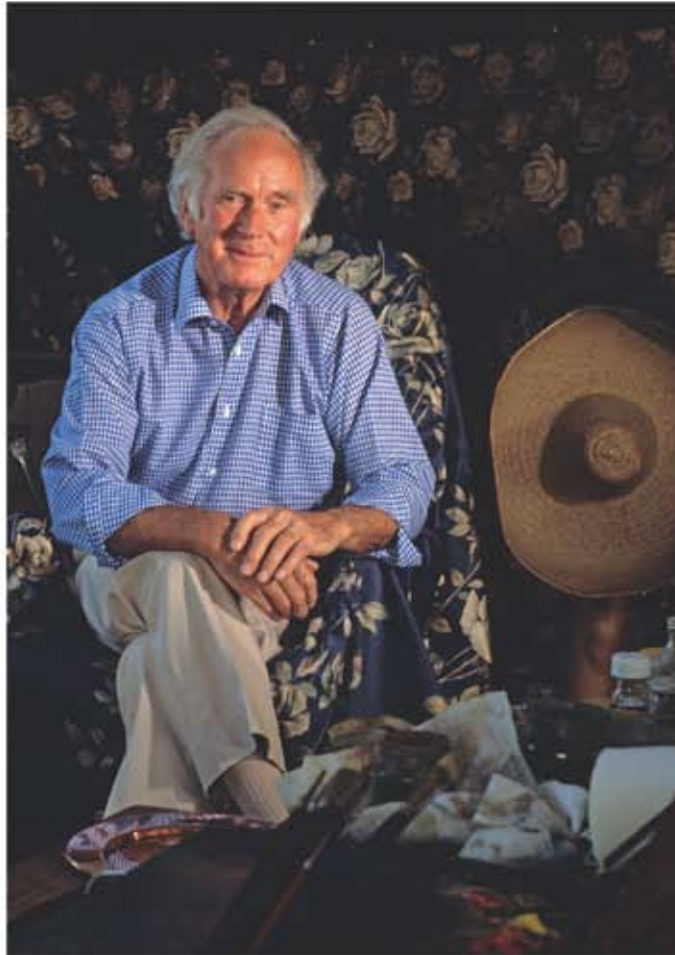
This brilliant artist has chosen to revisit his terrifying past, in *BURMA RAILWAY* to write a new and gripping commentary to accompany his artwork, and to bring to a new audience the reality of the struggle which our grandparents fought and won.

Published by Mercer Books *BURMA RAILWAY* is a sure-fire winner from the history shelves, predicted to seize the imagination of the national press...



This book has been obviously put together with great respect for the subject, and considerable design flare. Jack's paintings and drawings are so evocative of the terrible conditions and inhumane treatment experienced on the Death Railway, the reader is left open-mouthed. Illustrations range from technical drawings of tropical ulcers which would grace a medical textbook, to heartrending pictures of torture. Photographic images can rarely be as powerful and moving as these paintings and drawings. The crowning achievement of the book is that the reader is taken on a journey where horrific experiences bind men together in comradeship and where human spirit triumphs.

Dr. K. S. Greenfield



Jack Chalker  
At home in his studio

## Preamble

The drawings and paintings in this book have been selected from many I made firstly as a gunner in the Royal Artillery in England throughout 1940-1, then in India in 1942, and subsequently as a prisoner of war under the Japanese for three and a half years.

After being concentrated at Changi in Singapore for a month or two I was moved to a labour camp in Singapore Town for four months where I began to make the first of the prison drawings. A few notes were made on the train journey up to Thailand and the remainder were produced in the jungle working camps and sick camps on the Thailand-Burma railway project during the last three years of captivity. After the Japanese surrender in August, 1945, I was attached to the Australian Army as a war artist in Bangkok to complete official war records and during this time I produced further illustrations from notes made in the railway camps. Some of these have been included.

I managed to keep diary notes of our progress from the time we left England on our world trip to Singapore and subsequently during the fighting until we were captured in February, 1942. Thereafter as a prisoner of war I kept a microscopic diary which became intermittent after a move down-country from Kanyu to Chungkai sick camp in 1943. Some of these later diary notes were eaten by termites and rotted from the ravages of the monsoon rains. This account can only be a minute contribution to the overall complex and variable picture of conditions and attitudes that existed throughout the length of the Thailand-Burma railway. It is largely anecdotal, but it is told as I found it and remember it.

It is hoped that the drawings, paintings and hasty notes made under considerable difficulties and which had to be hidden throughout our prison existence may nevertheless give some idea of the conditions under which the Thailand-Burma railway was built and how we existed, together with an indication of the absorbingly beautiful jungle surroundings in which we lived during those years.

Over the post-war years I have been asked repeatedly why I made drawings and paintings in the camps, a question that never arose during our captivity. Visual curiosity, a delight in observation and in translating things in one's own terms is an inherent part of the ethos of an artist, and this drive, as well as pleasure in doing so, is undeniable. I began by making notes of places, people and landscapes to please myself, but it was not long before it became obvious that this was the only means of recording our strange circumstances. As conditions became rapidly more desperate in the jungle on the railway project it seemed imperative to record them, particularly the medical and surgical problems that faced the hard pressed medical staff. I was asked by two eminent surgeons, Captain Markowitz and Colonel Dunlop, to assist in recording them and what had been largely a self-indulgent pleasure quickly became a challenge

Burma Railway



Working men, Kanyu Camp, October 1942

A pen and wash drawing made in Kanyu River Camp. One of two drawings of prisoners in the working camps to survive from a collection discovered by a Korean sentry. The remainder were savagely destroyed during an unpleasant situation. (Actual size 14cm x 8cm)

## January-February 1942

The Fall of Singapore



Singapore, 1942

Malay Kampong (Actual size 9.4cm x 5.5cm)

Singapore Town, 1942

Incident observed while on a working party; Japanese beating a man's hands to a pulp with a lamp hammer on the stump of a tree for stealing from a Japanese store place. (Actual size 5cm x 7cm)



site from the river bed. Rails were spiked direct into the sleepers, four spikes to each, and spur lines were planned at 16km intervals where possible. Much of the ground to be dug was hard and contained rock requiring hammer-and-tap and picks to break it up. The work on the cuttings through steep hillsides was particularly heart-breaking and indescribably difficult.

In the jungle the clumps of bamboo *spinosa* were 20 metres or more across and as much as 60 metres high. Although feathery and beautiful to look at, its branches had huge, iron-hard spikes up to 10 cm long which tore into hands and legs, often inflicting painful and dangerous wounds. Clearing these clumps was difficult and extremely exhausting, and in our debilitated state scratches from the bamboo all too often turned septic and developed rapidly into rotting tropical ulcers.

The cuttings were completed almost entirely by hammer-and-tap, with the addition of blasting charges where the Japanese engineers thought it necessary. Even the sinking of a hole for a charge by hammer-and-tap could take hours of jarring, back-breaking work. The guards took few safety precautions when blasting and on occasions prisoners were severely injured by flying rocks as charges were detonated without warning. Some of the sadistic guards were entertained by this.

Perhaps the most infamous area was Hintok, where the Australians were subjected to appalling injuries by murderous guards with much loss of life. I visited Hintok Camp during this period on a line maintenance expedition and was horrified: bad as conditions were in Kanyu, Hintok was immeasurably worse; the Kanyu-Hintok section of the railway eventually provided the highest number of casualties on the whole railway trace.

The Australians at Hintok had to construct long, deep cutting through hard limestone together with a vast stone embankment on a precipitous hillside and a long, tiered viaduct some 28 metres curving around the hill. This last was known as the 'Pack of Cards Bridge' after it had fallen down three times under the weight of rolling stock and had to be rebuilt each time with further casualties.

The Australian camp was near the river and a good mile from the working site, which was approached up a steep gradient – in one part by means of crude bamboo ladders – making the daily journey a daunting undertaking even before the work itself began. It was at this camp that I first heard of the legendary 'Weary' Dunlop, an Australian surgeon serving as a colonel in the Australian Medical Army Corps. He had already made history in Java with his surgical prowess and courageous defence of his men, and these qualities were also evident at Hintok, bringing great comfort and strength to those in his care.

In mid-March, 1943, many of our guards and most of the Japanese engineers moved to the two Kanyu top camps, leaving a much reduced complement to supervise the river camp. Groups of prisoners were selected to move to these new camps and within a short time men



#### Living accommodation on the railway trace

(Above) Pen and wash drawing of my hut interior, typical of the bamboo and atap huts in which all prisoners lived on railway work. We lived on bamboo racks with about one metre per man of bed space. The bamboo was riddled with bed-bugs and in the monsoon season water poured across the ground under the racks and through the atap palm roof.

#### Typical latrines in up-country camps

(Left) Showing the small later adjustments to the aperture of bamboo to prevent debilitated prisoners from collapsing into the pits and drowning. During the monsoon season these areas were a sea of faeces, mud and maggots through which we waded barefoot.

ulcers seemed to give a new lease of life to these patients.

Our first Commandant at Chungkai, 'Kokabu', whom we had met on our march up-country, embodied the paradoxical qualities of the Japanese character. Early one morning, as a member of a small physio team, I was summoned to his hut. After one of his drinking sessions in Kanchanaburi, Kokabu had some residual pain in his neck and shoulders and demanded a 'massagi-man' to reduce this. He roared his orders at me through an interpreter and attended by two armed guards I was forced to massage his neck and shoulders for about fifteen minutes, relieved that I didn't receive one of his usual beatings. He tried out the remaining four masseurs over the next few days and then ordered me to attend to his neck whenever required. These sessions became regular over the following weeks, during which time the armed guards were dispensed with and only the interpreter remained present. When the massage finished Kokabu would clap his hands and roar for food from his orderlies. I was ordered to sit on a floor mat on one side of his low table and have tea, rice and soup. Through the interpreter he began to ask searching and intelligent questions about English university life, our educational system, banking, ballet, painting – about which he seemed unexpectedly well informed – and a variety of other matters. He allowed me to question him about Japan, its university life, Shinto and Japanese painting. These interesting discussions with a man who had already achieved such notoriety for brutality and murder seemed hardly credible.

On one occasion I asked him why he held human life so cheap. His answer was simple: 'I am a soldier. To be a prisoner of war is unthinkable'. To him, an officer and a fringe samurai, all was black and white; there were no other acceptable conditions. The Japanese refined love of beauty, manners, convention and gentle Shinto concepts and control seemed wildly at odds with their tendency to brutality both to others and to themselves. The masochistic and sadistic elements were all too evident, and it was easy to see how these could be channelled into fanaticism. Shortly after my sessions with Kokabu ended, he and his *gunso* returned early one night after going down-river to Kanchanaburi to seek their usual pleasures with some geishas. On entering the camp Kokabu found two of his duty guards missing: it was reported that they had gone to a Kampong down-river to find some Thai women. Kokabu and his *gunso* hunted down and brought back the missing guards late that night, and then over three hours systematically beat them to death. The noise of the shouting was appalling and there could be no doubt about the outcome.

Summary punishment could be exercised by a senior officer in the field for breaches of discipline or a culprit could be handed to the *Kempei-tai*.

Clothes were in short supply. They wore out and rotted and there were no replacements other than from those who had died. From old bits of blanket or cloth we cannibalized anything that could be transformed into shirts and shorts, although for most of us amateur tailors sitting down in a new pair of home-made shorts was often a disaster. A number of Australians could



Operating Theatre, Chungkai Hospital Camp  
Colonel 'Weary' Dunlop (facing) and Captain J. 'Marko' Markowitz (back view) working on a thigh amputation case. The theatre was a small area of about twelve square feet within a bamboo and atap hut lined with old green mosquito netting. Tenon saw, improvised retractors and other surgical camp-made instruments are on the table. Earlier leg amputations had taken place on bed-space bamboo racking at the end of one of the surgical huts. (Actual size 30cm x 21cm)