

### **TT 13 Day 36 (Misplaced zeal)**

In one of my previous posts I mentioned Chris Packham and his 'misplaced zeal'. Every time he comes on the telly the Guvnor thinks back to the brilliant film made in the late 50s, but still shown occasionally today, called 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'. This is what he has gleaned from Google and Wiki and which he remembers so vividly as a lesson in how easy it is to lose sight of the main objective.

In early 1943, British POWs arrive by train at a Japanese prison camp in Burma. The commandant, Colonel Saito, informs them that all prisoners, regardless of rank, are to work on the construction of a railway bridge over the River Kwai that will help connect Bangkok and Rangoon. The senior British officer, Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson, informs Saito that the Geneva Conventions exempt officers from manual labour. Nicholson later forbids any escape attempts because they had been ordered by headquarters to surrender, and escapes could be seen as defiance of orders.

At the morning assembly, Nicholson orders his officers to remain behind when the enlisted men march off to work. Saito threatens to have them shot, but Nicholson refuses to back down. When Major Clipton, the British medical officer, warns Saito there are too many witnesses for him to get away with murder, Saito leaves the officers standing all day in the intense heat. That evening, the officers are placed in a punishment hut, while Nicholson is locked in an iron box.

Meanwhile, the prisoners work as little as possible and sabotage whatever they can. Nicholson is shocked by the poor job being done by his men. Over the protests of some of his officers, he orders a new design to build a proper bridge, in order to maintain his men's morale and pride in their professionalism. As the Japanese

engineers had chosen a poor site, the original construction is abandoned, and a new bridge begun downstream.

Nicholson drives his men hard to complete the bridge on time. For him, its completion will exemplify the ingenuity and hard work of the British Army long after the war's end. When he asks that their Japanese counterparts pitch in as well, a resigned Saito replies that he has already given the order. Nicholson erects a sign commemorating the bridge's construction by the British Army, February to May 1943.

Four commandos parachute in, though one is killed on landing. One is wounded but they reach the river in time with the assistance of Siamese women bearers and their village chief, Khun Yai. Under cover of darkness, the commandos plant explosives on the bridge towers below the water line.

A train carrying important dignitaries and soldiers is scheduled to be the first to cross the bridge the following day, so they wait to destroy both. However, by daybreak, the river level has dropped, exposing the wire connecting the explosives to the detonator. Nicholson spots the wire and brings it to Saito's attention. As the train approaches, they hurry down to the riverbank to investigate.

One of the team manning the detonator, breaks cover and stabs Saito to death. Nicholson yells for help, but then recognises the commando exclaiming, "What have I done?" In an exchange of fire Nicholson is wounded and stumbles towards the detonator, collapsing on the plunger just in time to blow up the bridge and send the train hurtling into the river below.

Nicholson is an Army officer of the old school; professional and correct but under all the pressures of responsibility, and despite the degradations they suffered, he forgot that they were still at war.