

'Death Railway' victims honoured with US memorial Itoh at Kanchanaburi ceremony

Associated Press

KANCHANABURI – More than 50 years after hundreds of American prisoners of war (PoWs) died while building the "Death Railway", the first memorial to them was unveiled at the site yesterday.

Their suffering at the hands of Japan's Imperial Army was immortalised long ago in the classic film "The Bridge On The River Kwai", but their remains were sent home after World War II delaying any effort to build a memorial for them there.

That changed yesterday when US Ambassador William Itoh unveiled a new memorial to America's forgotten prisoners – a plaque that now stands next to the infamous bridge.

Most of the PoWs came from a US warship, the *USS Houston*, which was sunk by the Japanese navy off the coast of Indonesia. The survivors were taken prisoner and sent to Thailand to be used as slave labour to build the railway to Burma. They worked under cruel and inhumane conditions and many died.

"They made the ultimate sacrifice," Itoh said in a speech at the new memorial.

"This was important for us because we have empathy for these people who suffered," said Jesse Henry, and member of the US Veterans for Foreign Wars organisation, which funded the project and secured the necessary permission from Thai officials.

"Because of the US policy of repatriating the remains of the dead, something fell through the cracks," said veteran James Picha, 59. "It was an accident of history."

Along with the American PoWs, the railway was built by veterans from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Netherlands. But the US troops suffered the highest proportion of fatalities.

Of the 688 American servicemen who laboured on the 415-kilometre railway, 356 died, most of them from the *USS Houston*.

A total of 60,000 allied prisoners were forced to work on the railway. About