

LOCAL

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US Ambassador William Itoh, right walks down the infamous bridge over the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi province. Itoh was presiding over the inauguration of the first memorial to the 356 US prisoners of war who died while building the Death Railway for the Japanese Army during World War II.

12,000 fell prey to disease, executions, starvation or brutal torture inflicted by Japanese guards who were ordered to get the line completed quickly to speed supply lines to Burma.

An estimated 100,000 Asian labourers who died constructing the rail link were buried where they fell.

The other Allied nations whose PoWs

died there had cemeteries or memorials built near the route of the railway, but before yesterday there was no official monument for the US prisoners.

The Japanese soldiers were incredibly brutal.

Naked except for loin cloths and painfully thin because of a starvation diet of just a single ration of rice a day, the

PoWs were forced to hack up to 18 hours a day through dense malarial jungle and dig through solid rock with primitive hand tools.

Most of those who fell prey to disease died because there was no medical care. Prisoners who worked too slowly or showed signs of rebellion were shot, bayoneted or beaten to death.