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# Manifest

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*"Bore: a person who talks when you wish him to listen." Ambrose Bierce, "The Devil's Dictionary"*

*Editorial*

Graveside

corner of a graveyard that holds the remains of about 7,000 soldiers who died

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Jeremy Hay visits his grandfather's grave in Thailand.

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# Graveside

*By Jeremy Hay in Kanchanaduri, Thailand.*

I visited my grandfather Alistair William Hay's grave today for the first time. It seems somehow auspicious that the visit falls on the 20th anniversary of the day I quit drinking and got sober.

Maybe I would have visited otherwise, though that's unlikely given where I was headed, but even if I had I would almost certainly have been drunk — in order, naturally, to fully apprehend the solemnity of the moment — and would have taken away only the haziest of memories.

No, I think that my grandfather would have much appreciated my sobriety at his grave, as would my grandmother, of whom I have some wonderful memories but whom I also called late one night to chat with when I was 19, and stone drunk. That was the last time I spoke to her.

Her husband — they were married in Singapore and had, if I recall, about 8 years together, before the war, is buried in the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, in Grave Number 8 A: 02, in the northeast

corner of a graveyard that holds the remains of about 7,000 soldiers who died on the Thailand Burma Railway, what's become known as the Death Railway. Some 16,000 Allied soldiers, the majority British, the others Australian, Dutch and American, died on or because of the Death Railway. A far greater number of Malays, Indians, Sri Lankans, Burmese and Javanese died — more than 100,000 — and no records exist: no gravestones, no names.

Today, in a light, intermittent rain, we placed orchids on my grandfather's gravestone, which showed his age, when he died: 46. I think my grandmother — Granny, I called her — must have chosen the epitaph, because it appears in the spot where on other gravestones are messages of love, or eternal remembrance, or short religious passages. Granny (if indeed it was she) chose to have engraved his educational résumé.

He was among the oldest of those at rest here. Most of the other graves here belong to men who were in their early twenties, although there are many who were younger, some also in their late forties and at least one who was 50.

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**The "A" represents the location of Kanchanaburi,**

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My grandfather was in the Malay Civil Service, in what was at the time a British Protectorate, a colony essentially, serving in Penang when on Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese invaded what today is Malaysia. He packed my dad and his two sisters and my grandmother off to Singapore and from there to Australia to wait-out the war. He signed up with the volunteers in the terribly mismanaged defense effort that quickly led to the fall of both Malaysia and so-called "Fortress Singapore."

I'm probably distorting the Hay family history terribly here, but I believe he had four brothers — two of whom served also abroad in the colonial government — and three of them died in World War I and II.

My dad has been trying, especially as he has crossed into older age himself, to find out more about his own father, whom he neither knew nor was able to learn much about before. He was a committed pacifist apparently, who paradoxically volunteered to fight; a talented linguist who spoke several Chinese dialects, as well as Malay and French; who in the prison camps served as camp interpreter and, I believe, as custodian of the POW's secret radio, a role punishable by execution if discovered.

He died, according to information gathered at the Thailand Burma Railway Centre, a museum about the Death Railway that is here in Kanchanaburi, and from fellow prisoners' accounts, of a heart attack brought on by pneumonia and attendant complications. It seems that his funeral at Nathom Pathom, the camp where he died on Nov. 21, 1944, was the largest to have taken place there.

At the museum today, on a faint hope, I gave the staff a sheet containing what little information about him I knew: his name, the unit he served with, the Singapore Volunteers, and his grave plot number. The centre's manager, an Australian whose father worked on the railway and died soon after the war, said he'd see what he could

do but couldn't promise much: "We're researching all the time," he said.

An hour later he popped his head around an exhibit we were looking at and said, "Don't go anywhere."

It turned out that in the previous week he'd received a new batch of research notes that included some more specific information about my grandfather. There was more of the government work he'd been doing in Penang, which included serving as a district judge, and as something titled "Protector of Chinese." The



new details also included the "Force," or work unit he'd been assigned to during the war, the H Force, one of two that were subjected to some of the worst of the railway labor demands, during the construction's late stage, known as The Speedo," when the Japanese were pushing frantically to finish the railway to replace the sea-borne supply routes they'd lost after the Battle of Midway in the Pacific.

With that detail, we were able to determine the route he would have marched upon arriving from Singapore in Thailand, the camps he'd worked at along the railway and the exact plots of land in Kanchanaburi where he and his fellow prisoners would have been housed at various stages. One property is now a soccer field, while the aerodrome is now a bus station.

On the train here from Bangkok — ... I began to wonder for the first time what I would say to my grandfather if we were to meet today, me at my age, he at the age when he died or thereabouts.

I think I would say this to my grandfather:

Your son, who rarely spoke about you to me when I was young, now speaks of you with what seems to me a great and increasingly urgent admiration, for your facility with languages, for your humor, evidenced in the few surviving letters and postcards, and for the decisions you made in the crucible-like times that you lived. Also that your son grew to be full of a sense of his own shortcomings, a sense honed by your absence and by the impression of achievement and sacrifice left lingering by your death; and that I, his grandson, have grown up with a sense of my own shortcomings, honed by my own admiration for my father's achievements and character.

I think I would say that we both — your son and your grandson — wonder what we would have done in your place, with the war bearing down, and with wives and children of our own, and what, in the end, would be the right thing to do.

I think I would say that, for all your decision cost, I am proud and honored to know you, and that somehow, in some strange and

illogical way that I don't yet understand, you have in some way shaped me, as much by your death as your life, and that one day, when I fully comprehend how that is so, then, perhaps, I will know you better and have done you proud too.

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Jeremy Hay is a reporter with a New York Times Regional newspaper, The Santa Rose Press Democrat, in Santa Rosa, California. He and his family love traveling for what it teaches them about the world and themselves. He is working on a book about traveling with children in Southeast Asia and dreaming of ways to travel permanently or, at least, to move to Asia.

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