



On the road to Mandalay By David Milborrow



Foreword by Steve Rogers - March 2013

David Milborrow has recently taken the opportunity to visit present day Myanmar more commonly known as Burma to those of us in UK. The country is going through a period of change and beginning to open doors to visitors so before being 'spoilt' by mass tourism David wanted to visit and take the opportunity to photograph Rangoon memorial in total and update any cemetery images en route. What follows is his Journal for the few days spent there.

Day 1 - As we took off from Bangkok International Airport, destination Rangoon, I realised that my trip had really begun. Somehow breakfast had been only 3 or 4 hours previously, but afternoon high tea was now being served, and the sun was setting.

The overnight flight from London Heathrow can pass without description – however good the service is, travelling economy overnight tends to be squashed and uncomfortable, to be endured more than enjoyed. Waiting at the boarding gate for the Rangoon flight, I was befriended by a young Burmese furniture manufacturer who was keen to give me the low-down on the speed with which his country was being transformed. Politically there were many references to 'the lady'; economically atm's and places to pay by credit card were appearing fast – perhaps necessarily when a Rangoon hotel which 2 years previously was maybe \$50 a night was today costing \$350 (mine would be considerably less!). When he pulled out his 3G phone to show me some photographs I realised that Derek's advice to take my phone with me was better than the FCO's website, which had said 'Don't bother.'



It was dark again by the time we arrived in Rangoon, as it had been when I left Heathrow. However, the latter had been around 4 deg C - Rangoon was still 24!

My promised guide and taxi driver evaporated in the queues for passport control and immigration, though he did meet me to pass on his contact details in case I got stuck at all. My luggage, never a sure thing for transit passengers, arrived safely though hanging open, and after winning the usual(?) Asian taxi driver versus airport arrivals scrum, I was duly deposited at my hotel.

Day 2 -The next morning dawned heavily overcast but sultry.

The 15 miles from Rangoon to the cemetery was full of traffic and diesel smoke. In a passing thought, I wondered if it had been a mistake to omit carrying heavier winter clothing. The warm and generous welcome by the Commission staff meant a slow start to the photography.



It slowed further when my lens steamed up after just 50 minutes' use! It was even more humid than I had realised. Thankfully, I had learned my lesson in a sandstorm at Knightsbridge Cemetery in Libya three years earlier and I was carrying a good backup stock - unless each lens was only going to last 50 minutes... That particular predicament ended, but speed was reduced further, as the sun arrived and the temperature rose. My conscience was pricking (as was the sun burning the back of my neck) as I was still avoiding the Monument. Steve's prime reason for asking if I was going to Burma was for me to retake the Monument and I was avoiding the issue. The Commission staff suggestion that I should wait until the sun was directly on the Monument was a good excuse as the 112 panels are both narrow and extremely high! But the sun was casting a strong shadow across many of the panels, so that was another mistake.

We (I) avoided the issue by leaving mid morning to go out and to buy my coach ticket for Moulmein (recommended as being more interesting than 10 or 12 hours on an aged train from British Empire days). During the short trip - and the inevitable lunch - the outside temp rose from 29 deg to 36. Not promising. In the end a compromise was reached - abandon the Monument for today and start earlier (still) - by forfeiting breakfast - the following day. So the remainder of the day was spent in the uncomfortable heat obtaining around 3,700 images - around two thirds of the total graves, plus 2 additional small memorials. It was interesting to note 7 VC's and a GC in this one cemetery; also the Canadian crew of a Dakota who were only removed from their crash site and re-interred here in 1996.



Day 3 - Dawn had just about arrived when I returned a few hours later. An attempt to use a ladder and human assistance to achieve reasonable images was soon abandoned and I started again solo on the Monument.



I decided that images taken at the highest resolution with both feet firmly on the ground provided a more consistent result than hanging at a strange angle from a ladder. Hopefully, this would give Steve a better chance of achieving something magical with his image-enhancing software. Hoping to offset the detrimental effects of the strong sun's shadow I photographed the Monument a second time before I left the Cemetery, having completed the remainder of the graves.

Dropping into the delightful little Rangoon War Cemetery, confusingly not the home of the Rangoon War Memorial, I ended the day with my images and some aching muscles.

Somehow during the day I had collected some 6,000 images, comprising the remainder of Taukkyan Cemetery, the Rangoon Monument (twice) and the 1,300 graves in Rangoon War Cemetery.

A short wander from the hotel in the evening revealed the following;

- Rangoon's pavements comprise either loose concrete slabs or steel sheets; either way to attempt window shopping would be painful if not fatal:
- under these sheets lurk significantly heavy duty power cables (and possibly much besides):
- because the streets are so poorly lit, stopping to look in a window produces too much dazzle to then be able to see what's underfoot:
- there's nothing worth seeing in the aforesaid windows.

It was a short walk to learn so many lessons.

Tomorrow it's down south for my final Cemetery. The Express bus ticket for the 200 mile trip cost the equivalent of 7 litres of petrol, or 3 pints of local beer from a mini-market; no wonder Easterners find the West somewhat confusing, and vice versa.

Day 4 - There is a sense of the bizarre sitting on an air-conditioned coach, tapping away on a laptop while passing straw huts on stilts above the water at the roadside, with two barefoot Buddhist monks sitting in the row of seats in front. When a mobile phone rang, I did wonder for an instant if it were theirs... Perhaps this is an instance of where the Middle Ages meets modern society, or East meeting West?



A Busy Bus Station in Rangoon

En route, a few lessons in modern road-building would help comfortable transportation, as would the risks of parking in the outside lane when picnicking on the central reservation.



The traffic on all carriageways comes to a halt whenever we pass a group of temples, as cars park anywhere and families pile out to go and participate. Crocodiles of monks meander past with their fans, and processions follow dragons and drums celebrating Chinese New Year. If only the video on the coach TV screen of the discordant musical comic would come to an end....

A small sense of satisfaction was achieved towards the end of the journey when a different mobile ringtone sounded – and one of the monks in front produced his HTC android, with the various display screens beautifully produced in Burmese script..

Why does that blank look from a hotel receptionist always bring such a cold clutch of fear to one's heart when one attempts to check in at a fresh hotel? The bus trip had gone well and the 'transfer' in the back of a motor cycle rickshaw had been survived, despite the fact that there was no 'stop' at the rear of the pavement facing seat to stop one just sliding out at the back (should one hold onto luggage or framework when the bike accelerates?). But the lack of any welcoming smiles at the hotel told its own story – no record of reservation, despite prepayment via an agent nearly 3 months previously. 'One night only' was offered – no use to me who had scheduled a 3 day stay and expected to be off early for Thanbyuzayat. Was there a convention in town which meant all rooms had been resold to the highest bidders?

Thankfully another hotel was contacted and a room booked, though it meant paying again until the Malaysian agent could be contacted.

There are times when a promise of a bed is worth more than money! And it was cheaper – and closer to the bus station! Subsequently I was taken - the rearmost of 3 adults on a modest motorbike – back to the bus station to book my seat for the morning. More dire threats (echoing those I had received in Rangoon) about how early was the last bus back to Moulmein in the afternoon, but tomorrow was another day. A crazy end to an unusual day – every table in the hotel restaurant has a bar across the legs, which means everyone sits sideways on – perhaps it's an old Burmese custom?

Day 5 - Today began with my third motorbike ride in 45 years – and my third in 2 days. Thankfully the bus station is not far from the hotel, and unlike the previous day I was the driver's only passenger. The bus, when it finally came, was everything a Western tourist seeking an Eastern experience could have asked for – everything and everyone was travelling except a cage of chickens on the roof. The special Western guest had a reserved seat – indicated very vociferously after he had sat at the only apparently free seat – directly under the drinking water urn, which was dispensing freely without the need to use the tap.



We seemed to have most of the deliveries for most of the street vendors' stalls all the way to Thanbyuzayat, and they apparently had good trade – fruit, vegetables, and crates and sacks of unknown items were on board. We stopped many, many times after leaving the bus station - the driver seemed not to recognise 'full up'. His passengers just kept coming. We literally struggled up modest inclines in first gear, and a severe sideways motion occurring above maybe 30 mph indicated that the suspension was perhaps less than perfect. One passenger with good English told me she was a primary school teacher (I should have realised – the teachers wear the same uniform as the pupils). The bus was full of – I supposed – her colleagues, and when she told me she was one of 89 in her school, I assumed they were all on my bus. Yet at her school stop only 4 alighted. A guy getting on with a couple of goats at this stage would not have surprised me. We weren't just full, we weren't just packed – I guess the English language doesn't need to have a word to describe our bus. There were very few grab handles – standing passengers just tried to press the flat of their hands against the roof.

Then more got on, and even that wasn't necessary. Everyone had to remain just good friends – it's so nice when it's all done with warm smiles and good grace.

The problem then became how to find, and then extricate, the next street trader's delivery. Two and a half hours passed quickly. We arrived at Thanbyuzayat, but then suddenly there was no-one around who understood 'War Cemetery', and no way was that bus leaving me anywhere else. Alighting, I found a motorcycle taxi who did understand, and was willing to explain my need to the assembled company and press me back into my seat for a final mile.

A warm welcome, as usual, awaited me at the Cemetery; nothing was too much trouble. Are overseas Commission staff recruited for their diplomacy and hospitality? It became a painful 3,600 images; the temperature was as high as ever, and the site just seemed never-ending. But it was a very sobering thought to realise that ALL the graves, with the exception of just a few post War casualties, were the victims of the Japanese as POW's; to put it another way, none of the 3,700 plus in this cemetery had died in actual battle.



And these were the casualties found along the northern part of the track – less than 25% of the total casualties. I was shown the original Cross of Sacrifice, constructed after the War from sleepers of the Burma Railway and now preserved in the entrance gateway.



At the end of my day at Thanbyuzayat, before catching a slightly more luxurious bus 'home', I was taken to see the northern end of the Death Railway and an engine from the period, preserved there until it rusts away. It had been a privilege to visit this remote place – 2 hours from Moulmein, more than 7 hours from Rangoon, down some appalling roads – yet only a few dozen miles from the Thai border. There is every expectation that the border will soon be open to all, and with roads and new railway lines planned, perhaps in only a few years this site will be so much more accessible than at present. Even now there is a motel advertised just opposite the Cemetery – apparently not 'suitable' for tourists, but a sign of things to come.

Day 6 - My only free day in Burma. There are (at least) 3 churches worth a look at, for the possibility of memorial plaques and even military graves. I hitch a ride with a German couple who are going via a pagoda.

We travel sitting on the floor of a flatbed pickup behind a motorcycle. A carpet is provided to sit on, although it all proved pretty awkward for the one of us wearing a skirt.

This Pagoda was possibly the 'old Moulmein Pagoda' of Kipling's poem – probably little changed, and well situated on the top of a ridge overlooking the river. Then on the back of a motorcycle down to 1) St Patrick's, the Roman Catholic church with an old cemetery nearby, overgrown and with coats of whitewash seemingly holding many of the gravestones together – but obscuring the inscriptions, of course. The few that were decipherable indicated the area had been in use for 200 years. No remotely military graves were apparent, and the church was bare – as was 2) St Matthew's cathedral – unfortunately locked, but with little at the windows to obscure the view of bleak dank walls, as sad a church as could be found anywhere.

The Catholic priest had told me that the Anglican graveyard had been appropriated a few years previously for railway building, so there was nothing to look for there. A warm welcome awaited at 3) the First Baptist Church, founded by Adirionam Judson, a nineteenth century missionary of some fame in his time. Only his family members seemed to have been buried by the church, so my errand had been in vain.

A welcome cup of iced coffee down by the river, a wander through Moulmein's market, and a long walk 'home', was enough for the day – the high temperature, even higher humidity (over 90% at times), and dust and grime meant that remaining in any way tidy or respectable was out of the question.

Day 7 - I had found that a very kind and welcoming group of CWGC staff from the UK checked into the same hotel, which provided me with good company and also a lift back to Rangoon the following day (yesterday). No more overcrowded buses for me! I am left with one more day of exploration in Rangoon.

The Rangoon Cemetery manager 'lent' me one of his staff to guide me to the Jewish Cemetery, which contains just one war grave. Although the Commission do of course have access to the site, it appears to be neither free nor unrestricted! Permission has to be sought and, in this case at least, securing entrance for the two of us was not 'free'. Like so many Jewish cemeteries worldwide, it was from a past time, unused for many years - little used since the 1930's. I wondered whether the family of that one casualty would have insisted on that particular burial ground if they could have seen a) the condition it would be in by 2013, and b) how every Commission site would be maintained.



St Patrick's Cemetery

At the time the Commission data sheet was written there was no system of grave numbering, but by the time of my visit every grave was very clearly marked with row and grave number in bright blue paint. I wasn't sure it was an improvement.



The local market took place on the muddy track outside the Cemetery. My driver pointed out the large wall-sign stating 'historic site - no street trading here', but perhaps the local traders couldn't read either. The trading all took place at ground level – mats spread over the mud and dust contained piles of fruit, the usual variety of vegetables, chickens at differing stages of dissection and fish likewise. All very jolly and lots of laughter caused by my photography - 'Don't just take graves,' said Steve and my family alike before I travelled.

Then to a round of some of the sites – a couple of massive pagodas, and the main English churches. A blank was drawn at the Roman Catholic Cathedral and Baptist Church, but the Anglican Cathedral did have a WW2 Memorial Chapel, and a 1st Bn. Queen's Royal Regiment memorial to their casualties.

Shopping occupied the afternoon – gemstones, cloth, wood carving and lacquer-work was much in evidence in an enormous market frequented by locals and tourists alike.

Day 8 - During the night I awoke to total silence, and eventually realised that meant no electricity again. It was the same when I woke again, and began to wonder how I was going to pack up for a dawn start if I could not see. My wind-up torch wasn't holding its charge for more than a few seconds; I was on the sixth floor, had been planning on breakfast and am not that keen on that much exercise that early. Thankfully a few minutes before my alarm sounded, power was resumed.

It was a bit disconcerting that the airport shops appeared to be offering similar prices to yesterday's market – after the haggling. Possibly I'm not the most reliable subject for effective retail therapy anywhere east of Dover?

The short hop to Bangkok was unremarkable, but there was a small wish that it was a direct flight home...

Day 9 - Bangkok – heat, humidity and traffic fumes. But two great days just being a tourist.



On the first day, a trip up country to the 'River Kwai' bridge (we transferred from coach to motor boat for the final few miles), an hour's trip on the railway, visits to Kanchanaburi War Cemetery and the Museum. OK – it was the basic tourist day, but having seen the northern end of the Railway at Thanbyuzayat, visiting this southern end somehow joined up the circle. A last day in Bangkok, on the river and in the markets, brought the trip to an end, and then it was back to icy Heathrow.

It just remains for me to once again express my gratitude to Steve for asking me to go, and giving me much support; and to the Commission, whose staff always went that extra mile to make my trip easy and enjoyable, helped me with planning and transport, and offered generous hospitality. Thank you.

David Milborrow
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