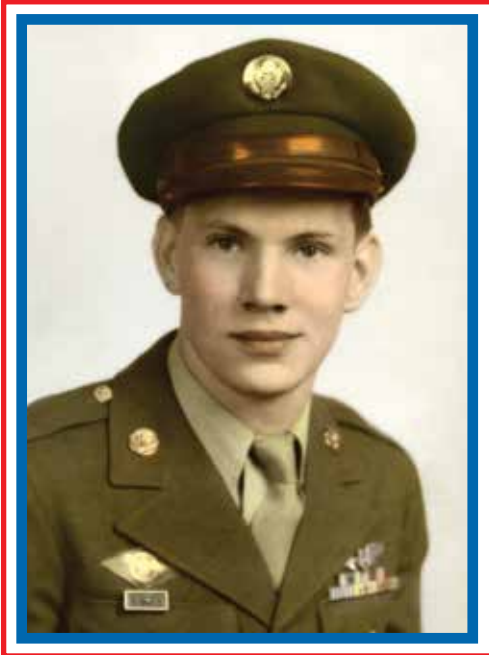


# Sgt. Lawrence Grove, Jr.

ONE MAN'S UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH  
**THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI**

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**



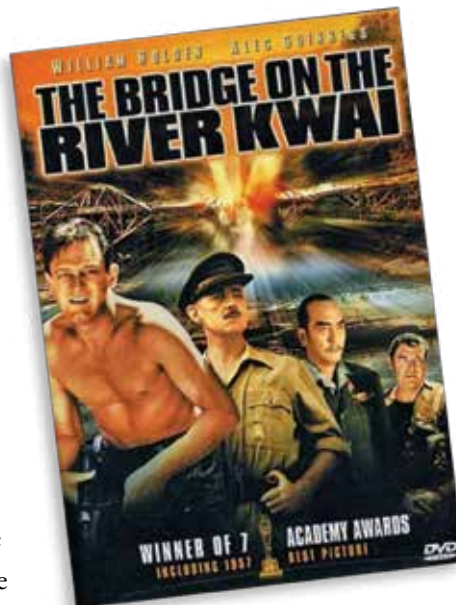
**SGT. LAWRENCE GROVE, JR.**  
(hand-tinted 1945 military photo)

Larry Grove, 98, displays his WWII medals and patches from his enlistment in the Army Air Corps.

PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

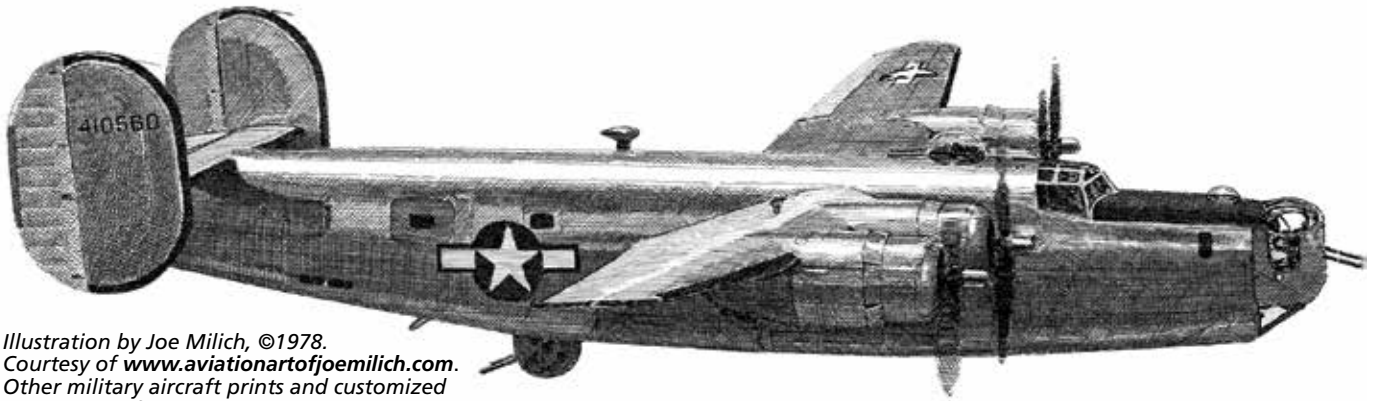


*The Bridge on the River Kwai* is widely considered to be one of the greatest war films of the twentieth century. The 1957 box office hit won multiple honors, including best picture and best actor at the 30<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. Acclaim continued over the decades when the British Film Institute voted it the 11<sup>th</sup> greatest British film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the National Film Institute included it in a list of best films ever made and the Library of Congress added the movie



to its registry. Few films have received such consistent acclaim—*The Bridge on the River Kwai* currently holds a 96% approval rating by *Rotten Tomatoes*, the popular review site for film and television.

The World War II movie is based on Pierre Boulle's novel about the Imperial Japanese Army's construction of a railway in Thailand using Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and the native population as forced laborers. Prisoners suffered brutal conditions that resulted in approximately 20 deaths per work day

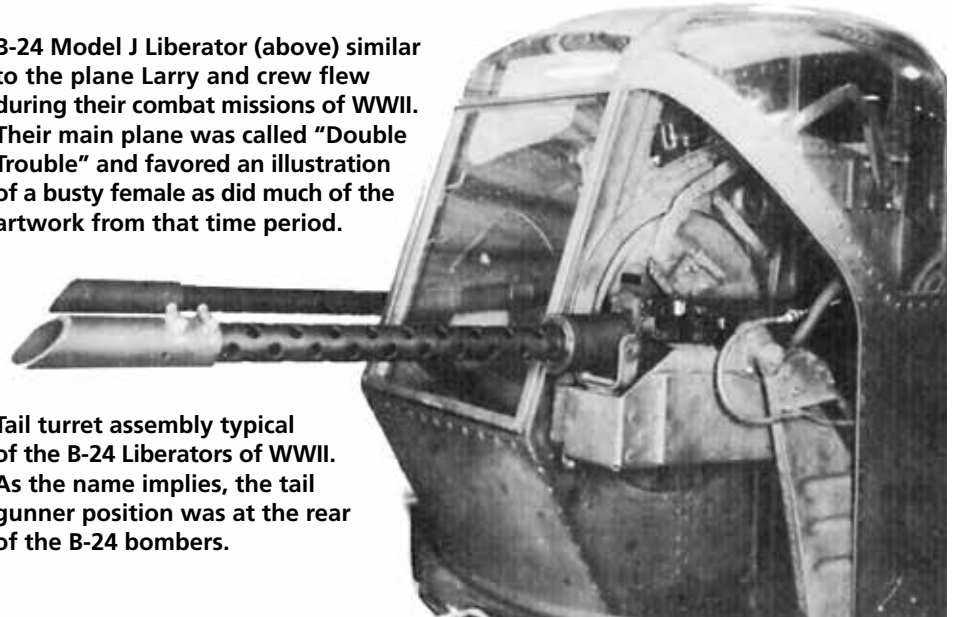


*Illustration by Joe Milich, ©1978.  
Courtesy of [www.aviationartofjoemilich.com](http://www.aviationartofjoemilich.com).  
Other military aircraft prints and customized  
matting and framing also available.*



**Larry received his Aerial Gunner's Wings from the Harlingen Army Gunnery School in July 1944.**

**B-24 Model J Liberator (above) similar to the plane Larry and crew flew during their combat missions of WWII. Their main plane was called "Double Trouble" and favored an illustration of a busty female as did much of the artwork from that time period.**



**Tail turret assembly typical of the B-24 Liberators of WWII. As the name implies, the tail gunner position was at the rear of the B-24 bombers.**

prompting survivors to label the project, "Death Railway." It is estimated that 13,000 POWs and between 80,000 and 100,000 civilians died during captivity.

The film opens with scenes of British POWs sabotaging construction of a railroad bridge they are forced to build under the strict supervision of Japanese guards. The arrival of British Commanding Officer Colonel Nicholson, played by actor Alec Guinness, creates confusion among the POWs who question Nicholson's orders. Instead of endorsing sabotage plots against their Japanese captors, Nicholson forbids them. The Colonel believes that building the bridge will be a way of maintaining order and demonstrating British superiority over their captors. Over time, the bridge becomes an obsession that is contrary to his duties as a British officer.

As depicted in the movie, the bridge is an elaborate wooden structure requiring engineering knowledge and skilled

labor. While Nicholson's construction efforts proved to be successful, the POWs rightly viewed Nicholson's work as collaboration with the enemy and resented working to complete the structure.

Upon completion of the bridge, Japanese dignitaries are scheduled to arrive amid celebrations. Allied Intelligence becomes aware of the bridge's readiness, however, and determines to destroy it before Japanese forces and supplies can be transported. A team of Allied commandoes is quickly dispatched to deploy explosives against the wooden structure. The film's dramatic climax, including the detonating of explosive charges and the actions of Colonel Nicholson, contributed to the film's popularity.

Lawrence "Larry" Grove, a resident of Corriganville, Maryland, has greater insight and personal experience with the bridge on the River Kwai than most individuals associated with the movie, or the actual bridge, because he was aboard



**Left: The crew posed for this photo with B24 Liberator #42-78690 after a check out flight. Back row officers (l to r): 2nd Lt. Clement Tromblay, pilot; Amos Leighton, copilot; Charles C. Curtin, navigator; not pictured Robert H. Cline, bombardier. Front row enlisted men (l to r): Donald D. Kittleson, flight engineer/waist gunner; Donald T. Alsever, radio operator/top gunner; Walter G. Ripperger, ball gunner/armor; Martin J. Sharkey, waist gunner; James Hecht, nose gunner; and Lawrence "Larry" Grove, tail gunner.**

**Below right: The crew of enlisted men in front of their basha (hut) at Pandaveswar Airfield. (l to r): Larry Grove, James Hecht, Donald F. Alsever, Martin J. Sharkey, Walter G. Ripperger, and Donald D. Kittleson.**



**This patch was designed by 2nd Lt. Clem Tromblay. He drew the picture and the enlisted men painted the collage.**



the B-24 Liberator whose mission was to destroy it in 1945. Larry is also keenly aware that the book and movie, while containing elements of historical accuracy, are not to be taken literally and in many ways have confused the truth about actual events. The movie's popularity should not overshadow the heroism of Allied airmen who repeatedly risked their own lives for the purpose of saving others. In many ways Larry's journey is typical of Americans from the Greatest Generation who fought in a war that had to be won—a necessary war, as it was called.

Larry's formal introduction to the war began with an early graduation from Allegany High School in January 1944. Receiving a diploma one semester early meant that Larry could be inducted into the Army Air Corps where he hoped to realize his dream of flying an aircraft. Initially inducted at Fort Meade, Maryland, and later sent to Miami Beach, Florida, for basic training, Larry experienced

disappointment when the Army Air Corps discontinued the cadet program. As an alternative, Larry recalled three choices being presented. "I was told the three options were gunnery, gunnery, and gunnery, so I was sent to gunnery school. We didn't have any say in the matter."

Larry successfully transitioned to the training and received Aerial Gunner's Wings from the Harlingen Army Gunnery School, Harlingen, Texas, in July 1944.

After reporting to Fresno and later March Air Force Base, California, a 10-man crew was formed. The men received combat training at Tonopah, Nevada, and later at Hamilton Field where a B-24 Liberator, #42-78690 awaited them. Following a series of flights within the states, orders finally arrived for overseas duty. As Larry recalled, "No one told us where we were headed. Our officers knew, but it was only later I learned the destination."

DATE 1945	AIRCRAFT IDENT. MARK	MAKE - MODEL & HORSEPOWER OF AIRCRAFT	FROM	TO	TYPE OR CLASS		LANDING
Feb.		model J (4) Panda AAB.		LOCAL	Me-L		185
2/1/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		COX'S BAZZAR	Me-L		1
2/6/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		BURMA & RETAR.	Me-L		1
2/9/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		BRIDGE #600 B.S.R.R.	Me-L		1
2/12/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		LOCAL	"		1
2/13/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		KANCHANBURI (By Air)	Me-L		1
2/13/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		KANCHANBURI, Thailand	Me-L		1
2/17/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		MULMEIN YE R.R.	Me-L		1
2/25/45	U.S. ARMY CVB-24 P/N 1200	Pandaveswar, India		BURMA	Me-L		1

← KWAI BRIDGE



Above: A copy of pilot Clem Tromblay's log book with the February 13, 1945, entry highlighting their mission from Pandaveswar Airfield, India, to Kanchanaburi, Thailand, and Bridge 277 (the bridge on the River Kwai).

Left: Southeast Asia map indicating the flight of the four bombers on their combat mission to Kanchanaburi, Thailand. After leaving India they did not fly over land so enemy radar would not detect their presence. All four crews safely returned after their 15 hour, 10 minute flight.

Larry's Liberator was destined for the China-Burma-India Theatre (CBI) with Pandaveswar Airfield in India serving as home base for the 10th Air Force, 7<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 493 Squadron. The crew arrived at its destination in October 1944 and began combat missions soon after, but it was the bombing mission on February 13, 1945, that brought Larry into contact with the bridge that was to become famous more than a decade later.

As Larry remembered, "At the time, it was just another bridge that we were to take out. Two attempts had been made before our mission — it was a difficult target. We also learned there was a POW camp close to the concrete bridge." Specifically, airmen were briefed that two parallel bridges located at Kanchanaburi, Thailand, were targets for the day.

TOTAL TIME AS CO-PILOT		TOTAL TIME SOLO TIME TO DATE
DAY	NIGHT	
70:45	44:30	735:20
1:25	"	1:25
6:10	"	6:10
	"	14:40
	"	1:10
	"	15:10
	"	13:50
	"	12:10

Another portion of pilot Clem Tromblay's log book with his remarks about the February 13, 1945, mission. It mentions their "low level of 300 feet and very heavy flak and fire."

REMARKS:

Awarded: AIR medal  
: cluster to AIR medal

Promoted: To 1<sup>st</sup> LT. A.C.

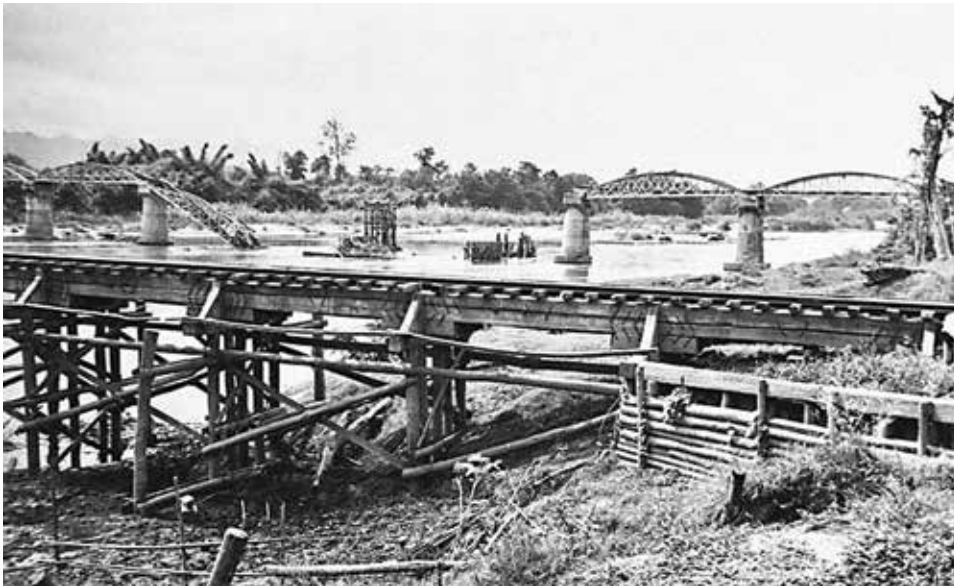
Ship #42 check out.

Local Bomb Range Low level 300' 12-100 lbs.

X-COUNTRY C.F.R. WITH C.O. MAJ. CRAIG.  
Burma Siam Railway. #40  
6-1000 GP. Bho. Bridge #600 3 direct hits.

Local low altitude (300') bombing 15-100 lbs.  
(By Pass) Bridge 2 direct hits approach 1 direct hit on  
Low level 300' very heavy flak and fire. Bridge.  
Maulmein Ye R.R. Low level 300' flak and fire. #48.  
Bridge #149 (#81) 1 direct hit on #148 6-1000 GP.

6-1000 GP. NO HITS. Bridge #51A. #46



The February 13, 1945, mission with four B-24 bombers was headed toward Kanchanaburi, Thailand, to strike two bridges (one wood and the other steel, concrete and other materials). The mission was confirmed with major damage to both bridges.

On this mission, Larry's aircraft was accompanied by three B-24s. Each B-24 Liberator was well equipped to handle the assignment—a trained 10 man crew, two bomb bay tanks of gasoline, and time delayed fuses attached to 1,000 pound bombs.

The four bombers flew over Calcutta at an altitude of 1,000 feet before encountering the Bay of Bengal where they dropped closer to the water—enemy radar in Burma would detect their presence if a low altitude was not

maintained. It was crucial to maintain the element of surprise because the Allied bombers were too far from home base for a friendly fighter escort.

The Liberators continued to skim across the water until daybreak where they encountered the coastline and city of Tavoy. The pilots then entered into a steady climb to clear the mountains at the Burmese coastline and headed toward the targets near Kanchanaburi. The POW camp was quickly spotted near the bridges.



As time passed the fictional movie served the purpose of highlighting historical events surrounding Kanchanaburi, the railroad and forced laborers. And what is Larry's opinion of the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*? "It was a good movie, but it didn't have anything to do with what actually happened when the bridge was bombed."

Sergeant Grove concluded his military service with 18 missions and 232 hours of combat flying. He later worked for Walter N. Yoder & Sons as a mechanical estimator for employment and enjoyed hobbies of recreational flying, hunting, target shooting, hand-loading ammunition and building target crossbows for tournament competition. Larry was awarded a second place trophy in Maryland State Competition for crossbow shooting.

Today, it is interesting to note that Bridge 277 the Allied bombers repeatedly tried to destroy remains in service and is part of the tourist industry. Visitors may use rail service or walk the bridge at their own pace. Also, the nearby Jeath War Museum and Kanchanaburi War Cemetery commemorates the thousands of native railroad workers and POWs who perished as victims of Japanese war time imprisonment.



Bridge 277 today is part of the tourist industry; visitors may walk the bridge at their own pace and visit the nearby Jeath War Museum and Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

## Springs Nutrition

Health Consultations

• Vitamins • Herbs



**WE HAVE MOVED  
TO CASSELMAN MARKET**

3249 Chestnut Ridge Road, Grantsville, MD 21536  
Monday thru Saturday, 8:00 am – 8:00 pm

Juanita Jo Yoder, owner  
Vitamin & Supplement Coaching  
**(814) 701-5872**

Juanita Jo or Shirley on location 2:00-4:00, Mon – Fri

[www.SpringsNutrition.com](http://www.SpringsNutrition.com)



90+ years of fine arts  
& free admission



Ranked 4th best museum in Maryland  
and #1 attraction in Hagerstown by Tripadvisor



**Washington County Museum of Fine Arts**

401 Museum Drive, Hagerstown, Maryland | 301-739-5727 | [wcmfa.org](http://wcmfa.org)

Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.,  
Sunday 1 to 5 p.m.; closed Monday and major holidays

