

River Kwai laborer finally goes home

Tearful Indonesian, 74, exits jungle

KANCHANABURI, Thailand (AP) An Indonesian who has lived in the Thai countryside since the Japanese forced him to work on the River Kwai railroad during World War II tearfully left Sunday for his home country.

Boontum Wandee, 74, was found by Takashi Nagase, 76, a former army interpreter at River Kwai who has devoted his postwar life to reconciliation and atonement.

Nagase met Boontum on Sunday at his 20-baht-a-month (about ¥70) hut 80 km north of the River Kwai bridge in Thailand's eastern province of Kanchanaburi.

Boontum shut the door of his hut for the last time, and the two men put their arms around each other to begin the journey.

"It really is a dream come true for me," Boontum said. "Although I am leaving good friends behind, as well as the graves of the men I came to Thailand with in 1943, I have no regrets about leaving.

"Mr. Nagase has been one aspect of salvation in my life, and has more than made amends for the suffering at the hands of the Japanese 50 years earlier."

Nagase, in an interview with AP Television, said he didn't want Boontum "to die unnoticed here in the jungle. He is of old age, like me. I think it is better for him to return to his homeland.

"I told him we Japanese

are very sorry for what we did and he said, 'Not at all, we are Asian brothers.' I was so happy to hear those words that it made me cry."

The cruelty of Japanese commanders at the railroad was shown in the 1957 film "The Bridge on the River Kwai." More than 16,000 Allied prisoners and an estimated 100,000 Asian forced laborers died while constructing the railway from Thailand to Burma.

Boontum is the Thai name the Indonesian laborer took on in the jungle. Born Cara Yavrija, he was a soldier of the Dutch colony of Java when he was forcibly taken to the River Kwai in 1942.

Boontum said he and several other Asian laborers escaped to the jungle during a bombing raid in 1944. They emerged several years after the war and heard a rumor that there was a Red Cross ship at Bangkok harbor waiting to take them home.

"We went to the port and saw a ship in the distance," he recalled. "We all cried as we believed that had been our ship. It was then that our hopes disappeared for good and we returned to Kanchanaburi, the only place we knew."

The laborer's became subsistence farmers. Boontum never married. Letters were his only contact with his family back in Indonesia.

Boontum's hopes of return-



TAKASHI NAGASE (right) helps former Indonesian forced laborer Boontum Wandee from a hut in a Thai jungle, where he has lived for 50 years since World War II. Nagase was an interpreter for the Imperial Japanese Army assigned to the rail link on the famed River Kwai bridge. AP PHOTO

ing home were rekindled after the last of his nine comrades in the jungle died.

"He's Thai now," said a Thai friend, Somboon Songsawan, 81, who was sad to see him leave. "He's one of us so he is always welcome back."

All the members of his family in Indonesia have died except for his younger brother, whom he only vaguely re-

members.

Boontum plans to apply for Indonesian citizenship; the country was still a Dutch colony when he left.

The journey was paid for by public donations Nagase collected in Japan.

"It's never too late to start a new life again," Boontum said, wiping away a tear.