



The Railway Man: Next Stop PTSD

A Review of

The Railway Man (2013)

by Jonathan Teplinzky (Director)

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Reviewed by

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In David Lean's acclaimed film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Spiegel & Lean, 1957), Hollywood's version of the building of the Thai-Burma Railway, Major Clipton (James Donald) utters the last words of the film, "Madness, Madness!" Fast-forward some fifty years to director Jonathan Teplitzky's *The Railway Man* and once again the setting is the jungles of Burma and the themes of "madness" associated with the forced slave-labor building of the Thai-Burma (Death) Railway by the Japanese during World War II. While the railroad is the backdrop to the movie, *The Railway Man* at its marrow is the story of Eric Lomax, the author of the book by the same name, and his struggles associated with his undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With greater attention given to PTSD related to America's recent wars, the psychological themes of this film should resonate with many in the audience.

Teplitzky's *The Railway Man* stays true to its title. Throughout the movie, trains and railways are fundamental to the main characters and the events that alter their lives. On a train in England many years after World War II, the older Eric Lomax (Colin Firth) harmlessly meets up with Patti Wallace (Nicole Kidman). Lomax, a self-described railway enthusiast, who displays savant-like knowledge of trains and schedules, gives Patti advice on making her next railway connection, and a relationship soon develops. The early dating scenes between Lomax and Patti that culminate in their marriage are brief, but they provide the film with hope that these two lonely, middle-aged individuals will finally find happiness together. Both in the movie and their real lives this happiness is soon shattered by Lomax's post-war psychological problems manifested in his detachment from his new wife to his aggressive razor attack on a bill collector. It is at this moment that both Patti and the viewer realize that Lomax's psychological issues are extremely serious and easily fit the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5's* (2013) description of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Through the use of multiple flashbacks, the viewer is introduced to the younger Lomax (Jeremy Irvine), a soldier who was captured by the Japanese soon after the fall of Singapore in 1942. Lomax and his unit soon become part of the enslaved and tortured thousands of POWs that the Japanese forced to work on the construction of the Thai-Burma Railway. While David Lean's film displayed a sanitized view of the slave labor conditions that between

80,000 and 100,000 prisoners were subjugated to by the Japanese, this film reveals the horrific conditions and the brutality the POWs were forced to live and die under.

The younger Lomax's life soon spirals out of control after he is caught with a radio and unjustly accused of being a spy. The camp commandant, with the assistance of Nagase, a young translator (Tanroh Ishida), sadistically tortures Lomax to make him confess. Lomax is subjected to multiple beatings with an ax handle, and when not being tortured, he is forced to sleep in an animal-sized cage. Finally, when Lomax refuses to confess, he is ruthlessly water-boarded in the film's most vivid close-your-eyes-and-tell-me-when-its-over scenes. Teplitzky's camera angles and close-ups of Lomax's torture skillfully force the viewer to be engaged in the moment. At some level, the viewer's mirror neurons are triggered, and an empathetic understanding of Lomax's post-war psychological issues is experienced.

Were this all the film portrayed, it would be another skillful retelling of war-time horror, but two major events catapult this film to its surprising psychological closure. First, Lomax's fellow prisoner of war (POW) and friend, Henry (Stellan Skarsgard) learns that Nagase, the former translator, is still alive and is making a living off his wartime crimes by serving as a guide for tourists who are allowed to visit the former POW camp. While Henry and Patti believe it would be therapeutic for Lomax to return to meet his nightmares, Lomax refuses. It is not until Henry commits suicide that Lomax reluctantly capitulates and agrees to train back to Burma to confront the man of his nightmares and flashbacks.

If Lomax could train-travel to our post-9/11 world, he would find a plethora of possible treatments for his psychological issues. Whether it was labeled nostalgia, shell shock, combat fatigue, Vietnam Syndrome, or PTSD, veterans such as Lomax have been in need of successful treatment for hundreds of years. Today Lomax would be able to select from various medications, including selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors such as fluoxetine. His other options would include various forms of group therapy, traditional therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EDMR). Instead, Lomax trains back to his "years of darkness" to meet his interrogator-torturer who Lomax finds to be an older and changed man (Hiroyuki Sanada) who has also been affected by his personal war experiences.

The screen becomes filled with tension and anticipation when Lomax confronts his "enemy" in a total reversal of roles. Lomax becomes the interrogator in an attempt to find out why Nagase was so unbelieving of Lomax and so willing to stand by and allow Lomax to be brutalized. These intense scenes of confrontation between Lomax and his extormentor feature many of the therapeutic aspects of a contemporary therapy for PTSD known as prolonged exposure therapy (PE). In this popular PTSD therapy, the client/patient re-experiences the event or events through recalling or revisiting the location of the trauma and then engaging himself or herself with the emotions that rise to the surface. Through this accidental, self-administered form of PE, Lomax not only confronts the physical location of his trauma but also confronts the source of his trauma. Ultimately deciding not to kill his tormentor, Lomax is able to forgive Nagase and thereby experience a profound catharsis that puts him on the pathway of healing and reconciliation. This remarkable telling of a real-life story goes one step further, and as the film ends, the viewer learns that Lomax and Nagase become friends and work together to bring their respective countries to meaningful reconciliation.

Whether it is due to directors trying to capture an aging baby boomer audience or the zeitgeist of nostalgia of the mid-21st century, World War II movies and novels are once again in vogue. Richard Flanagan's Booker Prize winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014) and the contemporary movie *Unbroken* (2014) both capture the horrors and heroism of POWs during World War II. Likewise, similar themes of brutality and bravery are being revisited in the recently released *Fury* (2014). From a literary and movie making perspective, Flanagan's novel *Unbroken* (not yet released), *The Fury*, and *The Railway Man* are different perspectives of a similar theme. These artistic endeavors not only reveal the shortcomings and flaws of humans during combat, but paradoxically, they also speak to the ingrained quality of human resiliency, grit, and forgiveness exemplified by both Lomax and Nagase during the last few years of their lives.

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