

# The Goktek Railway Viaduct in the Shan States

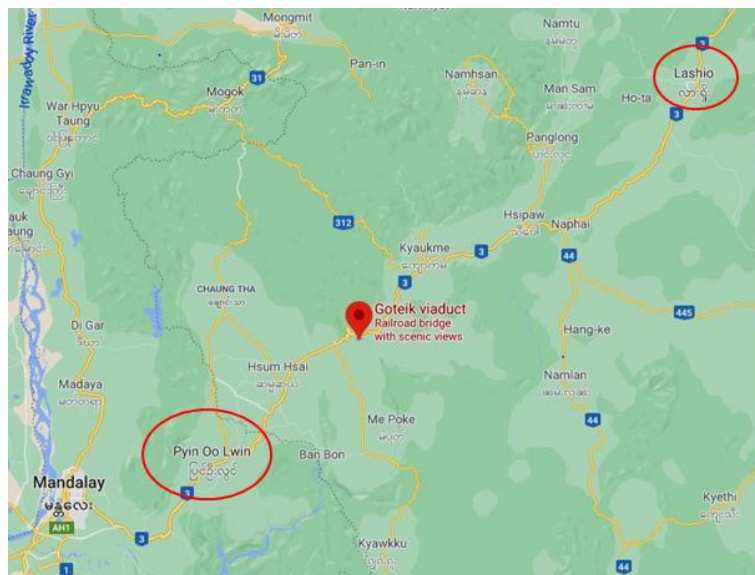
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*Goktek Trestle Bridge today (courtesy Tour Mandalay)*

Just over 40 miles northeast of Maymyo, now called Pyin U Lwin the ground plunges suddenly and unexpectedly deep into the Goktek (Goteik) Gorge; a heavily forested and dark valley that, from the top, appears almost bottomless. Crossing this gorge had always provided a challenge for travel between Mandalay, Maymyo and Lashio. Dropping steeply into the River Gohtwin valley is a rather dicey track, with a dozen switchbacks and numerous blind corners, built to keep the highly congested traffic moving should the bridge ever be sabotaged!



*Map of Northern Shan States (courtesy Google Earth/Laura Hayworth)*

Maymyo, at three and a half thousand feet above sea level, was the summer capital of the British Colonial administrators of Burma and Lashio was the principal town of the Northern Shan States. At the end of the Victorian era a solution was found to the challenge of joining the railway line Maymyo to Lashio, which was necessary if Great Britain was going to extend administration and control of its most easterly province in Burma; sitting on the border with China.

The result was the internationally famous trestle bridge, constructed right across the Gokteik Gorge making it then the second highest railway bridge in the world; and the longest bridge in Burma. It was constructed in 1899 by the Pennsylvania and Maryland Steel Bridge Construction Company with work starting on 28 April 1899. It was opened in January 1900, work was swift, with the construction being overseen by Sir Arthur Rendel, the officially appointed engineer to the Burma Railway Company. The component parts were constructed in America, shipped across and installed at a cost of c £111,000.



*Gokteik Bridge c 1900*

The viaduct bridge measures 2,260 ft across, includes 15 towers and the height is thought to be 820 ft from the underside of the bridge to the riverbed in the valley below. Due to its technical construction and natural location, it is still considered a world standard masterpiece of construction; and four trains a day use the single-track bridge, two from Mandalay to Lashio and two in reverse. The bridge even gets a mention in American Paul Theroux's Asian travelogue *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Theroux describes it thus: 'a monster of silver geometry in all the ragged rock and jungle'.

Today tourists are advised to get off at Nawngkhio Station and spend about 5 minutes photographing this remarkable site, before crossing over. Trains crawl slowly, so as not to place undue stress as they cross over this very wide, very deep and, yes, very picturesque natural feature. It is quite extraordinary that this bridge, built one hundred and twenty years ago, is still standing and still used regularly. It received major maintenance work in the 1990s and tourists are banned from walking across.

I went to the Gokteik Bridge in 1996 in the company of Brigadier Michael Calvert DSO\* under arrangements made by *Tour Mandalay*. This was an unrivalled opportunity because Calvert had had a direct connection with the bridge, dating from 1942, which he kindly shared with me. In 1942, then, Major Mike Calvert was commander of the Bush Warfare School, based at Maymyo, where Orde Wingate first met Calvert as he explained his vision of long-range operations behind Japanese lines.



*Brigadier Michael Calvert in Burma (courtesy Calvert papers) in 1944*

During the retreat to India in 1942, Calvert had spent a week guarding the Gokteik Bridge against the Japanese advance, waiting for formal orders to destroy it, but the orders never came! When Calvert arrived back in India he reported to General Harold Alexander. The first thing the General said to him was: "Calvert, did you blow the Gokteik Viaduct Bridge?" When Calvert replied that he had asked half a dozen times for permission to blow it, but each time was told to leave it alone, the General looked a bit put out. He explained that the order could not be given for political reasons, but that Calvert had been sent there as the person most likely to disobey an order!

The next year Mike Calvert had the chance to do the job properly. On 7th February 1943 Field Marshal Wavell saluted the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade as 3,000 men and hundreds of mules set out on Operation Longcloth; Major General Orde Wingate's first long range penetration expedition right into Japanese occupied territory. This was the only Allied operation to take place in Burma in 1943, all the others being stood down because it was deemed that the Allies were not yet ready. When Wingate's advance columns reached the western bank of the great Irrawaddy River, Mike Calvert and his fellow column commander Bernard Ferguson requested permission to make the thousand-yard crossing; which was given. Wingate decided to follow on, take the rest of his Brigade across and

ordered Calvert to take his Number 3 column and Ferguson's Number 5 column straight to the Gokteik Bridge to blow it and thus deny a vital access route to the Japanese.



*77th Indian Infantry Brigade setting out on Operation Longcloth in 1943 (courtesy IWM)*

Wingate's Brigade was now at the extreme range of air supply, with difficult communications with India and was therefore ordered by Army Headquarters at Imphal to return immediately. As a consequence Mike Calvert never had the second opportunity of blowing the Gokteik Bridge.

I mentioned that in 1996 I had taken Calvert back to Burma, for the only return he ever made, with a group of veterans and relatives. We flew from Rangoon to Mandalay and then by coach to Maymyo where we caught the Lashio train, which crossed over the Gokteik Bridge.



1. *Piers Storie-Pugh pushes Mike Calvert through Maymyo Station (PS-P collection)*

I asked Mike Calvert for his thoughts: "I really never expected to see this bridge again where I had spent a week in 1942 with a bunch of deadbeats, criminals, one hangman and escaped prisoners. Any one of them could have blown the bridge! I headed here again in 1943 with Bernard Ferguson on Operation Longcloth and we had precise orders from Wingate to blow the Gokteik Bridge. We never had the chance, receiving orders instead to withdraw immediately to India. I suppose if I had some explosive now I could try again and perhaps third time lucky".



*Gokteik Bridge seen from the Maymyo-Lashio road (PS-P collection)*

In recent years there has been violence, mainly between the RCSS and the TNIA, such as a bomb thrown at a police station another at a bank, all with casualties, which has forced villagers to leave certain parts of the Northern Shan States. As a consequence the general advice is to avoid travel from Pyin U Lwin to Lashio and Hsipaw which of course would involve crossing the Gokteik Viaduct. I wonder what Mike Calvert and his Chindits would make of this!

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*Piers Storie-Pugh is a qualified guide (see Guild of Battlefield Guides No 12) and has been taking groups all over the world, including Burma, since 1985. He gives regular talks (Covid 19 allowing) to support charities in their fundraising.*

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