

# **The Bridge on the River Kwai Film Summary**

**The Bridge on the River Kwai by David Lean**

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## Context

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* examines the motivations of men held in captivity during World War II. When a new group of British soldiers comes to the POW camp, their leader Colonel Nicholson refuses to be treated with anything less than the respect he deserves as an officer. Col. Saito, who is in charge of the camp, finally gives in to Nicholson, and the British begin working on Saito's project - a new bridge. Nicholson insists that they finish on time so that Saito doesn't kill them before committing suicide, and he wants them to take pride in their work and do the best possible job.

At the same time, the British military is planning to destroy the bridge. One man, Shears, has escaped the camp, and he is forced to lead the mission back to the area. When Nicholson finds out about the plot, as the train is about to come over the bridge, he becomes crazy and tries to attack the British soldier detonating the bomb. He finally realizes what he has done, and in his dying move, he falls on top of the detonator, destroying the bridge he has so lovingly created.

David Lean was one of the most brilliant directors of his time. He directed such classic films as *Great Expectations* (1946), *Oliver Twist* (1948), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *A Passage to India* (1984). In 1990, he received the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award.

William Holden gives a highly rated performance as Shears. One of his first works, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), placed him in a role for which he would always be remembered. Earlier, he also gave an excellent performance in *Born Yesterday* (1950) and won an Oscar in *Stalag 17* (1953). Later, he appeared in *Network* (1976).

After portraying Herbert Pocket in the 1946 version of *Great Expectations*, Alec Guinness became a well-known actor who has created many classic films. Some of his best known performances include his roles in *Oliver Twist* (1948), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), *The Ladykillers* (1955), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Dr. Zhivago* (1965), *Star Wars* (1977), *A Passage to India* (1984) and *Little Dorritt* (1988).

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was lauded as one of the greatest films of all time. The film won seven Academy Awards: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Alec Guinness; Best Cinematography for Jack Hildyard; Best Director for David Lean; Best Film Editing for Peter Taylor; Best Music, Scoring for Malcolm Arnold; Best Picture for Sam Spiegel; and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for Pierre Boulle, Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson. Sessue Hayakawa was also nominated for the Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role. It also won three Golden Globes: Best Motion Picture - Drama; Best Motion Picture Actor - Drama for Alec Guinness; and Best Motion Picture Director for David Lean. Sessue Hayakawa was once again nominated for Best Supporting Actor.

## Summary and Analysis

As *The Bridge on the River Kwai* opens, the audience sees a train with gunmen aboard arriving at the end of the railroad where hundreds of men are working. The men are prisoners of war who are then led in long lines through the jungle. At the camp, two of the prisoners, Major Clipton and Shears, beg the captain to give them the day in the hospital. Shears tries to convince the captain to accept a lighter as a gift, and they are put on the sick list. They finish burying a corporal as they discuss how they plan to escape before they face the same fate. Then Shears gives an elegant speech for the man.

Viewers see the flag of Japan flying high as a servant moves a fan over the captain and colonel. After they finish talking, the colonel hears whistling from the prisoners outside and looks out the window. The soldiers and the prisoners of war pass in their lines as they return to camp. They remain marching in place until everyone has returned. As they watch the group, Nicholson tells Warden that they'll be busy gravediggers in the next few days.

Colonel Nicholson arrives and salutes Colonel Saito. Saito welcomes them and introduces himself as the commanding officer of the group near the railroad. He wants to build a bridge over the River Kwai, and he expects all men, including the officers, to work. After warning the men to work hard, Saito tells them that Japan cannot feed idle men, and if they try to escape, they will die. They have one day of rest before they begin working. He tells them, "Be happy in your work."

The men are sent to their quarters, and Nicholson talks to Colonel Saito privately. Nicholson tells Saito that they will work hard but that using officers in manual labor is against the Geneva Convention. Saito doesn't believe Nicholson has the right to negotiate since he's a prisoner. Colonel Saito then turns down Nicholson's offer to let him read Nicholson's copy of the Convention. Rain begins and pours throughout the evening. While the men are at dinner, Nicholson goes to Clipton and Jennings in the sick ward. He meets Shears, who was part of the crew that first built the camp. He was in the Navy and made it to shore after his ship went down.

Nicholson is worried about officers having to do manual labor and asks Shears to stay with them. To Nicholson, Saito seems reasonable, but the rest of the group is not convinced that Saito can be reasoned with. That night, the officers discuss their plans. Jennings wants to plan an escape, but Nicholson believes that they can't escape. Shears points out that the odds of surviving in the camp are even worse, and if a man gives up the hope of escape, it's over. He's just been biding his time. Nicholson explains that they were ordered to surrender in Singapore, so running away might be against the law. Shears is appalled that they would want to uphold the letter of the law in the jungle, but Nicholson insists that they can bring civilization to the jungle. He wants his men always to feel that his officers command them rather than the Japanese so that they feel like soldiers and not slaves. Shears hopes they can believe that they're soldiers but



admits that he's a living slave. Nicholson is convinced that this American has just been cut off from his unit for too long.

The next morning, Saito talks to the "English prisoners" who he believes are no longer soldiers. Saito tells the prisoners that they are to finish the bridge by May 12, and he expects both officers and soldiers to work equally. He believes that they should have died honorably rather than surrendering. Nicholson talks to Saito about the Geneva Convention, but Saito hits him. Saito believes that the Geneva Convention is the coward's code, not the soldier's code of Bushido. Nicholson says that since Saito refuses to be civilized, he and the other officers will be forced to disobey him.

As the men go off to work, Nicholson insists on sticking to the proper way of behaving in the military. The men march away while the officers remain, and Saito demands that Nicholson order his officers to work. When Nicholson refuses, Saito says that he'll count to three, and if they're not off to work, he will have his men fire. Shears and Jennings watch and realize that Saito will really do it. At the last moment, Jennings runs out and says that everyone has seen, so he cannot hide the truth. Nicholson slaps him, but Jennings goes on, pointing out that murdering unarmed men is not part of the soldier's code. Saito turns around and walks inside.

Nicholson and his officers stand out in the sun all day. Shears and the other men talk about them, and Shears believes that this type of bravery can get them all killed. Jennings begs to go along with Shears in his escape plan, but Shears points out that when Nicholson suggests something, it's an order. Later that evening, Nicholson is put into the "oven," a small hole in the side of a hill, as everyone else sings, "He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Jennings, Shears and Weaver are killed as they try to escape; however, Shears isn't really dead.

The men work on the bridge by pulling down trees while Japanese soldiers guard them. Major Clipton comes to see Saito about Colonel Nicholson, who is still in the oven. Saito is angry that men tried to escape and that they are behind schedule on building the bridge. Clipton suggests that the men might not be trying to sabotage the efforts; they might just need their own officers to lead them. Saito gets angry but then allows Clipton to sit down. He sends Clipton to talk to Nicholson and threatens to make the patients work if he has to kill the officers. Clipton brings food and tells him about the situation. Nicholson wants to stand on principle.

Clipton reports to Saito and protests the way Nicholson is being treated. Saito refuses to take responsibility and returns to his quarters. Clipton thinks both men may be absolutely mad. Elsewhere, a dirty and ragged Shears falls on a bed of rocks under the hot sun. Vultures begin to circle, and he struggles to go on. Finally he arrives in a village, and some kind villagers carry him to safety.

At the camp, Saito meets with his men, who look at the calendar, realizing the bridge is not on course. Outside, the POWs wait quietly as Saito comes out to ask about the bridge. He tells them that the problem is their officers, who refuse to help with the work because they think they are too good to work. He is upset that they are not happy in



their work. Saito admits the failure of one man on the Japanese staff and fires him. Saito will be in charge from now on, and he tells them to rest today and offers them presents. He once again commissions them to "be happy in our work." The men run toward the gifts and fight for them, discovering that he is giving them packages from the Red Cross.

At the bridge site the next day, part of the bridge falls apart, to Saito's horror. The next morning, they take Nicholson out of the oven and bring him to Saito. Nicholson is barely able to stand, but he watches as Saito eats and drinks. Saito explains that he is to complete his orders by May 12 and points out that other officers from companies are working. Saito tries to compromise, but Nicholson refuses to let even junior officers work. Saito reveals to Nicholson that if the bridge isn't built on time, he has to kill himself and will kill others before he dies. Nicholson then invites Saito to sit down and tries to convince Saito to let his men command the POWs, since many of them have worked on bridges in the past. Saito hates the British because they have no shame even when they've been defeated. He sends Nicholson back to the oven.

After Shears is well, he borrows a boat to go down the river to Ceylon. Back at the camp, the men have a day off in honor of the day Japan conquered Russia. Nicholson is removed from the oven before them. They all salute him as he walks to Saito's quarters on his own. Saito then gives officers amnesty from their punishment and from doing manual labor in honor of the day. Nicholson comes out to his men, who celebrate wildly as he releases the other officers. Meanwhile, Saito cries in his room.

The next day, the bridge work is supervised by the British officers. Nicholson questions a corporal about the number of men he has, but Nicholson becomes annoyed when the corporal keeps winking at him mischievously. The men act up, and Nicholson puts a stop to it. The men feel that they should slow down the work, but Nicholson wants them to work hard at their jobs.

Nicholson then talks to a bridge expert about what he would do if it were his bridge. He says that the location is all wrong for building a bridge and suggests that there needs to be organization and teamwork. Nicholson decides to put the Japanese to shame by putting the company back together. Reeves agrees that to keep the men in line, they need to be busy. He wants them to take pride in their work and build an excellent bridge.

After putting together their plans, Nicholson and his officers prepare to prove to Saito that they know more about building a bridge than he does. They meet with him and tell him the bad news about his bridge. They show him their plans to get the bridge finished on time. Some more men will be needed on the bridge, so Nicholson asks Saito to add his men to the bridge work. Nicholson tells him that they may not be able to finish the bridge on time, but they will try. Saito dismisses the meeting.

Outside, Clifton says he's not worried about the Japanese appreciating what the British are doing for them. Reeves then tells him that there are trees similar to the elm in the



jungle, and the London Bridge made of elm lasted 600 years. Nicholson says that would be something all right.

In Ceylon, Shears recovers in the military hospital. A British officer comes to visit Shears, who is playing on the beach with a beautiful woman. Shears expects to be discharged, and he is excited about his plans. The British officer, Major Warden, finds him and talks to him about his escape. Warden wants more information on the railway and invites him to come up to see him the next morning. Warden leaves, and Shears goes back to his woman.

The next morning, Shears meets with Warden as men are being trained. Viewers find out that Shears was rescued by an airplane, and he tells Warden about Nicholson's insanity. Warden explains that they will have to carry demolition equipment through the jungle and wants Shears to give specific information. Finally, he gets to the point and asks Shears to go back with them to the camp before explaining that Shears is now temporarily part of the British Army. Shears explains his lack of experience in the Navy. He tricked everyone by changing uniforms with an officer who died after they arrived on shore. Shears explains that he can get a medical discharge and go home, and thus the papers are no good. Warden goes through the papers and shows Shears his photograph. They've known about his real record for a week, and that's why the Navy was happy to let the British borrow him. Shears takes a drink and volunteers since there's no way out. Colonel Green comes in, is introduced to "Major" Shears and congratulates him for volunteering.

As Saito watches, he sees the bridge coming together nicely thanks to the British officers, and the railroad tracks are almost finished as well. Although he's pleased, some of the British soldiers are confused. Clipton asks Nicholson whether he's convinced that building the bridge is a good idea. Nicholson points out that everyone is now happy and treated well, but Clipton points out that what they're doing could be seen as collaboration with the enemy. Nicholson realizes that they need to show that the British can do well, and he hopes that in years to come, people will use the bridge and remember who built it and under what circumstances.

In Ceylon, Shears arrives late to a meeting because he was with his nurse friend. They need a fourth member for the team, and they are to choose him today. Shears is there to evaluate whether Lt. Joyce will be a good person for the job. Joyce volunteered for the Army, but he has never had to kill anyone. He admits that he doesn't know if he could kill someone. They are impressed that he's honest, and they agree that he should go.

Shears tries to get out of the job on the basis that he can't parachute, but they set up lessons for him. Green is thrilled that Shears made friends in the village because that makes the job easier. He also shows Shears the new "L-pill" (lethal pill) and tells him not to be taken alive. If anyone falls ill, they'll have to leave that person behind. Shears admits that he's not convinced that Warden has experience. Warden comes up as Green tells Shears that Warden has blown up several bridges. Warden reports that





everyone agrees Shears should just jump and hope for the best, since he could get hurt in a practice jump.

Finally, the men are on their way. When they jump, Chapman gets stuck in a tree and is killed when he is lodged on a branch. The villagers plan to bury him and his chute, and one villager agrees to lead the men to the concentration camp. The next day, they begin their dangerous trek through the jungle with the villager and several women who carry food. After they go through a river, a girl picks leeches off Shears's back. Their radio won't work, and Shears kicks it because he believes it's molded like everything else in the jungle. As it tips over onto the ground, though, they get a signal. That night it pours rain, but when it stops, they find that the bridge has been moved a bit. They are instructed to destroy the train as well as the bridge.

At the camp, Nicholson talks to Clipton about his "sick list." They need more men in order to finish the bridge, even though the officers are working, and Nicholson is sure that there are at least a few malingerers. Nicholson finds that almost all of the hospitalized men can help with the work.

On the journey through the jungle, the men and women bathe together at the base of a waterfall before going further. After the men have moved, several Japanese soldiers come up to the girls. The Allied soldiers throw grenades and shoot at the Japanese, as thousands of birds fly out of the trees. The Japanese soldiers lie dead as the women sob. One soldier gets away, and the men try to follow him into the jungle. They finally find the man, but he almost kills Joyce before Warden stabs him.

The soldier shot Warden in the foot, but he is still able to go on. They continue their slow march through the jungle wilderness. Finally, they take a break so that Warden won't bleed to death. Warden wants them to go ahead without him, but Shears points out that the important thing isn't to die by the rules but to live like a human being. He demands that they go on together. Warden tries to force himself up but falls again. They pick him up, put him on a stretcher and carry him until finally they arrive at a ridge far above the bridge. The group moves closer to get a better look. Warden can't believe that the Japanese have built such a sound structure. Joyce suggests that the morale might be boosted if the British knew they were so close. They plan to set the charges against the piles and blow the bridge when the train comes by. They make the rest of their plans, and Shears encourages Warden that Joyce will be okay.

Over at the bridge site, Nicholson relaxes on the bridge and takes pride in the work. Saito comes over and says that the work is beautiful. Nicholson wonders what the meaning of his life has been and whether he's made any difference, especially in comparison to what other people have done. A moment later, Nicholson decides to leave to see the men. He tells Saito that the men are preparing some entertainment. That night, they put on a hilarious show for the group.

While the camp is busy enjoying the show, Shears and Joyce row out to the bridge to install the explosives. As the Japanese soldiers patrol the bridge, they quietly make their way over so they can check everything out. At the end of the evening, Nicholson speaks





to the group about the new camp where they will be transported by train the next day. He applauds them for turning defeat to victory by successfully constructing the bridge.

After Shears and Joyce finish setting the explosives, the group silently returns to shore. Joyce stays on one side of the river, while Shears is on the other. Shears wishes him a long and happy life before going to the other shore to cover him and wait to detonate the explosives. The morning finally arrives, and everyone waits for the train to arrive. The river is down in the morning, and the wire is exposed. They are afraid the Japanese will notice. Suddenly, they hear shooting, but it is just the Japanese cutting a ribbon for the bridge and marching the soldiers across it as they whistle once again.

As Warden watches, he decides that Joyce should go ahead and blow the bridge after the British soldiers have made it across, while the Japanese remain on the bridge. Clipton and Nicholson go to stand on the bridge, but Clipton doesn't want to celebrate with them while they wait for the train. Suddenly, they hear the whistle of the train, and Joyce prepares to do his job. Nicholson stands proudly on the bridge until he sees the wire coming out of the river. He realizes what's going on and makes his way off the bridge to tell Saito that they should look at things again before the train comes across. They go below the bridge, and Nicholson leads Saito away from the bridge toward Joyce, who prepares to shoot if necessary.

Nicholson finds the cord coming out of the water, pulls it from the sand and begins to walk toward Joyce. The train is coming quickly. Nicholson finally makes his way almost to Joyce, who attacks and kills Saito. Nicholson goes crazy when he finds out that the British have commanded them to blow up the bridge. Shears yells at Joyce to kill him after Nicholson calls for help. Shears runs across as the Japanese shoot Joyce. Finally, they kill Shears as well, and he snarls at Nicholson as he dies. Nicholson is shocked and feels terribly guilty. Warden sends a large shell into the air to kill the Japanese, who are closing in as Nicholson walks toward the detonator. With his final breath, Nicholson falls onto the detonator, and the bridge explodes as the train begins to cross it. Warden watches with delight. Clipton calls it "madness" and runs back. The Japanese women are appalled that Warden killed someone, and he tries to explain that he had no choice. Clipton takes another look at the damage and quietly says, "Madness!"



# Characters

## Shears, played by William Holden

### Description

Shears is an American Navy man whose ship sunk along the Japanese coast. He impersonates an officer by wearing the uniform of an officer who had died. He did this so that the enemy would treat him better. The British in the camp believe he has a bad attitude because he is simply waiting to escape rather than trying to make the best of the situation.

Colonel Nicholson especially doesn't trust Shears and believes that Shears is lazy. When Shears and two other men try to escape, they are shot and presumably killed. Shears actually does survive, however, and he makes it to Ceylon with the help of some of the natives.

While in Ceylon, the British figure out Shears's true identity, and the Navy turns him over to their control. Thus, Shears must help lead a mission back to the camp so that the British can destroy the bridge before it helps the enemy. Shears ends up dying bravely in order to complete the mission successfully.

### Analysis

Shears' independent, American attitude does not mix well with the ideals of many of the British soldiers in camp. Some of them do agree with him that they should try to escape, but he is the only one to survive their attempt. Nicholson and the newest batch of British men hold to the philosophy that you should always work your hardest and try your best, while Shears simply wants to survive. In the end, Shears seems to fall in with the same philosophy once he starts on the final mission, and he loses his life to complete his mission.

## Colonel Nicholson, played by Alec Guinness

### Description

Colonel Nicholson is the leader of a group of British soldiers who are captured by the Japanese. He insists on keeping his men in line so that they do not become unruly after their capture. He believes that it is integral that they still feel that their own officers are in charge of them.

When Saito tries to make Nicholson and the other officers work, Nicholson refuses, and they are all put into the oven. Nicholson waits out the time until Saito is finally forced to give in. Then, he takes over the work at the bridge and gets his men back in order. He



inspires them with his example and his courage. However, Nicholson does get a little too attached to his bridge. He sees it as his own property, and he is willing to protect it with his life. When he finds out that his own military is seeking to blow it up, he tries to save the bridge and costs them their lives and his own. He makes up for it in the last moments by falling on the detonator and destroying the bridge.

## **Analysis**

Nicholson seems to be easily obsessed by ideas. First, he gets caught up with the idea of building the bridge with pride. Although everyone wants to stall the building so that they mess up Saito's plan, Nicholson rightly recognizes that they will all be killed should they fail. He is focused on perfection and wants to create the best bridge imaginable.

Nicholson later gets obsessed with keeping the bridge safe. Instead of being excited that his military is planning an attack, Nicholson tries to prevent them from carrying out their mission. He has become friends with Saito and is angry about his death. He wants to keep the bridge safe. Finally, he comes to himself and realizes what is going on. In a last moment of heroism, he falls on the detonator as he dies.

## **Major Warden, played by Jack Hawkins**

### **Description**

Major Warden trains soldiers in Ceylon. When he hears of Shears's experience at the camp, he decides that they must have Shears in order to carry out their mission. He manipulates events so that Shears is forced to help. Warden shows great bravery as they make their way through the jungle. After he is hurt, he tries to go on and even insists that they leave without him. Shears points out that this ideal is not worth the cost and forces Warden to be carried the rest of the way.

### **Analysis**

Warden is a brilliant fighter and a brave man. He leads his group even after the first of their group is killed in the jump. Warden also instills bravery into Joyce, who later kills Saito in order to preserve the mission.

## **Col. Saito, played by Sessue Hayakawa**

### **Description**

Col. Saito is in charge of the camp and has been directed to finish the bridge and the railway by May 12th so that supplies can be sent through. Saito knows little about bridge building, but he refuses to admit any kind of weakness. Once Saito realizes that Nicholson and the other officers will not give in, he offers them their freedom. Since



Saito will be forced to kill himself if he does not finish the bridge successfully, he is willing to let the British build the bridge as long as he is at least able to pretend in front of some of his men that he is still in charge.

## **Analysis**

Saito's pride almost costs him his life. He does not want to admit that there is anything he cannot do or anything that he does not know. When Nicholson outlasts Saito and shows more knowledge, Saito grudgingly gives him more freedom and respect. Over time, Saito lets Nicholson almost completely take over the camp so that the bridge will be built and the railroad finished. Saito is scared to die, which is his only choice if he does not successfully finish the project. Saito may not be very nice, but he is unfailingly committed to his military code.

## **Maj. Clipton, played by James Donald**

### **Description**

Major Clipton has been in the camp for some time. He runs the sick ward and puts many people on it simply so they won't have to work. When Nicholson comes in, Clipton tries to explain to him how Saito works, but Nicholson refuses to give in.

### **Analysis**

Clipton helps viewers see the action through an outside source. Although he is a prisoner in the camp, he is not directly involved in the work, and so he has a more objective outlook. He thinks Nicholson is crazy but eventually respects him. At the very end of the film, viewers can say with Clipton, "Madness."

## **Lt. Joyce, played by Geoffrey Horne**

### **Description**

Lt. Joyce is new to the forces, having been an accountant in England before signing up. He has graduated the best in his class, but neither his superiors nor himself are completely sure that he can kill a person. When they are traveling through the jungle, their group is attacked by some of the Japanese soldiers, and Joyce and Warden chase them. When presented with a soldier who is about to shoot him, Joyce freezes and is almost killed, but Warden comes up and stabs the soldier. Joyce later shows that he can kill a man when he murders Saito after he and Nicholson discover that the bridge is lined with dynamite. Although Joyce does not kill Nicholson before the Japanese shoot him down, he has proven his bravery in the test of war.



## **Analysis**

Joyce is an innocent soldier who has worked hard in training but does not have a natural urge to kill. He is realistic about his ability to kill, and when asked, he responds that he simply doesn't know if he can kill a man. When first tested by the possibility of his own death, he fails, but he succeeds when the stakes are even higher by killing Saito.

Joyce's bravery can be seen as representing the millions of men who died during World War II for every country. He believes in the war and wants to help because of the troubles at home. After working hard in training, he eventually proves himself in battle.

## **Capt. Reeves, played by Peter Williams**

### **Description**

Reeves is one of the officers with Nicholson's group. He is an expert in bridgework, having created many bridges for the military. Nicholson asks his advice as to how they can make the best bridge possible. Reeves gladly helps, since the men need something to do so that they will not become unruly.

### **Analysis**

Reeves's experience is invaluable to Nicholson and the rest. He helps them create the best bridge possibly in all of Japan. The men finally have work to do, and Saito stops mistreating them.

## **Col. Green, played by Andre Morrell**

### **Description**

Colonel Green is head of the British forces around Ceylon. He is helping them train to go into battle, but he also oversees the plans for missions. Green hears about Shears and decides that he must go so that the mission will be successful. After he gets the Americans to let him have Shears for a while, Shears is forced to agree to the job.

### **Analysis**

Green is a master strategist. He covers all his bases by making sure that Shears can't refuse the job.



# Themes

## Dignity under Pressure

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* focuses on a man's ability to have dignity even when under the greatest pressure. Colonel Nicholson spends his time keeping his troops together and the officers in charge even before they arrive in the camp. He believes that to sacrifice their dignity by being ordered about by the enemy would be to admit defeat.

Col. Nicholson and his officers refuse to work alongside their men, according to the rules of the Geneva Convention. Saito has made all the other officers work, and he sees no reason why these men shouldn't work as well. Because they refuse to give in, he puts them in the "ovens." When they are finally released, they retain their dignity by willingly helping Saito build his bridge. They use the best wood, the best methods and the best system to show that even under this horrible rule, they will keep their dignity by doing their best.

## Persistence

Persistence is often a slim commodity these days. Many people simply want others to give them what they feel they deserve. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* reminds viewers that persistence is invaluable when you must demand what you deserve, and each man deserves both dignity and honor.

Col. Nicholson and his officers refuse to give in to Saito's demands that they work. Instead, they spend weeks in the terrifying "ovens" while almost burning and starving to death. When they are finally released, their persistence has paid off. Saito does not make them work and even listens to their plans for his project.

## "Be Happy in Your Work"

Saito often commissions his own men and the prisoners to "be happy in your work." Instead, though, they are all miserable. They are cruelly beaten and often work slowly and do lousy work. Nicholson, on the other hand, realizes that the men need to feel a sense of ownership in order to be happy.

When Nicholson and the officers finally take over, the men are able to feel that they are serving their own country by building the bridge and surviving the camp. Suddenly, the work is faster, and the men take pride in the excellent bridge they have built. In order for anyone to be happy in his or her work, the key is a feeling of ownership and pride. Nicholson understands this basic human need and helps his officers to feel worthy and involved.

## Style and Cinematography

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* allowed military men to relive the glory days of World War II even as the Korean War was still going on. The film's creators show the harsh realities of daily life as a prisoner of war and the struggle of this group of British soldiers to overcome all the odds and survive.

The style of this film shows the exotic jungle areas in all their glory while at the same time showing the gritty reality of working on the railroad tracks and building a bridge. Nothing is shown as easy, and viewers see the torture the men go through in the ovens. The sick ward is used as a haven so that the military men can get some rest once in a while.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* is a brilliant military film that brings all the good and bad of war to life. The real point, though, is the ability of man to survive anything and triumph over the enemy even when under their control. Man struggles against both man and nature and survives.





# Motifs

## War

World War II is the backdrop for this story. Many people will experience a time of war in their lifetime. War is a common motif in film, since many people can relate to it and since war provides a backdrop and purpose for heroic deeds as well as tragedies. World War II can be considered the worst war that the modern world has seen. The wartime motif helps viewers see all the themes running through the film. We are able to see the courage, determination and dignity with which Colonel Nicholson and the other soldiers act. Even under the greatest pressure, these men act with dignity and honor. The war motif also gives a good reason for Nicholson's men to have a common goal. This story could not reasonably be set any other time besides wartime, since war creates a unique situation that brings out the best and the worst in the human condition. Since this film is based on a true story, this story truly has meaning for viewers.

## "The Dictator"

Colonel Saito serves as a dictator figure in this film. His involvement means that the men are actually forced to do the work. Without this pressure and insistence, they might be able to easily do their task well. Instead, they are forced to help the enemy, and most of the men choose to try to slow the work. Once Nicholson arrives, though, he refuses to give Saito recognition as their captor. Instead, Nicholson acts as if he is just as good as Saito and demands respect. He offers to work with pride and dignity, only if he receives respect from Saito. Eventually, the dictator must give in to the demands of the prisoner so that the mission will be successful.

## Journey

There are many journeys during the course of the film. One must assume that the first important journey is the one that brought these normal men into this extraordinary situation. By being placed in this situation, they have a choice to slack or to be extraordinary, and with Nicholson's help, they choose the latter.

Shears also journeys to Ceylon and then back on a mission. His first impulse is simply to escape, and he bravely drags himself through the jungle and the wasteland until he arrives at safety. When the British discover that he has been to the camp, he is forced to go back to complete an important mission. Although he dislikes his role at first, he later performs his duty brilliantly.

Several personal journeys are made as well. Saito goes from being a cruel dictator in the camp to recognizing the intelligence and equality of his prisoners. Nicholson also moves from being a trapped prisoner to being a brilliant motivator and leader, while Shears becomes not a bitter escapee but a brave soldier.

# Symbols

## The Bridge

The bridge that the men build can be seen as symbolic in several different ways. First, it is symbolic of Nicholson's perseverance against all odds. He is convinced that they must stick to their principles and not allow officers to work. When he is finally released, he becomes committed to having his men build the best bridge possible. His hard work finally pays off when the bridge is finally finished.

The bridge can also represent Nicholson's foolishness. He believes that now that the bridge is built, they must keep it up at all costs. Although he realizes that it will help the enemy, he also recognizes that it is their way of standing up to the enemy even in captivity. In order to save the bridge, he lets several British soldiers get killed, but he finally realizes his duty and falls onto the detonator to destroy the bridge.

## The Ovens

When Nicholson stands up to Saito and refuses to let the officers work, Saito puts them all in the ovens, which are small shacks with no windows on the side of the hill. For weeks, Nicholson and his officers wait out their time until Saito finally gets desperate enough to give in.

The ovens symbolize Nicholson's patience and stubbornness. He knows what the Geneva Convention says about officers working, and he refuses to give in until they get the respect he feels that they deserve. Many men are stubborn, but Nicholson is also patient and stubborn under extreme circumstances. He demands his rights, and he is patient enough to wait out Saito even in such horrible conditions. Nicholson shows these same traits when he leads his men in building the bridge and when he tries to keep the bridge intact in spite of the British mission to destroy it. Viewers first see his patience and stubbornness, though, as he waits in the oven.

## The Explosion

Unbeknownst to Nicholson, the British are actually planning a mission to destroy the bridge that they have built. He is convinced that his job is to help Saito with the bridge and keep the British looking healthy and competent even as prisoners. When Shears and the others finally arrive back at the bridge, they find that it has been completed just in time for the train to arrive. They are also surprised to discover that rather than halting progress, their own British soldiers have obviously been helping. No matter what, though, they must destroy the bridge.

Nicholson tries to fight the men until he comes to his senses and realizes his duty to his country. After he gallantly falls onto the detonator in his last movement before death, the

bridge explodes. In this explosion, all Nicholson's dreams and hopes are symbolized as coming to an end. In the end, the explosion symbolizes his success as a leader who kept his men safe and eventually did the right thing for his country.



## Essay Questions

Why is Shears different from most of the other prisoners?

How did Nicholson come to be in the camp?

Why are the officers put in the ovens?

What is Saito's mission?

Why does Saito finally give in?

What will happen to Saito if he does not meet his goals? What do you think Saito would have done if he were not under this pressure?

What is Nicholson's goal for his men?

Why does Shears return to the camp?

Why does Nicholson attack a British soldier?

What is Nicholson's last heroic act?