

## JOURNEY TO A LEGEND

By P. L.

*Southeastern Asia is today one of the world's danger spots. It has constantly been in the news during the summer and autumn of 1941. The agreement with the French Government has brought Japan to the southern part of French Indo-China and to the eastern borders of Thailand, while Great Britain, supported by America, is feverishly developing her position, concentrating troops from the whole empire in Malaya and establishing a chain of British airfields along the Burma-Thailand border.*

*In the strategic aspect of southeastern Asia the isthmus of Kra plays a unique role. We have asked P. L., our collaborator in Bangkok—known to our readers from the article "A New Border in Asia" in the October issue of this magazine—to report upon what he saw on the isthmus.—K.M.*

### A GHOST REAPPEARS

Next to white elephants (which are at best gray, never white) and the Siamese twins, the isthmus of Kra is one of the things that have made Siam, or Thailand, known throughout the world. At Kra the Malay peninsula narrows down to a strip of land that could be pierced by a canal of about 70 miles which would rob Singapore of its dominating position and shorten the shipping routes to the Far East by several days.

For decades the canal project of Kra has been appearing like a ghost in the international press to increase the tension in the already tense enough atmosphere of the Far East. During the last few months the atmosphere in southeastern Asia was electric and everyone was talking of war—unless he preferred to say nothing. Promptly the legend of Kra returned. 20,000 workmen, rumor had it, were working feverishly at the building of the canal under the supervision of Japanese engineers.

So one day I took the express from Bangkok and traveled south. The traffic on the railway showed the effects of the war atmosphere. Trains coming from Malaya to Bangkok were crowded with Japanese who could no longer do business in Singapore after the freezing of Japanese credits.

### THROUGH THE JUNGLE

I reached the famous isthmus of Kra, at Chumpon, whence a thirty-mile motor road leads to Taplee, which lies right on the border of Burma and is separated from that country only by a river about a hundred yards wide. This river, which soon widens into an inlet, forms the border as far as Point Victoria in the south. No matter which route the planned canal of Kra may one day follow, it must end in this inlet.

The motor trip to Taplee revealed the difficulties with which the construction of a canal would meet. The district is fairly hilly, overgrown with dense bamboo forests, and the rivers flowing into the sea from both sides of the watershed descend so steeply that they can hardly be considered an aid to the project.

A tropical bamboo forest is uncanny. Seen from an airplane or a high mountain it looks pleasant and harmless, a gentle, deep-green fringe taking the harshness out of the landscape. Seen from close by it is an impenetrable thicket of smooth, hostile bamboo stems and thorny creeping plants in which thirsty leeches eagerly wait for a chance to cling to the calves of passers-by. When one tries to penetrate a few steps into this thicket, one can understand why the British hold courses

in "jungle warfare" for their troops from Australia, New Zealand, England, and India.

### DOWN THE KRA

In Taplee, which consists of only a few houses, there was a motorboat waiting to take us further south. Besides myself there were innumerable bearded Sikhs stowed away into the narrow boat. To add to my discomfort their staple food seemed to be garlic.

At first the Kra river, swollen by the heavy rainfall of the last few days, was swift and rushing. Soon, however, it became broader; a brackish smell rose from the water, and the drops that from time to time sprayed into the boat tasted slightly salt. It was already water from the Indian Ocean—in a few hours we had crossed the narrow isthmus between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, although by car and small motorboat and not on a big steamer, as the project of Kra envisages it.

The journey downstream was monotonous but fascinating. Dense, apparently quite uninhabited jungle slipped past us. Only now and again did we meet other boats. Some had set up broad palm-leaves as sails, and from a distance they looked like strange, leafy logs drifting in the water, on which a few humans had found refuge.

In Kraburi we made a short stop. It lies six miles down the river from Taplee and is already connected with this place by a road. Later the road is to be extended to Ranong in order to open up the rich tin district in the south.

### "FEVERISH ACTIVITY"

Kraburi seemed to be peacefully asleep. *Buri* in the Thai language means place or town. Hence Kraburi is the "Town of Kra." A few posts sticking out of the dirty gray water of the Kra river, connected by some rotten planks, represented a landing stage. Two rows of about ten houses each reached down to the edge of the water and formed the main street. I thought of the feverish activity reported by some newspapers. The only person

working feverishly around here was an old Chinese woman concocting a midday meal for me. She chopped onions and tomatoes, washed cabbage and similar leaves in the grayish-brown river water, took out of a huge bowl some noodles which had apparently already been cooked and had meanwhile stuck together again in a spongy mess, mixed all this in an extremely greasy pot, and finally broke an egg over the whole thing. The dish she put before me a few minutes later was so delicious that I made an effort to forget the way in which it had been prepared. I tried to imagine instead that I was at the Ritz. The chef of the Ritz could be proud to have produced such a dish. And after all we do not know how he does it.

The rainy season was in full swing. At short intervals lukewarm water splattered down on us. I gave up any attempt to seek shelter under the straw mats from the torrents of water. Instead I stowed away my coat and shirt in a dry place and sat, stripped to the waist and soaking wet, up in the bows. The rain was pleasantly warm, and when it stopped and the view became clear again the scenery captivated me. Out of the water, which was by now very rough, rose steep hill-like islands, and the mainland on both sides of the inlet was also mountainous—wild, green mountains behind drifting wisps of fog. By now it was evening, one of those swift evenings of the tropics where night has already begun to rule while the sun is still above the horizon. The sun was shining through a narrow opening in the dark storm-clouds, but the sea and the mountains around us had already taken on the appearance of night. The sun seemed quite out of place and—as if he were conscious of it—finally disappeared. The details of the surrounding mountains now vanished, and I could no longer distinguish whether they were covered with palms, bamboo, or firs. Their outlines, however, and the mist floating through the valleys gave me for a short time the illusion of a rainy evening in the European Alps.

Soon lights appeared in the darkness and we reached Ranong, the tiny port at the mouth of the inlet.

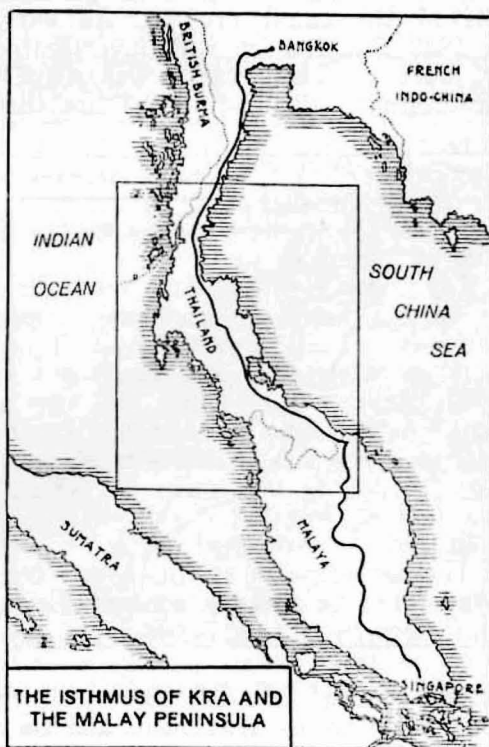
*VICTORIA POINT*

I did not drive into town, but spent the night instead in one of the ramshackle huts which lay right at the edge of the water. From my bed I could see the lights of Victoria Point shimmering through the night. Victoria Point is on the southernmost tip of the Burma mainland—only a few islands reach further south—and it is one of the important strategic points of the British Empire. The future Kra Canal would have to end in the inlet which joins the sea at Victoria Point. As long as Victoria Point is British, the canal of Kra could never gain importance as an anti-British measure, for from Victoria Point England would absolutely command the western end of the canal. A few batteries built into the steeply rising hills—and no ship could reach the canal against the will of the rulers of Victoria Point.

A little beyond the headland a few islands can be seen in the haze. They too are British. They are insignificant little islands on which fishermen ply their trade; like a rampart they follow the coast to the south. There are Sullivan Island, St. Matthew Island, Chance Island, Middle Island, Perforated Island, and many others; little, insignificant islands, but only insignificant so long as there is no Kra Canal. Should the canal one day come into existence, these islands would have the same value that Perim has today for the Suez Canal. As long as the Union Jack waves over these islands and there is a power behind this flag, England would control the Kra Canal.

The significance of the canal lies in the fact that it would avoid the naval fortress of Singapore and the large radius of the airplanes and ships stationed there. However, as long as England is secure in Singapore she will also be able to retain the northern islands. Should she, on the other hand,

withdraw from Singapore together with her American aid, there would be little incentive for the new master of these territories to build the costly canal. We therefore have a complete logical circle: if England is powerful in Malaya and Burma the canal would be of great value to a hostile power; but England would dominate it strategically from Victoria Point and render it worthless. Should the Union Jack, however, disappear from these territories, then the canal would be feasible, but rather futile.

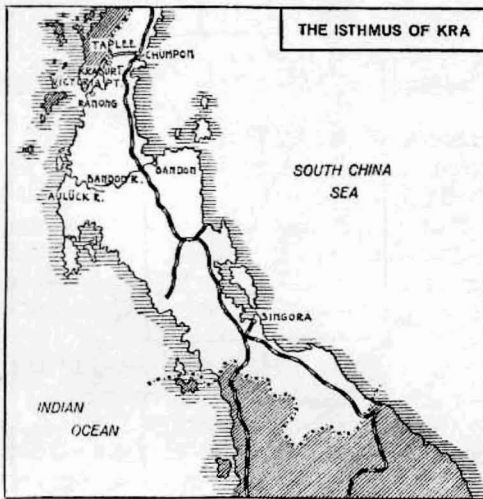


*IT IS AN OLD STORY*

However, there are considerations other than strategic which speak for the construction of the canal. The plan to create a sea connection through the isthmus of Kra is probably several hundred years old. The shipping route from Europe to the Far East would be shortened by three to five days and the roundabout way via Singapore would be avoided. The distance from Ceylon to Saigon would be shortened

from 2,500 to 1,900 miles. The discovery of flint implements and other antiquities proves that even in earliest times a lively traffic took place here. The powerful Indian influence, which left a lasting impression on the buildings of Angkor Wat, probably found its way over Kra. During the Middle Ages hurried travelers landed on the west coast of Kra and rode across the isthmus on elephants to continue their voyage by sailing boat to Ayuthia, the capital of those days.

Hence there were palpable and positive advantages which repeatedly revived the canal project. As early as 1843 the district was investigated by Burma. The result was hardly encouraging. The engineers found that



seventy miles of difficult territory would have to be traversed, and they estimated the cost of building a canal at one and a half million pounds sterling.

Twenty years later new investigations and surveys were made by Captains Fraser and Forlong on behalf of the Indian Government. Both came to the conclusion that the construction of a canal would be unprofitable.

Another twenty years later the French Government, desirous of creating a shorter and cheaper route to Indo-China, had surveys carried out and came likewise to a negative conclusion.

### WOULD IT PAY?

Technically much has changed since those days, and today the canal could certainly be built. It would, however, still represent an enormous technical achievement. We all remember at what costs and sacrifices the Panama Canal was built. It had to conquer a distance of 49 miles and a height of 275 feet. For the Kra Canal the corresponding figures would be 70 miles and 250 feet.

Merchants would have to calculate whether the undoubtedly very high costs of construction could be covered within a reasonable time by the saving of three or four days of shipping time. Furthermore it is still an open question whether the trade center of Singapore could be so quickly deprived of its importance, or whether, even after the completion of the canal, a large part of Far Eastern shipping would not call at Singapore for economic reasons.

From the point of view of Thailand, a waterway through the isthmus would be very welcome. Almost a fifth of the country's wealth—especially tin and rubber—is to be found in the southwestern part of the narrow isthmus. Hitherto the commercial traffic from this region has gone mainly to Penang and Singapore. The work of opening up through roads and railways is proceeding very slowly and cannot replace a short shipping route to Bangkok.

Beside the Kra project mentioned here, there are two further possibilities of creating waterways south of Kra, navigable only for small ships.

England is not quite without anxiety about the isthmus with its possibilities. When she signed a treaty with Siam in 1909, one of the conditions was that Siam was not to undertake any steps in the matter of Kra without first consulting England. The over-generous King Rama VI had at one time wanted to present the isthmus to a French company. His advisers were able at the last moment to cancel this magnanimous gift.

Today Kra is a myth, a legend and a fact, all in one. Its future—as that of so many other things in the Far East—will be decided in the course of greater disputes.

ACROSS  
the  
ISTHMUS  
of  
KRA



The river that separates Thailand from Burma is narrow and rushing in its upper reaches



Kraburi, the sleepy little village that takes its name from the isthmus



Ranong, a possible terminus for the planned canal. Across the inlet are the hills of Victoria Point, the southernmost tip of Burma