

OSS and Free Thai Operations in World War II

Bob Bergin

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The situation in Siam was different from any that had ever confronted OSS in an enemy-occupied country. Instead of a resistance movement, such as was encountered in European countries, there existed in Siam what might best be described as a patriotic governmental conspiracy against the Japanese in which most of the key figures of the state were involved. The regent himself, the minister and chief of police, the minister of interior, the minister of foreign affairs, senior officers of the armed service, and many other ranking officials belonged to it.”¹

Kermit Roosevelt

The US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) established a base in Bangkok in early 1945. At least 7,000 of the 60,000 Japanese troops who occupied the country were based in

Bangkok, many within a few hundred meters of the OSS base. The base was established after more than a year of frustrating attempts to infiltrate Free Thai officers into Bangkok from China and from Ceylon. Success came when OSS-trained Free Thai officers made contact with the Thai underground that had formed inside the country—a fact unknown to the allies until April 1943.

The Thai proved to be masters at manipulating the Japanese occupiers and adept at collecting intelligence. OSS officers engaged in Thai operations—both inside the country and outside it—had to deal with situations different from anywhere else. Concerns about Britain’s postwar intentions and Chinese regional ambitions had to be factored into intelligence operations. OSS officers had to walk a fine line, to have good working relations with the friendly British and Chinese services, while “playing a lone hand,” and working

¹ Kermit Roosevelt, Introduction to the 1976 edition, *The Overseas Targets, War Report of the OSS*, Volume II (Washington, DC: Carrollton Press Inc., 1976). The original version of *War Report of the OSS* was published in 1949 by the Government Printing Office, but it was classified Top Secret. The book was partially declassified in 1976 and reprinted commercially. Thailand was named Siam until 1939. At the time the *War Report of the OSS* was originally written, the country’s name had reverted to Siam for a brief period (1946–49).

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When the Japanese invaded Thailand on 8 December 1941, the Thai government under Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram aligned itself with the Japanese and declared war on Britain and the United States.

around them. In the midst of this, the Japanese occupiers of Thailand largely missed what was happening to them. The Thai may have been adept, but Japanese attitudes toward the Thai were a big factor: They apparently could not bring themselves to believe the friendly, easygoing Thai, among whom they lived, could be capable of skilful subversion.

War Begins

When the Japanese invaded Thailand on 8 December 1941, the Thai government under Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram aligned itself with the Japanese and declared war on Britain and the United States. Britain reciprocated by declaring war on Thailand; Washington ignored the Thai declaration and looked on Thailand as an occupied nation. These reactions reflected the difference of interests the two allies had in Asia, differences that would be reflected in the rivalry between Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) and OSS in Asia, particularly in Thailand.

When the Thai government declared war on the allies, Thai students abroad volunteered to join the resistance movement, calling themselves the Free Thai.² Volunteers in England were trained by the SOE; in America by the OSS. Inside Thailand, an anti-Japanese underground was formed under the leadership of Prime Minister Phibun's political rival, Pridi Phanomyong, the Rector of Thammasat University and regent to the 17-year-old King Anan Mahidon.

Early indications that a resistance movement inside Thailand existed could not be confirmed by the allies. The underground inside Thailand sent envoys to China to establish contact with the allies, but the envoys were intercepted by Tai Li, the Chinese Nationalist intelligence and security chief, who had no intention of permitting American or British intelligence operations inside Thailand. It was not until April 1943 that the allies learned that a Free Thai movement indeed existed inside Thailand.³

Infiltration from China

In early 1944, both SOE and OSS started their attempts to infiltrate Free Thai officers into Thailand from China. Major Nicol Smith, former travel-writer and one of Donovan's personal recruits, was in charge of the OSS Free Thai operations. Because of prior agreements, the first OSS infiltrations had to be coordinated with Tai Li, whose assistance seemed to result in nothing but delays. In time, Smith started to think that the Chinese "might not want an intelligence mission to enter Siam."⁴

Meanwhile, the British SOE appeared to be more successful. Teams of SOE-trained Thai parachuted into North Thailand; others were landed by submarine. But none of these SOE agents established radio contact after their arrival.

Major Smith looked for another approach and found a Chinese Catholic priest who knew the land routes to Thailand. He offered the priest \$1,000 to lead the Free Thai to the border. In May 1944, 11 Free Thai officers, in three independent groups, set off overland to Bangkok. This time

² One Free Thai member recalled that the Free French movement established in England soon after German occupation of France inspired his group's name. See Wimon Wiriyawit, *Free Thai: Personal Recollections and Official Documents* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997).

³ While US and UK officials may not have been able to confirm the existence of a resistance movement inside Thailand, citizens there would have known of the existence of the external Free Thai Movement and had a good idea of what was going on in the United States and England because, starting as early as mid-December 1941, Thailand was receiving regular Coordinator of Information, then OSS, propaganda broadcasts, as well as news from BBC, All India Radio, and other broadcast information.

⁴ Nicol Smith and Blake Clark, *Into Siam, Underground Kingdom* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1946), 20.

they were dispatched without Tai Li's assistance.

Operation HOTFOOT: Racing the British

At about that same time, another OSS infiltration plan was being put into action in Ceylon. Two Free Thai officers, Wimon Wiriyawit and Bunmak Desabut, completed training at the OSS facility at Trincomalee, Ceylon, and were to be infiltrated into southern Thailand by a British submarine. They set out on 8 August 1944, but when the submarine reached the Thai coast, they were not landed. The captain had received last-minute orders to proceed on another mission to the vicinity of Singapore. After a series of delays, caused by weather and mechanical problems, Wimon and Bunmak found themselves back in Trincomalee in early September—just in time to participate in Operation HOTFOOT.

There was concern, both in Washington and in the field, that once SOE established contact inside Thailand, the British would try to freeze OSS out of Thai operations. By August 1944 OSS had not yet heard from the Free Thai dispatched from China in May. Then SOE revealed a new plan to parachute its agents into an area near Bangkok, from where they would attempt to contact Free Thai leader Pridi.

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Colonel Richard P. Heppner, chief of OSS Detachment 404 in Ceylon, saw danger in this. He reported to OSS headquarters that the SOE plan “shows that the British are in dangerous competition with the United States in Thailand and that the future relations of our government with Thailand depend to a large extent upon the actions of our organization in that country.” He suggested maintaining “outward forms of cooperation,” with the British, but “to play more or less a lone hand.” He mentioned “preparing several operations which...have a good chance to succeed.”⁵ The response from OSS headquarters noted that OSS Chief Donovan “feels that since the British want to make an independent show of the [Pridi] mission that gives us license to take the same approach.”⁶

Heppner went to American theater commander Lt. Gen. Joseph Stilwell and secured his support for Operation HOTFOOT, which would preempt the British by getting OSS agents into Thailand as quickly as possible. Wimon and Bunmak would parachute in, establish contact with the Free Thai leaders, and prepare the way for an OSS presence in country. HOTFOOT would *not* be coordinated with the British.

A minor problem, Wimon and Bunmak had no parachute training, was quickly rectified with a training manual and practice jumps from stacked oil drums. On the night of 9 September 1944, after two drops were aborted by bad weather over the drop zone, the two Thai agents jumped from a B-24 bomber, 2,000 ft over Thailand's Phrae Province.

Wimon Wiriyawit's Adventures

Wimon landed in a tall tree, and spent the night nearby. The next morning he found no sign of Bunmak, and set off to make his way out of the dense jungle. After five days he came to a village, where he encountered a group of armed men. They told him they had earlier “arrested” a man dressed as a “paratrooper,” but he had escaped. Wimon had buried his uniform and was wearing “ordinary clothes,” shorts and a T-shirt, but the men now started to question him.

Wimon had devised a cover story. He told the men that he was an aide to Adun Dejarat, the director general (DG) of the Thai National Police and was on a secret mission for him. He took a chance and gave his true name—instead of using an alias

⁵ E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand's Secret War: OSS, SOE, and the Free Thai Underground during World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 223.

⁶ Reynolds, 235.

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as he had been trained to do. Adun, known to be one of the two rival leaders of the internal Free Thai, was reputed to know the name of every Thai student in the United States. If Adun recognized Wimon's name, he would know that Wimon's return had a political purpose.

The cover story worked. Wimon was handed off to provincial officials who wired the DG, who quickly telegraphed back. He asked that Wimon be sent to Bangkok "secretly," with an escort of plainclothes policemen.

On his arrival in the city, Wimon was taken to Police Special Branch headquarters, where he spent the night in a cell. The next morning, 22 September, he was taken to another Special Branch installation, and there he found seven of Nicol Smith's Free Thai agents who had walked in from China and eight SOE agents who had been infiltrated by parachute or submarine. All were in Special Branch custody.⁷ The mystery of why none of these agents had contacted their headquarters was

now solved. Wimon was then told that DG Adun would meet with him that evening.

Wimon's meeting with Adun took place amidst great precautions. The two met at nightfall in the middle of a bridge, and Adun walked Wimon to a black sedan parked in a small lane. They talked while being driven through Bangkok's dark streets.

By Wimon's account, he told Adun that he was a messenger from OSS and that the United States would support the Free Thai, but only if the two major players—Adun and Pridi—would work together. Later that night, Adun took Wimon to a meeting with Pridi, and Wimon repeated the message he had given Adun.⁸

Regular radio contact between Bangkok and OSS was soon in place, and the Free Thai started to operate. The way was now open for OSS to establish its presence in Bangkok. OSS had won its race with the British.

HOTFOOT II: OSS arrives in Bangkok

In January 1945, the first two OSS officers arrived in Bangkok. Richard Greenlee and Major John Wester had been brought in by two PBY Catalina flying boats that landed in the Gulf of Siam in the early afternoon of 25 January.⁹ They were met by a Thai Customs Department launch that transported them to Bangkok to start the process that would give OSS a base in Bangkok in the midst of the Japanese.

Richard Greenlee was a civilian, a former New York tax lawyer who was Chief of the Special Operations (SO) Branch at OSS Detachment 404 in Ceylon. He had no previous experience in Asia. John Wester had been employed by an international engineering firm before the war and had lived in Thailand for 18 years. OSS had sent him to China, and then Ceylon, to prepare Free Thai officers for infiltration missions, including operation HOTFOOT.

The two were housed in a compound near Wajirawut College, where they were joined by some of the Free Thai who had been infiltrated. Pridi came to discuss his "war plan," which

⁷ All the infiltrators had been arrested almost as soon as they entered Thailand. Two of the OSS Free Thai who had walked from China were killed by the Thai police, apparently for gold they were carrying. Nicol Smith's misgivings about Tai Li were well founded. According to a March 1945 OSS intelligence report, the Thai police had "a 'complete photographic record' of the China group 'with correct names and ranks of each', the latter based on intelligence provided by Tai Li's organization." Reynolds, 186.

⁸ There was speculation why Adun and Pridi met with Wimon when they would not meet the Free Thai who had infiltrated from China. China itself may be the answer. Wimon had been dispatched via India, Southeast Asia Command headquarters, and thus was free of any taint of association with Tai Li's organization. In addition, the Free Thai China group's "arrests" were known within the Thai government, while Wimon's unusual arrival in Bangkok had kept him under the radar.

⁹ Ironically, the Catalinas that flew OSS missions between Kandy, Ceylon, and the Gulf of Siam were provided and flown by the British Royal Air Force (RAF).

called for coordinating American landings along the Gulf of Siam with a Thai uprising. Greenlee deferred consideration of any military action to Washington and raised OSS interests in Thailand, including black propaganda operations, the insertion of more trained agents, and supply of the Thai underground “on an ever increasing scale.”¹⁰

Greenlee stayed five days, was exfiltrated to Kandy, and flown to Washington. He carried messages from Pridi for President Roosevelt and General Donovan and gifts, a solid gold cigarette case for the president and a silver one for Donovan. Wester stayed behind as the chief of the OSS mission in Bangkok.

What Greenlee and Wester Accomplished

The *OSS War Report* focused on the long term political aspects of what Greenlee and Wester had accomplished:

The OSS officers underestimated what was really the most significant element in the situation: the fact that they were not dealing with the usual underground groups, but with the responsible and official heads of a sovereign state... By sending two American officers to discuss policy on the highest level with the Regent

As it became clear that no American military operation would be carried out in Thailand, OSS shifted its emphasis from special operations to intelligence collection.

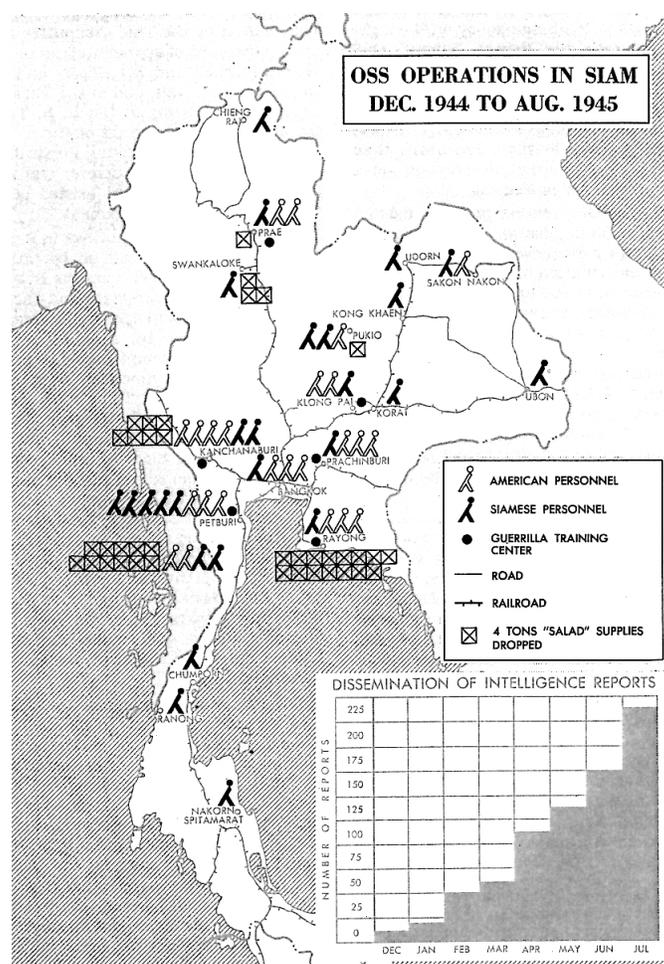
himself, OSS forced him to commit himself to a course of action....

The best OSS political card “was to hold out hope of official American support to Siam in her struggle to maintain her territorial integrity against suspected British designs.” This was delicate, as “it was also necessary to avoid stirring up the Siamese against the British. Military considerations required that Siam cooperate with the British clandestine services as well as the OSS....”¹¹

Over the long term, this worked in America’s favor: What OSS accomplished through its support of the Free Thai and short tenure in Bangkok would serve the US government well in the years leading up to and through the era

of the Vietnam War and in ways the writers of the *War Report* could not have anticipated. But OSS officers on the ground had more immediate concerns and, as the *War Report* notes:

While the OSS officers probably did not realize the full implications of their success, they shrewdly diagnosed the peculiar character of the



A graphic from the *OSS War Report* showing distribution of personnel and total number of distributed intelligence reports.

¹⁰ Reynolds, 278.

¹¹ *OSS War Report: The Overseas Targets*, 410.

In return, Chennault told Smith that once Thai agents were successfully placed into Thailand, he would have a favor to ask.

situation in Siam and developed an operational plan to meet it.¹²

This would become evident in coming months. Although the Thai continued to organize guerrilla groups upcountry, and the OSS supported them, as it became clear that no American military operation would be carried out in Thailand, OSS shifted its emphasis from special operations to intelligence collection.

Living in the Bangkok Bull's Eye

Greenlee returned to Thailand in April. He brought with him OSS Captain Howard Palmer, a graduate of Harvard law school who had been born in Thailand and spent his childhood there. They found that the OSS one-man-Bangkok-show, John Wester, had developed serious medical problems. Left to himself, Wester grew conscious of being the only American in Japanese-occupied Bangkok, "never knowing at what moment he might be betrayed or discovered, he lived in almost unbearable tension."¹³ There were 60,000 Japanese in the country, 7,000 of them in Bangkok, many within 100 m of the OSS base. For two months Wester had spent day and night locked in a small

dark room, where he maintained the radio link between the Free Thai and OSS headquarters in Ceylon.

When Wester's condition deteriorated—he became violent and had to be restrained—the Thai decided that the lack of female companionship was at least partly responsible:

They figured that two months of solitary confinement in that room would upset anyone completely. They evacuated an entire residential section of the city, rented a house, stocked it with eight young ladies who were expected to cure whatever ailed John and at the same time provide an ounce of protection for Dick and me. They even detailed extra policemen to the neighborhood to insure complete security.

Greenlee and Palmer begged off, and "missed a party that cost the Thai something like a thousand dollars!"¹⁴

It was decided that Wester would have to be evacuated. Palmer would become the acting chief of the OSS Bangkok station.

Ex-filtration of a Flying Tiger Pilot

The release and ex-filtration of an AVG Flying Tiger Pilot held as a POW in Bangkok is an excellent illustration of how the Free Thai operated under the noses of the Japanese and how Thai operational thinking obscured the Japanese view of events and ensured the security of Free Thai and OSS activities in Bangkok. This operation coincided with the plan to evacuate John Wester.

In late 1944, when Nicol Smith started his attempt to infiltrate Free Thai agents from China without Tai Li's assistance, he called on the US Fourteenth Air Force Commander Claire Lee Chennault for help in establishing a radio station and jumping-off point for the agents. Chennault had just built an air strip at Szemao on China's border with Laos and agreed that Smith could set up his radio station there. Because the area was remote and it would eat up much time if horse caravans were used to move the required heavy equipment and supplies there, Chennault offered aircraft to fly it in. In return, he told Smith that once Thai agents were successfully placed into Thailand, he would have a favor to ask.

In early 1945, after the Free Thai agents were established in Bangkok and communicating,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Smith and Clark, 225

¹⁴ Ibid., 227–28. Smith quotes Howard Palmer.

Smith reported back to Chennault. Chennault showed him a map of north Thailand where one of his AVG pilots, William “Black Mac” McGarry had parachuted into heavy jungle three years earlier. McGarry had been the pilot of one of six AVG P-40s that had attacked the Japanese Air Force at Chiang Mai on 24 March 1942. His aircraft was damaged by ground fire and McGarry had to abandon it before he could reach the Burma border. Other AVG pilots had seen McGarry land safely on the ground, and Chennault thought there was a good chance that McGarry was now a POW. He asked Smith if the Free Thai underground might be able to locate him.

Chennault had his answer four days later. McGarry was a POW. He was being held in a compound on the grounds of Thammasat University. His guards were Thai, supervised by the Japanese, but under Free Thai control.¹⁵ Chennault asked if Smith could “find out from McGarry if possible, whether he is in condition to leave and willing to attempt an escape.”¹⁶ Word from Bangkok came back quickly: McGarry was fit for an escape attempt.

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The Free Thai had devised a plan: McGarry would feign illness and be moved from one hospital to another until he just disappeared. If his disappearance became an issue with the Japanese, it would be explained that McGarry had died and been cremated in the customary manner. McGarry would be taken by Customs Department boat to the Gulf of Siam where he would be picked up by a Catalina dispatched from Ceylon. (In the end, two RAF Catalinas were used for the exfiltration, which also would take Wester and four Thai Air Force officers to Ceylon.)

There was some concern with this plan among the senior Free Thai. McGarry had become too well known; his absence would surely be noted by the Japanese on one of their periodic visits. That would mean trouble. The day before McGarry was to be moved from the compound, Police Director General Adun announced a better plan. He had arranged a *fake* release order that “purportedly” came from him. The order directed the Thai chief of the internment camp to turn McGarry

over to the police officer who brought the order. If the Japanese later noted McGarry’s absence—as was most likely—the Camp chief would explain that he had turned McGarry over at the request of the director general and then produce the release order to prove it. When the Japanese then came to DG Adun to find out what was going on, Adun would show them that the release order was a forgery and that it could not possibly have come from him.¹⁷

On 14 April 1945, Pridi arrived at the OSS safe house at about 8:30; Adun about 30 minutes later, with McGarry in tow. McGarry was stunned. He had no idea of what was happening to him until he was suddenly introduced to the OSS officers. He did not seem overjoyed, Palmer wrote. “Understandably, he did not have two words to say all evening.”

Wimon Wiriyawit, who had been put in charge of the exfiltration, described the run to the gulf.¹⁸ McGarry and the others boarded a Thai Customs Department boat that had been docked on the Chao Phraya

¹⁵ McGarry wandered the northern Thai hills for three weeks before Thai police found him. He was turned over to the Japanese Army, interrogated and brought to Bangkok. Pridi convinced the Japanese that as the Thai had “captured” him, McGarry should remain a Thai prisoner, albeit under Japanese supervision. The compound in which McGarry was held was on the grounds of Thammasat University and in line of sight from Pridi’s office as the university rector. From the earliest days, Pridi was convinced that the Japanese could not win the war. He believed that a show of good will toward an American POW would pay dividends when the war ended. Author interview with Free Thai Piya Chakkaphak.

¹⁶ Smith and Clark, 191.

¹⁷ There is no record of Japanese reaction after McGarry’s successful exfiltration. According to Wimon, the Japanese were outraged when they found McGarry missing. They knew they had been tricked, but were not quite sure how or by whom. Author interview with Wimon Wiriyawit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

As the parachutes drifted down, the spectators and the drill teams ran to help themselves.

River behind the house. To minimize the possibility of encounters with the Japanese, the boat crossed the Chao Phraya river and entered the network of klongs or canals that criss-crossed the area and led south toward the Gulf of Siam.

Adding to the difficulty of the journey was Wester's illness. In his delirium he would often shout out in English. Whenever a Japanese patrol boat came into sight, one of the Free Thai officers would get up on deck and dance a ramwong, a traditional style of Thai dance in which the enthusiastic singing and musical accompaniment of the boat's crew would drown out the sick man's shouts. Below decks, Wimon and McGarry crouched with submachine guns ready, just in case the Japanese became curious and decided to come aboard.

The boat entered the Gulf of Siam and headed south to the vicinity of Prachuab Kiri Khan, where it lay hidden to await nightfall and the arrival of the Catalinas. The two aircraft arrived, a bit behind schedule, but the boarding of personnel and offloading of equipment was otherwise uneventful. The two Catalinas returned to Ceylon, where McGarry was transferred to a B-24 and flown over the Hump to Kunming, where

Chennault and two of his former AVG comrades met him on the runway.¹⁹

A Hard Life in the Palace of Roses

When Major Nicol Smith was secretly flown into Thailand in July 1944, he found Howard Palmer had things well in hand; Palmer had gained 15 pounds living behind enemy lines and the OSS base had been ensconced in Wang Suan Kulap, the Rose Garden Palace, or Palace of Roses, a property belonging to the royal family that previously had been occupied by the deposed prime minister. There were six radio transmitters in the former PM's bedroom now, and his study was occupied by six Free Thai who coded messages for transmission to OSS in Ceylon. Smith later wrote: "I am sure that no secret agents trying to deliver a country from oppression ever enjoyed such palatial quarters, as we of the OSS living in Siam's Palace of Roses."²⁰

Palmer and the Free Thai were very active collecting information, and Smith met some of the agents. One, a colonel in Thai intelligence, lunched with Japanese officers almost every day and wrote up everything they told him. Punctually, at 5 p.m. he would stop by for a drink with Palmer. He

brought in so much information, Palmer said, that two Free Thai radio men were kept busy sending it out.

In addition to intelligence collection, the OSS and Free Thai engaged in other kinds of operations. One of them, Operation SUITOR, on June 18, 1945, was quite spectacular.

Operation Sutor: A Comic Opera

Bangkok's hospitals had been suffering from a serious shortage of medical supplies and OSS arranged a parachute drop to alleviate it. As the drop zone, Palmer selected the Praman Ground in front of the Royal Palace, where all grand ceremonies were held. He cautioned the Thai that measures would have to be taken to assure that the supplies did not fall into the wrong hands.

On 18 June 1945, the day chosen for the air drop, two companies of Thai soldiers were detailed to put on a show of fancy drill. Word had gone out, and the Thai public came to the Praman Ground in great numbers to watch. The Free Thai had trucks standing by and men designated to retrieve the containers.

At noon, Bangkok's air raid sirens sounded. Aircraft engines were soon heard, and nine P-38 fighters were spotted

¹⁹ Author interview with AVG and Fourteenth Air Force pilot Edward Rector, who had been McGarry's wing man on the Chiang Mai raid. The other former AVG pilot waiting with Rector was Charles Older.

²⁰ Smith and Clark, 236.

flying low along the Chao Phraya River. Minutes later, a B-24 bomber appeared overhead and, at about 300 feet, roared across the Praman ground, dropping eight parachutes of different colors. Then a second B-24 went over and a third, each dropping parachutes as it passed. An occasional burst of Japanese machine gun fire was heard.

Then the P-38s appeared. Four put on a show by buzzing low over the crowd, while the five others went after a machine gun position that had fired on them. Their strafing killed four Japanese soldiers and five Thai. At least one round from a P-38 hit less than 10 ft from Brigadier Hector, a "British liaison officer," presumably the local SOE representative to the Free Thai, who had come by to watch. When they met later, Greenlee assured Hector there was "no malice aforethought in the scare our planes had given him."²¹

As the parachutes drifted down, the spectators and the drill teams ran to help themselves. Fighting broke out among them. By the time the Japanese arrived, there was little left for them. It was a comic

The Japanese suspected there was a Thai underground and that it had links to the outside.

opera, Palmer said, but a hugely successful one. The medicine had been delivered and over 10,000 Thai had witnessed the American drop. The Japanese had lost a lot of face.

The War Ends

One morning in August 1945, OSS officers Alec MacDonald and Jim Thompson and their Free Thai teams were on board a C-47 flying over Thailand, preparing to parachute into Ubon Province.²² They were part of an OSS operation to infiltrate "214 Americans and 56 Free Thai to train 12 guerrilla battalions of 500 men each."²³ The pilot suddenly entered the cabin, "shouting, his arms waving. 'It's over,' he was yelling. 'The goddamn war is over!'" The news triggered more shouting, back-slapping and even sobbing among the Thai. Then came the Thai cheer: *Chai Yo! Chai Yo!*

The C-47 returned to Rangoon. The next day MacDonald and Thompson in another C-47 landed at Bangkok's Don Muang airport, which was "patrolled by scores of armed

Japanese soldiers."²⁴ It was "decidedly eerie. We stared at them; they stared at us. They did not bother us." The war would not be over until the formal surrender on 2 September 1945.

MacDonald and Thompson were taken to the Palace of Roses to meet Howard Palmer. Palmer was a short-timer and left for the United States within the week, leaving Thompson, a US Army major, as the Bangkok OSS chief. The OSS station was to become the official US affairs establishment until State Department officers arrived in Bangkok, almost a year later. In the meantime, Thompson and MacDonald would be amateur diplomats, dealing with the prime minister, the Thai Foreign Office, and all allied embassies.

Then Thompson decided to leave for the United States. He would be discharged and return to Bangkok as a civilian. MacDonald then became the OSS station chief. As a US naval reserve lieutenant, MacDonald became the ranking American officer in Thailand. As such, he

²¹ Brigadier Hector apparently was a code name for Brigadier Victor Jacques, who had worked in Bangkok as a lawyer before the war and had returned in early 1945 as the SOE representative.

²² MacDonald, a journalist in Honolulu when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, organized OSS black propaganda broadcasts from Ceylon and later was assigned to OSS Detachment 101 in Burma to run Burmese agents through Japanese lines. When the Japanese were pushed out of Burma, he volunteered to work with the Free Thai. Thompson was a New York architect who joined the OSS and worked with the Free French in North Africa and in France after D-day. As the war in Europe wound down, he volunteered for duty in the Pacific. The two became friends during their training in Ceylon. Both would achieve a degree of fame in Bangkok after the war: Thompson as the "Thai Silk King" who disappeared under mysterious circumstances on Easter day 1967; MacDonald as founder of the *Bangkok Post*, one Asia's most prestigious newspapers.

²³ Alec MacDonald, *A Wandering Spy Was I* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 1997), 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

“Because of their feelings of superiority and their attitudes toward the Thai, the Japanese could never believe that the friendly Thai among whom they lived could be capable of such skillful subversion.”

was the US representative at the formal surrender of the Japanese forces in Thailand. Two weeks later, MacDonald again represented the OSS at a final military review, where the Free Thai were formally disbanded.

MacDonald decided it was time for him to return to civilian life. Bangkok’s only prewar English-language daily newspaper was gone, and MacDonald saw fertile ground to grow a new English-language paper. He wrote his own orders to the nearest US naval base, at Subic Bay in the Philippines, where he signed the forms that ended his four and one half year navy career, which he largely spent with the OSS. The four enlisted men of the Bangkok OSS staff were sent to join the US legation. “It was, by coincidence, at just this juncture that back in Washington President Harry Truman abruptly ruled the US Office of Strategic Services out of existence.”²⁵ The OSS mission in Bangkok was over.

What did the Japanese know about the Free Thai and the OSS Presence?

The Japanese suspected there was a Thai underground and that it had links to the outside. Over time they had captured OSS agents being infiltrated

and suspected others had been successful. They reported upcountry air drops to Pridi and suggested that as regent he take care of this problem, so they would not have to. The Japanese apparently had no strong suspicion of Pridi’s Free Thai role and never uncovered the Bangkok OSS presence. When OSS first started to operate in the Palace of Roses, the Japanese were told that the Thai police Criminal Investigation Division (CID) was setting up a radio transmission station in the palace. If their direction-finding equipment picked up OSS transmissions, the Japanese would think it was Thai CID.

Before the move to the Palace of Roses, the base had moved several times for security reasons. The relocation to the palace had been precipitated by a fruit vendor near the former base, who had casually commented to his customers that “those Americans sure eat a lot of bananas.” Palmer described how he moved to another house on the Chao Phraya River while Greenlee and Wester were still there. They borrowed a car and a driver from the Thai Army. As they drove through crowded city streets, the car’s horn started blowing. By one account, it was a helpful Japanese soldier who finally disconnected a wire to stop it —without ever noticing the OSS officers in the back seat.

When former Free Thai were asked how they managed to get away with as much as they did in dealing with the Japanese



This photo of a group of Free Thai members and US officers was one of many shown in a CIA Museum exhibit in 2000 entitled “Historic Photographs and Memorabilia of Thailand’s OSS Heroes. The photos and many of the artifacts have been transferred to the Thai government.

²⁵ Ibid., 36

during the occupation, their answers were usually similar to Free Thai veteran Piya Chakkaphak's: "Because of their feelings of superiority and their attitudes toward the Thai, the Japanese could never believe that the friendly Thai among whom they lived could be capable of such skillful subversion."²⁶

The Legacy of the OSS Bangkok Experience

The OSS experience in Thailand was one of the most complex situations an intelligence organization faced during World War II. The Japanese enemy was not the biggest obstacle to operational success. Post-war interests of the Chinese and British allies had to be factored into operational planning. The importance of "unilateral" intelligence operations quickly became evident. The British were our closest

allies during the war, and American feelings against British colonialism and its possible revival after the war are now largely forgotten. SEAC, the joint, Anglo-American South-east Asia Command under Admiral Louis Mountbatten, often became to Americans fighting in the theater "Save England's Asiatic Colonies." The Chinese represented a similar problem, but, constrained by geography, they were easier to deal with.

On the other hand, the significance of dealing closely and openly with an ally—in this case the Free Thai—showed how effective joint operations could be run. As the *OSS War Report* points out, the OSS was not just running intelligence agents who were part of a resistance movement, but dealing with the "key figures of the state" on matters of great importance. Perhaps a unique situation in World War II, but a

preparation for what CIA would face in the world to come.

The Bangkok experience underlined the importance of *diagnosing* "the peculiar character" of a situation, and developing "an operational plan to meet it." This is as fundamental as it get for an intelligence service. It requires a service's ability to be open and flexible, to accept a situation for what it is—not as one would like it to be—and to work within that context.

The greatest legacy of the OSS-Free Thai experience was the relationship between the two nations that was formed from it. Thailand became one of America's staunchest allies in Asia, from World War II's end through the era of the Vietnam War. And the biggest beneficiary of this relationship was the OSS successor, the CIA.



²⁶ Author interview with Piya Chakkaphak.

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