

The Youngest Operative: A Tale of Initiative Behind Enemy Lines During WW II

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Pridi Panomyong, the leader of World War II's anti-Japanese Free Thai Movement once said that the Free Thai were not only those formally inducted into the movement, but all Thai who helped in the effort against the Japanese occupiers. This is the story of one such Free Thai, perhaps the youngest of them all. Orachun Tanaphong was a 12-year old in 1944 when he became a courier and carried medicines and messages to Allied POWs held in a temple compound in Northern Thailand. This story of his adventures is based on his recollections of those events.

By mid-1943, Allied aircraft bombed targets in Thailand with regularity, striking at concentrations of Japanese troops. The city of Chiang Mai became a primary target. It was close to Burma, and the city's railroad station was the northern terminus of Thailand's railroad system that extended out from Bangkok and its port. The railroad became the primary means for the Japanese to move troops, weapons and supplies around Thailand, and most importantly, north to Chiang Mai to support the Japanese Army's campaign in Burma.

On 21 December 1943, Allied bombers hit Chiang Mai's railway station in a massive raid. The station and the neighborhoods around it were destroyed. More than 300 Thai civilians were killed. Among the dead and injured were Orachun's relatives. The city's hospitals were crowded with the injured, and Buddhist temples were used to treat the overflow. More bombings followed, and Orachun's father decided to move the family into the countryside, where they could live in relative safety until the situation improved.

It was almost a year before Orachun's family returned to Chiang Mai. They found their house damaged, its roof holed by strafing fighters. They also found that a neighboring building, a motor vehicle repair shop known as the best in town, was now regularly servicing Japanese Army vehicles.

When the Japanese appeared at the shop, they often brought with them POWs they used as drivers and mechanics. Most of the POWs were British, but there were also Dutch and Australians. From the start there was a communications problem. Neither the Japanese nor the POWs spoke much Thai, while the shop personnel spoke only Thai. Someone remembered that Orachun's father spoke English. He was a graduate of Prince Royal College, an American missionary

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school. His father was pressed to serve as an interpreter between the POWs and the shop mechanics. Every time his father was called next door to the repair shop, Orachun went along.

As the interpreter, his father's job was to help the workers in the shop understand the problems of a particular truck. At first, when he spoke with the POWs, the Japanese soldiers watched closely, but after awhile—as they understood no English and little Thai—they became bored and paid little attention. As his father worked with the POWs and got to know them, he started sliding in questions about their situation and their treatment by the Japanese.

Orachun's father learned that life had become very spartan for the POWs. Each man had a single pair of shorts and a pair of sandals; none had shirts. He noted that one POW, an Englishman named Tom, had numerous small pits in the skin on his back. Asked about that, Tom said that he had been working in the POW camp's kitchen cooking rice, when he got in a quarrel with one of the Japanese. The Japanese settled the argument by pouring the boiling rice over his back. Many months later his skin was scarred like someone who had had small pox.

When some of the POWs who had regularly visited the shop dropped out of sight, Orachun's father learned that they were sick and were left behind in the camp. Malaria was rife in Chiang Mai at that time. It could be controlled with quinine, but the POWs were getting nothing to keep them healthy. Orachun's father decided to try to get medicine, some fruit, and even some cigarettes into the camp. It would have to be done secretly. The obvious choice of a courier was the 12-year-old Orachun.

It was known that the POW camp was located in a temple compound on the other side of town. There were actually two temples, down a small road from one another. One was used as the POW camp, the other continued to be used as a temple. The Japanese frequently used Thai schools and temples to house their installations, knowing that American aircraft would not target them. The area was a long way from Orachun's home. He would have to ride his bicycle almost an hour to get there.

Orachun's mother prepared a small basket-like container. Inside was medicine, some fruit, and cigarettes hand-rolled by Orachun's father. There was already a basket fixed to the handlebars of Orachun's bicycle, and the container for the POWs was placed inside that. His father could not describe how the POW compound was laid out. Orachun would have to improvise once he got there.

Temples in Thailand are public places, and Orachun thought that once he got there, he would simply sneak into the area in which the POWs were kept. When he saw the temple camp, he realized that was not going to work. Japanese soldiers stood at the entrance and all along its perimeter. They seemed to be everywhere, and they all carried guns.

Orachun found a place to sit where he would be inconspicuous while he watched for a while. He could see the POWs easily enough, and among them he recognized visitors to the repair shop. When they noticed Orachun, it was evident to him that they knew who he was, and that seeing him there, they suspected he was up to something. That made it a bit easier. He could not get close enough to talk with them,

but he gestured, to let them know that he recognized them. Then he continued to watch.

Soon, an opportunity materialized. He saw one of the POWs, apparently a designated water carrier, set off on a task. There was no water in the POW compound, but there was a well in the other temple down the street. As water carrier, this POW's job was to walk from the POW compound to the second temple, draw water from the well and carry it back to camp. It was a totally routine job that he had obviously been doing for some time. The guards watched as he walked from one temple to the other, but they were so used to his comings and goings that they did not watch very closely.

The water carrier had two cutoff gasoline cans suspended from the ends of a pole slung over his shoulder. When Orachun understood how the water carrier's job worked, he strolled into the second temple and placed his little container near the well. There, it remained hidden but close to where the water carrier would have to pass. As the water carrier approached him, he made little signs to make sure the man would notice the container. The POW then casually filled just one of his cans with water, leaving the other empty for Orachun's container, which he slipped in. He carried his load out through the temple gate and back to the POW compound, right past the Japanese guards, who noticed nothing amiss.

Orachun's mission was accomplished! He was elated. He mounted his bicycle and took off like he was piloting an airplane. When he reached home he felt like he had flown there. He had been afraid. He knew—as everyone did—how bad-tempered the Japanese could be, and what they did to people for even minor offenses. If they caught anyone stealing rice or sugar or gasoline, they would make him drink the gasoline or cram the sugar or rice in his mouth until he choked. Orachun knew that if he was going to do this again, he would not only have to be very careful, but work out a system that would keep him safe.

On the many visits that followed, Orachun refined the way he did things. He continued to ride his bicycle to the temples and kept the container in the basket on the handlebars. When he got to the two temples, he would take the bike into the one with the well and park it where it would not be noticed. He feared that sooner or later a Japanese soldier would wonder who he was and what he was doing here. But Orachun had found a way to disappear. There was usually a gang of local children who played in the area between the two temples, and Orachun would join them. If they did not let him join directly in their games, he could just hang around and watch. To any Japanese soldier he was just another kid, not worth any attention.



As seen today, the entrance to the temple grounds with the well from which the POWs drew their water and received Orachun's hidden messages.

Orachun knew that the POW water carrier tried to keep to a schedule and visit the well at the same time every day. So that his own arrival did not coincide with that, he would come early and hang around in front of the temple, watching the other children play. At times he would have to spend two or three hours there. His little basket-like container was so common an item that no one ever displayed the least bit of curiosity about it. Nor did the Japanese guards ever show the least bit of interest in what might be in the basket mounted on the bicycle's handlebars.

Orachun watched the kids play, and when everything was just right, he would stroll past the well, and leave the container concealed somewhere near it. He varied the places where he put it, so as not to establish a detectable pattern. Then he would go back and wait some more, until he saw the water carrier approaching. With small gestures he would guide the man until he knew where the container was. While doing this, Orachun often was afraid. Several times he was sure he would get caught, but it never happened.

As time went on and Orachun and his father became more confident about his ability to pass things to the POWs without being detected, they started putting messages in the basket. Most related to the development of the war, of which the POWs were kept in complete ignorance. Orachun had a Harvard-educated cousin who was surreptitiously listening to Allied radio broadcasts from outside the country. Summaries of these broadcasts were written on paper and placed in the container with the medicine, fruit and cigarettes.

Orachun's last visit to the temples was the most interesting of all. The container he delivered had the news that war was ending. After he saw the water carrier pick up the container, he waited until he was inside the POW camp. It did not take long before the camp erupted with shouts and cheers and happy people jumping up and down. The Japanese guards were completely taken aback. The POWs had news that their guards had not yet heard: the Japanese had lost the war.



Photo courtesy of the author.

A year after the war, Orachun's family was awarded a plaque by the British government. (In the picture to the right, the young Orachun is standing over his father's left shoulder, with his brother next to him.) Orachun finished his studies in Bangkok and won a scholarship to study in Madrid. He returned to Thailand, joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and went on to a distinguished career as a diplomat. He served as Thailand's ambassador to the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Portugal, Mexico, and Central America. Today he is an associate judge at the Central Intellectual Property and International Trade Court in Bangkok.



Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974

Kristian Gustafson. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007. 317 pages, notes, bibliography, and index.

Reviewed by David Robarge

CIA's operation to attempt to affect a national election in Chile in 1970 and its consequences have engendered more persistent controversy, and more polemic and scholarship, than any of the more than one dozen covert actions with which the Agency has acknowledged involvement. Although some cost more and lasted longer (Tibet, Laos), entailed intervening in the domestic affairs of European allies (France, Italy), had greater long-term geopolitical impact (Iran, Afghanistan 1979–87), or were more acutely embarrassing in their execution and outcome (the Bay of Pigs), CIA's presidentially mandated effort to prevent Salvador Allende de Gossens from becoming the first elected socialist president of a Western Hemispheric nation soon cast a shadow on the Agency's reputation that lingers nearly four decades later. A few years ago, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke for many critics of US policy toward Chile when he said "It is not a part of American history that we're proud of."¹

This stigma on CIA has endured largely because of the interplay of ideological romanticism, political disillusionment, and institutional energy on the part of detractors of the anti-Allende covert action, who have dominated the historiography on the subject. According to Peter Kornbluh, director of the Chile declassification project at the National Security Archive,

The Via Chilena—peaceful road to socialist reform—captured the imagination of progressive forces around the globe.... The sharp contrast between the peaceful nature of Allende's program for change, and the violent coup that left him dead and Chile's long-standing democratic institutions destroyed, truly shocked the world.... In the United States, Chile joined Vietnam on the front line of the national conflict over the corruption of American values in the making and exercise of US foreign policy.²

There it has remained, principally because of to the efforts of a community of human rights activists, left-wing scholars and intellectuals, and antisecrecy advocates that emerged in the early 1970s while the Cold War consensus inside the United States was fracturing. The members of this subculture—the bound-

¹ "Chile Cheers Powell Remarks on 1973 Coup," Reuters, a1147, 22 February 2003.

² Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: The New Press, 2003), xiii, xiv.

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aries between them are often porous—are dedicated to uncovering evidence about the police-state tactics of Gen. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, who succeeded Allende after a military coup in 1973, and to seeking justice for the victims of his often brutal 17-year dictatorship. The National Security Archive, for example, is up front about its motive for aggressively using the Freedom of Information Act and civil lawsuits to extract thousands of pages of documents from CIA and other US government agencies to “force more of the still-buried record into the public domain—providing evidence for future judicial and historical accountability.”³

The Chilean operation galvanized CIA’s congressional critics at the same time. In 1973, a Senate subcommittee on multinational corporations, led by Sen. Frank Church, investigated contacts between the Agency and the International Telephone and Telegraph Company, a prime target for nationalization under Allende. It was the first public hearing ever held on covert action and resulted in a critical report that provided the first official account of one aspect of the coup. Two years later, Church’s select investigatory committee conducted more public hearings and produced another (unfavorable) survey of CIA’s operations in Chile.⁴

Then in 1976, Chilean intelligence operatives murdered Allende’s foreign minister, Orlando Letelier, and an associate in Washington, DC. To Pinochet’s opponents, that brazen action demonstrated the bankruptcy of US policy toward Chile that CIA had helped implement. How could the United States support a regime so ruthless that it would commit terrorism in its largest patron’s capital? More than ever in the minds of writers on this subject, the Agency became identified with the regime’s origins and hence charged with some responsibility for its actions, including the deaths or “disappearances” of thousands of people in Chile and, through the notorious Condor program, in other Latin American countries.⁵ The notion that CIA was at least partly to blame for whatever happened after its failed attempt to keep Allende out of power became a leitmotif of most historical treatments of US intelligence activities in the region.

The Reagan administration—partly because of the influence of UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick’s arguments about the reformability of authoritarian states—took a more benign view of the Pinochet regime and further inspired its critics to seek a full accounting of Agency involvement in Chile. They received a huge boon from the Clinton administration, which, having already authorized sizable releases of secret material on Central America and under pressure from Congress and the anti-Pinochet lobby, undertook the Chile Declassification

³ Kornbluh, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 8, “Chile and the United States: Declassified Documents Relating to the Military Coup, September 11, 1973,” on National Security Archive Web site at <<http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/nsaebb8i.htm>>.

⁴ L. Britt Snider, *The Agency and the Hill: CIA’s Relationship with Congress, 1946-2004* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2008), 271–73; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Multinational Corporations, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, *The International Telephone and Telegraph Company and Chile, 1970–1971* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1973); *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate, 94th Congress, 1st Session, Volume 7, Covert Action* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

⁵ On Condor—a Pinochet-initiated collaboration with neighboring governments’ intelligence services to quell radical subversion throughout the region, often through violent means and occasionally abroad—see John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

Project that eventually yielded around 24,000 never-before-seen documents from CIA, the White House and National Security Council, the Defense and State Departments, and the FBI.⁶ In response to a congressional requirement in the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1999, CIA issued a white paper in September 2000 entitled *CIA Activities in Chile*.⁷ The report concluded that the Agency was not involved in Allende's death during the 1973 coup, that it supported the military junta afterward but did not help Pinochet assume the presidency, and that it reported information about human rights abuses and admonished its Chilean assets against such behavior according to the guidance in effect at the time.

That scarcely settled the matter. The issue of US-Chilean relations and the legacy of CIA's intervention stayed prominent during the next several years through a succession of events that included the Chilean government's efforts to get Pinochet (then living in Europe) extradited and put on trial; the uncovering of his secret multi-million-dollar accounts in a Washington, DC, bank; a Chilean legislature investigation of CIA's role in the coup; huge lawsuits filed by Chilean citizens against Henry Kissinger (national security adviser and later secretary of state during 1969-77) and the US government for damages in connection with deaths and human rights abuses by the Pinochet regime; and a contretemps over Kissinger allegedly pressuring the Council on Foreign Relations to squelch a CFR fellow who wrote a favorable review of Kornbluh's book *The Pinochet File in Foreign Affairs*.⁸

Pinochet's death in December 2006 brought no closure to the long debate over CIA intervention in Chile and its legacy. The discussion essentially remains polarized between left and right,⁹ and for some time an objective narrative of the facts and a fair-minded analysis of the critical and apologetic perspectives have been sorely missed. Such is the landmark contribution of Kristian Gustafson's *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964-1974*, which must be considered the indispensable study in the large bibliography on that seemingly intractable subject. A former student of Professor Christopher Andrew's at Cambridge University and now a lecturer at Brunel University in England, Gustafson previewed some of his findings in this journal in 2003.¹⁰ In *Hostile Intent*, he demonstrates in an orderly and comprehensive way, with a good grasp of Chilean politics and full facility with the now substantial documentary record, how US administrations carried out their Chilean policy founded on the concern

⁶ *Pinochet File*, xvi-xvii.

⁷ Available on the Agency's public Web site at <<https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/index.html>>.

⁸ "Pinochet Indicted on Human Rights Charges," <<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/americas/12/13/chile.pinochet.ap.index.html>>, 13 December 2004; Terence O'Hara, "The General and His Banker," *Washington Post*, 21 March 2005: E1, 9; "CIA Activities in Chile to Be Investigated," Associated Press story on <<http://www.nytimes.com>>, 7 October 2004; Kenneth Maxwell, "The Other 9/11: The United States and Chile, 1973," *Foreign Affairs* 82:6 (Nov.-Dec. 2003): 147; Lynne Duke, "A Plot Thickens," *Washington Post*, 27 February 2005: D1, 6-7.

⁹ At the other end of the spectrum from Kornbluh's *Pinochet File* are Mark Falcoff, *Modern Chile, 1970-1989: A Critical History* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1989) and idem, "Kissinger & Chile: The Myth That Will Not Die," *Commentary* 116:4 (Nov. 2003): 41-49.

¹⁰ "CIA Machinations in Chile in 1970," *Studies in Intelligence* 47 no. 3 (2002): 35-49. The article received the Walter L. Pforzheimer Award given for the best undergraduate or graduate paper on an intelligence-related subject submitted to *Studies* during 2002.

stated as early as 1958 by the senior State Department official responsible for Latin America that “were Allende to win we would be faced with a pro-Soviet, anti-U.S. administration in one of the most important countries in the hemisphere.”¹¹

One of the strengths of Gustafson’s book is that in the course of recounting the often-told story of how Washington tried to prevent that from happening, he takes on prevailing misconceptions and provides details that add meaning to familiar material.

- Instead of reflexively supporting the right wing as it had elsewhere in Latin America during the latter 1960s and well into 1970, Washington had CIA channel assistance to an increasingly marginalized group of centrists at a time when Chilean politics was growing more polarized—a development that US analysts missed.
- Notwithstanding recurrent rhetoric about Chile being a cornerstone of US policy in the region, White House oversight of covert action planning was strikingly haphazard, and CIA and the State Department went about their business operating under inconsistent premises, sometimes supporting the same parties and politicians, sometimes not, for different reasons.
- Besides State having previously opposed intervening in the 1970 election, another important reason why Richard Nixon kept the US ambassador, Edward M. Korry, out of the loop on the coup plotting in September and October 1970 (also known as Track II) was that he distrusted Korry’s politics. The ambassador was a Kennedy Democrat and supporter of Chilean politicians who had benefited from the Kennedy administration’s Alliance for Progress.
- Despite Kissinger’s ominous admonition to Nixon in November 1970 that “your decision as to what to do about it [Allende’s election] may be the most historic and difficult foreign affairs decision you will have to make this year,” and the enunciation by the National Security Council of a “publicly cool and correct posture toward Chile,”¹² the administration’s guidance on both covert and overt activities was slow and erratic during the next two years even as the Allende government fell deeper into economic and political trouble and became increasingly unstable.
- After the September 1973 coup that ousted Allende—in which CIA had no role and about which it knew little beforehand—Washington let the Agency continue supporting the center-left Christian Democratic Party, and the Agency’s head of Latin American operations argued against the cutoff that went into effect at the end of the year. He and other CIA officers contended that the subsidy was needed to counter the left if the junta relinquished power and to

¹¹ Roy Richard Rubottom, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, quoted in *Hostile Intent* on page 19. Prof. Andrew (with Vasily Mitrokhin) has described the KGB’s relationship with Allende and its involvement in Chile during the 1960s and 1970s in *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 69–88.

¹² Kissinger memorandum to Nixon, 6 November 1970, and National Security Decision Memorandum 93, 9 November 1970, quoted in *Hostile Intent*, 139, 145.

“maintain our capability for influencing the junta and molding public opinion” if it did not.¹³

Gustafson’s study makes a crucial point about covert action that policymakers and intelligence practitioners would do well to learn: for political operations to succeed, they must have time to work and must be coordinated with the overt aspects of policy and all elements of the country team. Those conditions existed in the 1960s, and the Agency helped accomplish Washington’s objective of keeping Chile in what it perceived as safe, center-right hands. In contrast, throughout most of 1970 “the United States was perpetually one move behind the political evolutions in Santiago.”¹⁴ By the time the Nixon administration suddenly took notice of events in Chile after the first round of elections in September and then went into panic mode, CIA had few resources and less time to stem the tide moving in the socialists’ favor. Nixon and Kissinger ordered it to undertake a back-channel coup plot that failed disastrously and assured Allende’s victory. As Gustafson concludes:

*Rather than operating on their own, covert actions in 1964 were used to bolster overt plans such as the Alliance for Progress. Thus they acted as a force multiplier for U.S. foreign policy goals. In October 1970, covert action was separated from any strategic thinking and uselessly sent charging into the brick wall of immovable Chilean public opinion.*¹⁵

Thus another lesson from the Chilean covert action is that political operations will most likely work when they reinforce trends and do not try to create them or shift them in other directions.

Hostile Intent is marred by some minor errors of style and fact. Occasionally Gustafson’s prose takes on a slightly turgid, dissertationesque quality; he misuses some words (disinterested for uninterested, reticent for reluctant); credits Rep. Otis Pike with the “rogue elephant” charge instead of Senator Church; mentions the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence several years before it was created; overlooks the fact that the 1980 Intelligence Oversight Act superseded the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment’s requirements for reporting covert actions to Congress; and misidentifies the State Department official in the first photograph of the insert section. More substantively, Gustafson uses material acquired from the KGB archives in the early 1990s in a way that suggests it was available to US officials at the time. But these small problems should not distract readers from realizing Gustafson’s achievement after entering such a politically and emotionally charged environment. If it is true, as Kornbluh claims, that “after so many years, Chile remains the ultimate case study of morality—the lack of it—in the making of US foreign policy,”¹⁶ then a scholarly and dispassionate contribution to the literature such as *Hostile Intent* is all the more to be valued.



¹³ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133–34.

¹⁶ *Pinochet File*, xv.